Decision Sciences Institute
WeChat Shopping: A Study of Cosmetic Product Selling to College Students in China

Yun Zheng
Xinyang Normal University
Email: zhy7208@163.com

Jianfeng Wang
Millersville University of Pennsylvania
Email: jwang@millersville.edu

David DiRusso
Millersville University of Pennsylvania
Email: david.dirusso@millersville.edu

Jianbing Gao
Jinggangshan University
shgaojianbin@126.com

ABSTRACT

This study examines a new form of e-commerce transactions, dubbed W-shopping (WeChat shopping), which occurs through the prolific and growing WeChat social networking application. The research reports the W-shopping experience based on a sample of college students in China. Furthermore, it applies an established model of trust, satisfaction and loyalty to this new form of commerce and is tested using cosmetic product in the WeChat channel. Implications for both theory and practice are discussed.

KEYWORDS: E-commerce; WeChat; Social Media Marketing; Trust; Product Quality; Customer Satisfaction; China

INTRODUCTION

WeChat is a mobile text and voice messaging communication service developed by Tencent in China. It was first released in January 2011 and has exploded in popularity (Wang, 2014). As of January 2015, WeChat has 1.1 billion accounts ("Technode.com) with over 538 million active users ("Tencent.com"), 100 million of which reside outside of China ("Thenextweb.com").

WeChat was primarily a social networking/messaging application, but the company since ventured into e-commerce by integrating buying and selling functionality into it. WeChat-shopping (referred to as "W-shopping" in this paper) is growing rapidly in China. According to a report of W-shopping by World Network ("Weishangshijie.com"), more than 300 million people purchased products via WeChat in 2014. The value of transactions in 2014 was $24.2 billion, which was an increase of 35% compared to 2013.

Whereas "traditional" internet based shopping revolves around e-commerce websites, W-shopping centers around the social network established by WeChat. The products are shared and promoted in a group of people through recommendations by friends. These product messages are then shared amongst friends and the messages themselves spread quickly in a similar fashion as viral marketing messages, although it is all contained within the WeChat app.

This allows WeChat sellers to leverage their circle of friends to help promote and recommend the offer to others, and minimally, the seller can be assured that their message will be seen at least by their circle of friends, but the message often spreads to others.

W-shopping is clearly an important e-commerce trend, as indicated by the 300 million users who have made purchases through WeChat. However, despite the fact that W-shopping is well recognized by practitioners in the field, there have been no academic studies that have investigated this new transaction process. Several key questions are currently unanswered: Does W-shopping share the common shopping process with traditional commerce or e-commerce? Are there any differences between W-shopping and traditional commerce or e-commerce process?

Prior research reveals that product quality, trust and satisfaction are important elements in the buying process. Trust and satisfaction have been established by many scholars as important roles in successful commerce as customers usually do not make purchases from any suspicious sellers (Jarvenpaa et. al., 1999; Urban, 2000), or they won't come back for repeat purchase if they are not satisfied. There is a great deal of literature which addresses the importance of trust and satisfaction in internet shopping (Grabosky 2001; Doney and Cannon 1997), but there is no research exploring the role of trust and satisfaction in W-shopping environment.

Based on our knowledge, this is a very first empirical research addressing the fast growing W-shopping market. We report customers' shopping experience/concerns through WeChat, and intend to uncover the roles of product quality and satisfaction in trust and purchase judgments in W-shopping environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT/MOD

W-shopping is a very efficient shopping channel, and is even faster than traditional e-commerce. It centers around the social network established by WeChat. The products are shared and promoted in a group of people through recommendation by friends. With the forwarding of the message in friend circles, more and more people will be informed of the product within short timeframe. Also, the promotion message through WeChat is certain to be delivered to every contact in friend circles.

In 1965, Buchanan developed club theory through the study of club goods in economics. He argues that there is an "awesome Samuelson gap between the purely private and purely public good". This gap contains goods that are excludable but are shared by more people than typically share a private good by fewer people than typically share a public good. Club is the congregation of people with similar preferences aiming to gain the benefits of scale consumption. Examples of club goods are vehicle, swimming pool, and gold court, etc. In a famous "simulation model", Schelling (1971) shows that a small preference for one's neighbors to be of the same color could lead to total segregation. His theory develops the base for analyzing "people gather in groups" in socio-psychological and political-psychological fields.

