

## The New Social Media

by JWT Intelligence - Tuesday, July 09, 2019

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Social media is now a daily habit for many adults worldwide, and particularly for young digital natives. In the United States alone, nearly 80% of Snapchat and Instagram users between the ages of 18 and 29 say they engage with the app every day, with 68% and 60% respectively saying they use it multiple times a day, according to a [study](#) published by the Pew Research Center in April 2019. In China, social media is highly integrated into smartphone usage. Nearly all of Chinese internet users access the internet through mobile devices, with much of their time devoted to WeChat—in fact, about 40% of WeChat users spend between one and four hours a day on the app, as [reported by Luxion Media](#) in August 2018.



Mr. Bags BaoShop Mini Program. Courtesy of Mr.

Bags



Tech companies around the world are finding new ways to help users capitalize on all that online engagement, paving the way for more immersive shopping experiences, intuitive creative tools, and targeted social features. Yet many are also taking action to combat the negative effects of social media culture on mental health. Young people are increasingly rejecting the anxiety-inducing aspects of keeping up their image on digital social networks, and those who stay logged in might soon see a different world. For example, in Canada in May 2019, Instagram began a trial of hiding its “like” counts feature, and a spokesperson [told TechCrunch](#) that “exploring ways to reduce pressure on Instagram is something we’re always thinking about.”

In this landscape, millennials and generation Z are craving ways to stay connected and entertained while honoring their values and wellbeing, opening the floodgates to a wave of new platforms and features that promise a better experience.

### **Social enrichment**

Social media channels have become playgrounds for brands and advertisers, to the point where social media’s original purpose—fostering social connections—can get lost in the user experience. Some companies are adding features or building entirely new platforms that put a fresh emphasis on community building and collective participation.



Snap's Bitmoji Party

In April 2019, Snap launched its first multiplayer game, Bitmoji Party, which allows users to play live mini games as their own avatars with a small group of friends inside the app. This takes the Snapchat experience beyond messaging into a realm of deeper interactivity and engagement.

“We wanted to build something that makes us feel like we’re playing a board game with family over a long holiday weekend,” said Will Wu, Snap’s director of product, at the company’s Partner Summit. “Something that makes us feel like we’re sitting with friends, controllers in hand, looking at the same screen.”

Platforms designed for other functionalities are using common interests to create social spaces. Spotify is reportedly offering a social listening feature for employees, where users can make the song they’re listening to “social” and let friends in on an entire playlist, according to an article from *Hypebeast* published in June 2019. At the time of writing, it hasn’t been officially confirmed whether Spotify will release its Connect with Friends feature to the public, but, if it does, it will give users the opportunity to interact within Spotify’s own ecosystem, rather than using messaging platforms outside the app.



Feiliao

In May 2019, ByteDance, the parent company of TikTok (called Douyin in China), launched a new instant messaging platform called Feiliao, or Flipchat. The company calls it an “interest-based social app,” claiming to offer a more targeted resource for social interaction in lieu of the ever-expanding and

all-encompassing WeChat. It's not the only platform challenging WeChat's reign in this space: Tencent-backed [Jike](#), a similar hobby-based chat app targeted at young users, is gaining steam. And in June 2019, in a bid to get a piece of the social networking renaissance, Beijing-based search engine giant Sohu also launched its own messaging app, called Huyou, or Fox Friends.

For [Escapex](#), the importance of quality connections and experiences goes beyond close friends and into fandom. The platform, which launched in 2015 and has since gained more than 20 million users, operates on an exclusive subscription model—users can pay to unlock content from their favorite influencers and never miss out on anything they post. In this way, celebrities have the freedom to develop their own apps for creating content and interacting with their fans without the restrictions of algorithms or the need to work within the limitations of sponsorship deals. The result of this formula, according to Escapex's chief business operator Shamik Talukder, is a tighter-knit community of fans that fosters supportive, IRL connections as opposed to ones that revolve around self-promotion and branding.

### Social Shopping



Xiaohongshu

In China, social apps are completely transforming the e-commerce landscape. Rising platforms like Xiaohongshu (which literally translates as Little Red Book) are creating new spaces for influencers to generate content, foster online communities with consumers, and inspire authentic engagement through livestreaming, short-video, or photo-text formats.



Xiaohongshu

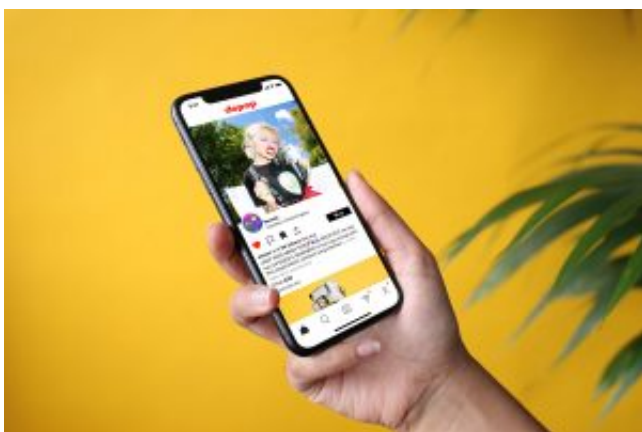
To date, Xiaohongshu is one of the fastest growing and most talked about lifestyle apps guiding how consumers discover products and brands. Starting out in 2013 as a platform for giving advice on shopping duty-free overseas, it has since expanded into a user-generated creative content hub for fashion and beauty reviews and tips that's attracted a wealth of international brands and bred numerous local ones. As it evolves, retaining authenticity remains one of Xiaohongshu's core values, and brands and influencers work within strict posting guidelines to sustain the trust of their followers.