In WeChat, there are numerous of clubs based on ties of "alumni", "same origin", "social status", "housewives", etc. The structure is a typical "friend circle". There are at least three people in one club (WeChat group) who know two or more members in another club (WeChat group). Extended in this way, a bigger circle will be formed by the connections of few active members in one club to some active members in other clubs. Circulating in this way, more and more people can be reached. The core function of WeChat is the forwarding of messages. By forwarding a message, one member in a WeChat releases her/his signal of personal characters such as preferences, hobbies, even social status, etc., to all other member receiving messages in the club.

In the internet world, which is overflowing with information, the most scare resource is "attentiveness". The forwarding behavior of WeChat users is an information agent of their

character. Through WeChat, the resource of attentiveness is distributed in numerous WeChat groups. Several WeChat users are moving among numerous WeChat groups which consist of members with different characters and preferences. This phenomenon tends to form many stable network clubs which are different in terms of characters and preferences. Hence, the promotion of "right" products is the key for the success of W-shopping. For example, promoting of various sports summer camps in a "children's parents" group may gain more attentions because the products promoted is consistent with the interests or topics of that particular group in WeChat. When the promotion message is not complementary to the main interests of most members in the group, it will be banned, or the message publisher's image or reputation will be damaged. Therefore, it is appropriate to target a specific group of people for particular products such as "low value" and "high quality" items. It is effective for special style differentiation and personalization marketing.

In 2000, Singh and Sirdeshmukh propose a model exploring the roles of trust and agency mechanisms in consumer satisfaction and loyalty judgments, which is shown below in Figure 1. They argue that trust interacts with agency mechanisms in prepurchase stage of transaction, which in turn affects satisfaction and influences loyalty in the postpurchase stage. They declare their model is built on a contingency model of the impact of prepurchase expectations and postpurchase perceptions on satisfaction proposed by Voss et al. (1998), in which quality is included as one component of prepurchase assessment.

Figure 1   Singh and Sirdeshmukh Model of the roles of trust and agency mechanisms in consumer satisfaction and loyalty judgments
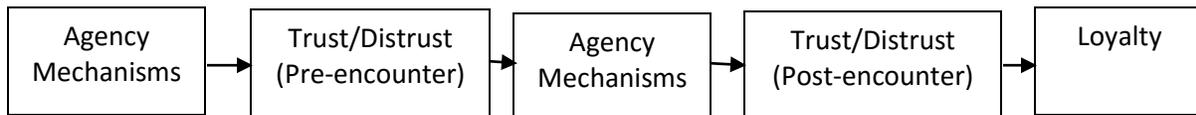
W-shopping is in the early stage of development, and while there is a system to ensure easy payment, there currently exist very few buyer protections such as those found on established e-commerce websites such as Amazon and Taobao. In such an environment, some opportunistic sellers may take the advantage of friend circles in WeChat to sell inferior products as they do not have to fear any institutional safeguards. We believe that product quality is an important element of prepurchase assessment. Thus, we propose a simplified model in W-shopping in Figure 2 built upon the frameworks of Singh and Sirdeshmukh (2000) and Voss et al. (1998). It is argued that perceived product quality influences customer trust, which in turn affects satisfaction leading to consumer purchase in WeChat.

Figure 2 An adaptation of Singh and Sirdeshmukh's model in W-shopping environment
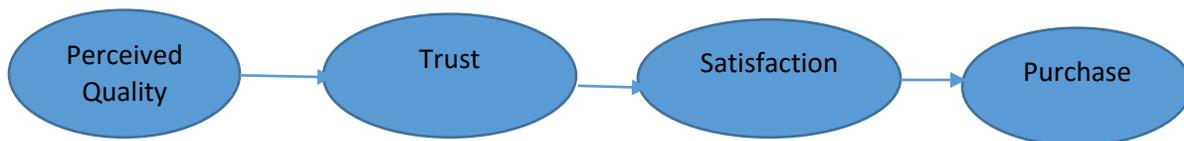
HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT
A research framework exploring the role of trust and satisfaction in W-shopping is proposed in Figure 2. Sellers on WeChat should form an environment in which customers feel confident about going through with a transaction. Three elements in the transaction process are perceived product quality, trust and satisfaction.

In an online market environment, buyers cannot meet the seller face to face, so buyers cannot scrutinize the product before making a purchase, and must make payment before receiving the merchandise. Based on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), trust will not be established until a consumer's expectation is met. High quality product perception or other quality cues such as big brand or quality certification help buyers increase the trust to the seller. Prior studies (Harris and Goode, 2004; Kim, et al., 2004) support the effect of product or service quality on trust. Thus, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Perceived product quality relates to consumer trust in W-shopping environment.

Trust plays a vital role because consumers may take risks of not knowing the ability and integrity of the seller. Trust also affects the long-term relationship between the buyer and seller through satisfaction. Singh and Sirdeshmukh (2000) argue trust leads to satisfaction, which in turn leads to loyalty. Their model is supported by Chaudhuri and Holbrook's (2001) study on brand loyalty. In W-shopping, the confidence on seller's capability of delivering quality product or service relates to post-purchase satisfaction. Additionally, it has been found that trust can bring buyers with high level of satisfaction on the transaction (Hawes et al., 1989). Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: Consumer trust relates to satisfaction in W-shopping environment.

Using the American Customer Satisfaction Index, Fornell et al.'s (1996) study supports the positive relationship between consumer loyalty and satisfaction. Cristobal et al. (2007) also reveals that customer satisfaction lead to loyalty in e-commerce. Thus, we propose:

*Hypothesis 3: Consumer satisfaction relates to purchase in W-shopping environment.*

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

We employed a "Snowball" sampling procedure. A questionnaire was designed based on several interviews with WeChat marketers.   195 college students were selected as respondents. Data was collected through the distribution of the questionnaire to the members of some college student groups via WeChat. 191 students who live in 12 provinces responded. The results were statistically analyzed by using SPSS software.

We first report the descriptive statistics of consumers' shopping experience on WeChat, followed by the hypotheses testing of the research model.

4.1 Which social networking website college students often use?
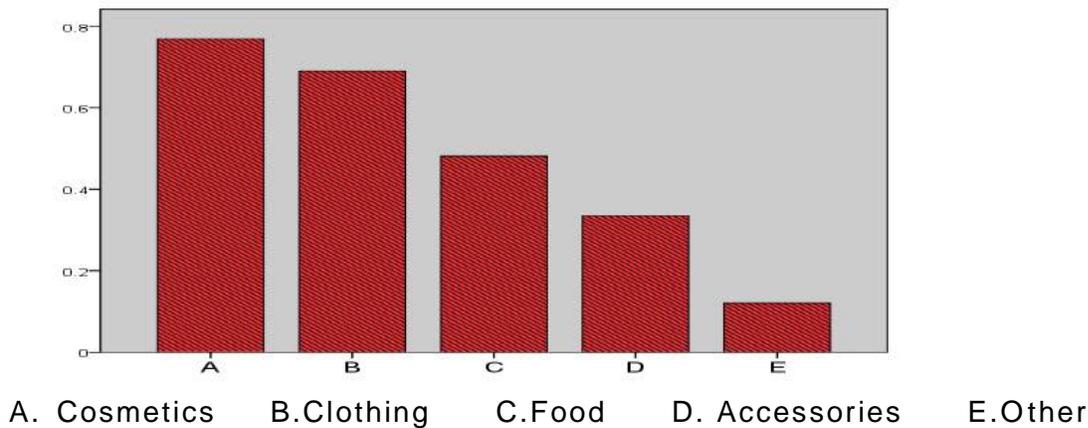
Figure 3
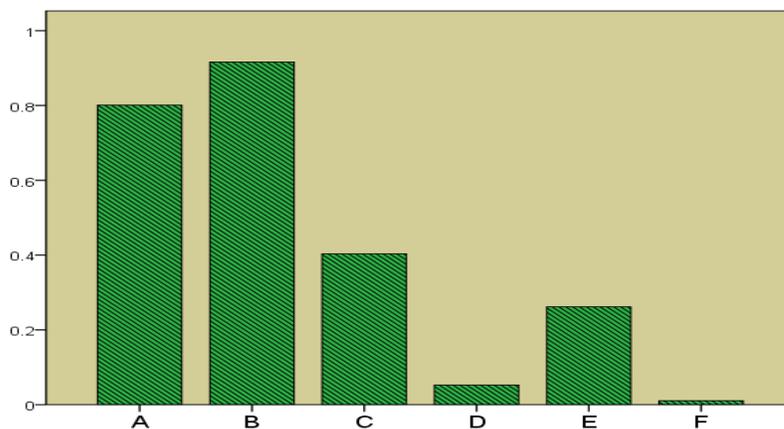
A. WeChat   B.QQ   C. Micro-Web   D. Renren   E. PostBlog   F. Other

As shown in Figure 3, 91.62% of the students in China, 175 people, use QQ as platform for social networking. WeChat is the second most widely used platform, where 80.1%, or 153 people use it quite frequently. Followed by Micro-web: 40.31% or 77 students use it. 26.18% people use PostBlog. Renren is used by 5.245% students. Only 0.52% or one student chooses "other".