Xiaohongshu

While e-commerce itself is still only a small part of Xiaohongshu, [analysts suspect this won't be the case for long](#). This month, the Alibaba-backed platform started testing a livestreaming feature in a likely move to experiment with a monetization format that has, so far, worked for Tmall and WeChat. Xiaohongshu's overall appeal is spreading to other tech companies as well—in early 2019, China's leading question-and-answer site Zhihu launched Chao, billed as Xiaohongshu for men, with feeds for entertainment and gaming, technology, food and fashion.

China's leading e-commerce companies are also building their own thriving social ecosystems for shoppers and influencers. Alibaba's [Weitao app](#), which is directly connected to its shopping platform Taobao, is enjoying a surge in popularity in 2019 after making relatively little impact after its launch in 2013. Its users comprise industry experts, influencers, celebrities and others, who generate product and store recommendations, brand storytelling and creative lifestyle content to drive purchases directly within its app.





Depop



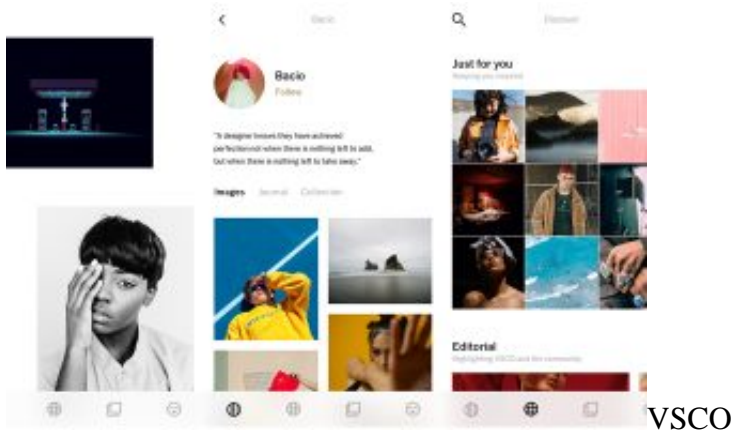
London-based shopping app Depop is growing in popularity with gen Zers. In June 2019, Depop raised \$62 million in a Series C funding round, and has big expansion plans going forward, expecting to reach more than 15 million users in the United States alone in three years, according to the company's CEO Maria Raga. This is thanks to a thriving community of bedroom entrepreneurs, who buy and resell thrifted or handmade clothing on their profiles and build a social media following based on their personal style in a way that's fluid, fresh, and affordable. Many in the Depop community consider themselves teenage fashion influencers in the making, leveraging the accessibility of cheap fashion on the platform to boost their cool factor on Instagram, or discovering trends before they hit other social media feeds.

### **Creative inspiration**

In an algorithm-driven digital world, new spaces are emerging to bolster frictionless self-expression and creativity, some with the aim of building judgment-free zones, others prioritizing a decentralized network.

New Life AI's creator Vector Newman promises his platform will put power into the hands of talents who are normally excluded from the creative economy. "As the founder, I'm federating people but eventually I want this project to be owned and driven by the community," Newman told *Dazed*. Users' content is boosted through a voting system that operates entirely on a global cryptocurrency, and the ecosystem is devoid of data farming, ads, or any centralized algorithms. "A user from Sri Lanka can vote

for content posted by a Mexican user and some microscopic value units will flow between the two and bounce onto everyone else,” Newman said.



[VSCO](#) removes the need for upvoting and validation altogether in its app, with a mission to simply “help everybody fall in love with their own creativity.” Launched in 2011, the photography and video editing platform (which allows users to share their work, but not like or comment) has recently seen a surge in popularity among gen Zers as they seek ways to remove themselves from the social pressures and Facetune culture of Instagram (see our [“Into Z Future” Report](#) for more on Gen Z creativity).

“The younger generation are very smart, they are very perceptive, and they actually value their mental health and their overall wellness, and they know what serves them,” VSCO’s vice president of product Allison Swope told *Cheddar*’s Nora Ali at the Mobile Apps Unlocked Conference in Las Vegas in May 2019. “People don’t feel a pressure when they share on VSCO and it’s a thing that they value very deeply, in addition to the quality of the tools.”

Instagram, which serves primarily as a digital portfolio for artistic work completed outside of the app, is carving its own space in the augmented reality (AR) filter trend and expanding its creative toolkit for users. In April 2019, Facebook announced it would be opening its Spark AR feature to a beta community of Instagram developers, allowing virtually anyone to create their own AR filters for their Instagram Stories. Other users can access these filters by following the creators. The resulting face filter crazes have taken on entirely different aesthetics compared to those on Snapchat; Instagram AR talents like [Johanna Jaskowska](#) have transformed countless feeds with their unique brand of futuristic, ultra-glossy, beauty “masks.”





Kuaishou

In China, apps are also differentiating and giving consumers separate hubs for creative expression outside of larger platforms such as WeChat and Weibo. Bite-sized video is a fast-growing medium, with apps like Alibaba and Tencent-backed Bilibili wooing China’s anime-obsessed gen Zers, while Tencent-backed Kuaishou has become a favorite among China’s rural internet users for showcasing their skills to a wider audience. The latter platform had its cross-linking with WeChat restored in June 2019, allowing users to embed and share their videos on food, entertainment, fashion, and more with audiences on WeChat’s Moments feed. According to an article on *Elephant Room*, Kuaishou stands out as an example where the typical restrictions of influencer marketing apply to a much lesser extent.

“What the app focused on instead,” the article stated, “was building a community where diversity reigns, where users are given the freedom to establish their own rules, choose their own idols, and to create the type of content completely to their own tastes.”

*Main image courtesy of Spark AR Studio*

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