4.2 What are some products college students ever purchased on WeChat?

Figure 4 shows that 76.96% or 145 people ever purchased cosmetics on WeChat while 69.11% bought clothing, followed by 48.17% bought food，and 33.51% for accessories. 12.04% or 23 people purchased other products on WeChat.

Figure 4

A. Cosmetics   B.Clothing   C.Food   D. Accessories   E.Other

4.3 Have you ever purchased above items on WeChat？
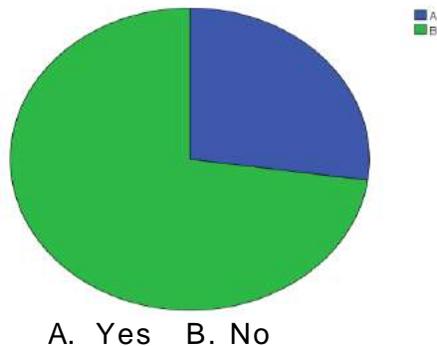
Figure 5

A. Yes   B. No

Figure 5 shows 27.2% or 52 people ever purchased above items (cosmetics, clothing, food, or accessories) on WeChat while more than 70% people did not.

4.4 Are you satisfied with the products purchased from WeChat?

The results indicate that among 52 people who have ever purchased products on WeChat, 5.77% or 3 people are satisfied while 44.23% or 23 people are very satisfied. 46.15% chose "neutral". 1.92% are unsatisfied while 1.92% are very unsatisfied.

Table 1

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
A.Very Satisfied	3	5.77	5.77
B.Satisfied	23	44.24	50.1
C. Neutral	24	46.15	96.16
D.Not Satisfied	1	1.92	98.08
E.Very Unsatisfied	1	1.92	100.0
Total	52	100.0	

4.5 The reason customers were most unhappy with WeChat experience.

Table 2

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
A.Product is completely different from the description provided by the seller	10	19.24	19.24
B.Very expensive	8	15.38	34.62
C.Quality problem of the product	18	34.62	69.24
D.Poor after sales service; Seller does not agree for the return/exchange	8	15.38	84.62
E.Other	8	15.38	100.0
Total	52	100.0	

The results indicate that among 52 people who ever purchased products on WeChat, 19.23% or 10 people report the worst WeChat purchasing experience was caused by the inconsistency between product itself and the description provided by the seller. 15.38% thought they bought the product at a price higher. 34.62% people report quality problem of the products. 15.38% complained poor customer service on W-shopping.

4.6 Have you ever encountered consumer disputes after you purchased a product on WeChat?

Table 3

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
A.Encountered	7	13.46	13.46
B.Encountered frequently	7	13.46	26.92
C.Encountered occasionally	10	19.23	46.15
D.Never encountered	28	53.85	100.0
Total	52	100.0	

Among 52 people who ever purchased products on WeChat, 13.46% or 7 people reported that they encountered consumer disputes.13.46% people encountered frequently. 19.23% encountered occasionally. 53.85% or 28 people never encountered consumer disputes on WeChat.

4.7 What method you will take to protect your rights when you encountered disputes on WeChat shopping?

Among 52 people who ever purchased products on WeChat, 67.31% or 35 people choose to negotiate with the seller when they encountered disputes on W-shopping while 15.38% choose to file a complaint, and 9.62% choose to give up their rights.

Table 4

	Frequency	Percent
A. Negotiate with the seller directly	35	67.31
B.File a compaint	8	15.38
C.Give up and keep silence	5	9.62
D.Other	48	7.69

4.8 Which actions did sellers take to compensate you when the products you purchased on WeChat had quality problem or you were not satisfactory?
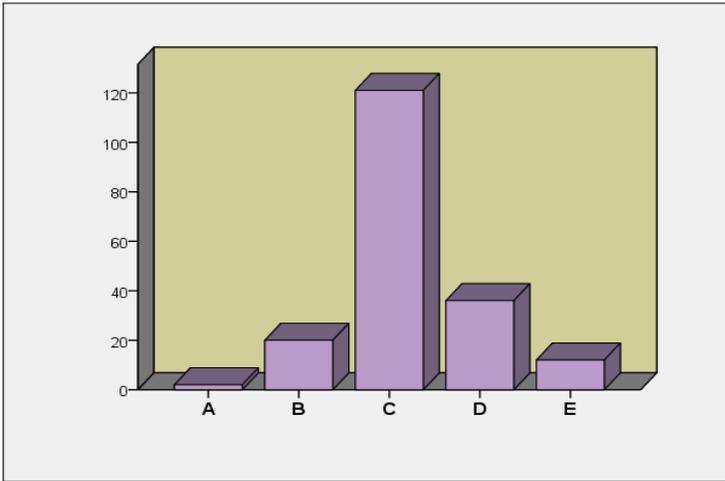
Table 5

	Frequency	Percent
A.Return or exchange the product within seven days of purchasing	37	71.15
B.Exchange the product with seven days of purchasing, but no return	14	26.92
C.No return or exchange after selling	8	15.38

Among 52 people who ever purchased products on WeChat, 71.15% or 37 people report that they wished the seller would agree to return or exchange the product within seven days of purchasing. 26.92% report the seller agreed to return the product within seven days but not for an exchange. 15.38% report the seller chose no return or exchange policy.

4.9 Do customers trust WeChat?

The data shows that 1% or 2% people report they absolutely trust W-shopping. 10.5% report they trust. 63.4% people are neutral. 18.8% people report they do not trust W-shopping while 6.3% report they do not trust W-shopping at all.

Figure 6

A.Abosolutely trust B.Trut C.Neutral D.Not trust E.Absolutely no trust

**4.10 What can enhance customers' trust level on W-shopping?**

Table 6

	Frequency	Percent
A.Product certification	126	65.97
B.Invoice	82	42.93
C.Combined with physical store	120	62.83
D.User reviews/comments	76	39.79
E.Other	34	17.8

Table 6 shows that 66% people think product certification can enhance the level of trust toward W-shopping. 42.9% people choose store receipt. 62.8% prefers to buy products via W-shopping from a seller which has physical stores. 39.8% people report they will have more trust on W-shopping if they can find user reviews or comments on the product.

4.11 Consumer acceptability of daily ads on WeChat groups.
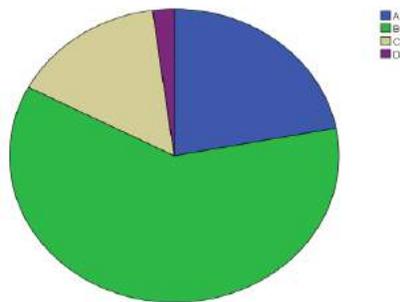
Figure 7
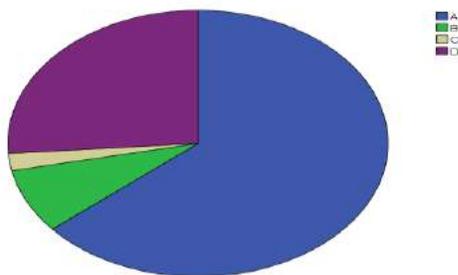
A. 1-3 times   B.4-6 times   C. more than 7 times   D. Unacceptable

Figure 7 shows that 63.9% people can accept 1-3 ads on a We-Chat group. 7.9% think 4-6 ads a day is acceptable. Only 2.1% accept more than 7 ads a day. 26.2% people report that they cannot accept any ads in a We-Chat group.

4.12 What channel college students purchased cosmetics mainly from?
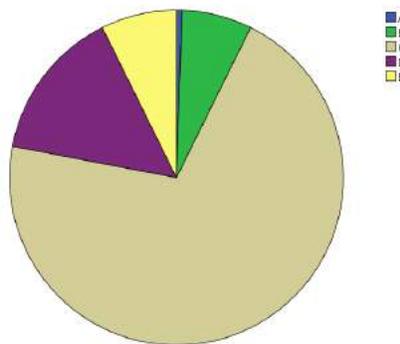
Figure 8

A.Supermarket   B.Boutique   C.Online Seller   D.WeChat Seller

As shown in Figure 8, 22% people report they purchase cosmetics in supermarket. 60.7% people buy in boutiques. 15.2% people choose online sellers while only 2.1% choose WeChat seller to buy cosmetics.

4.13 What do customers think the quality of cosmetic purchased from WeChat?

Figure 9

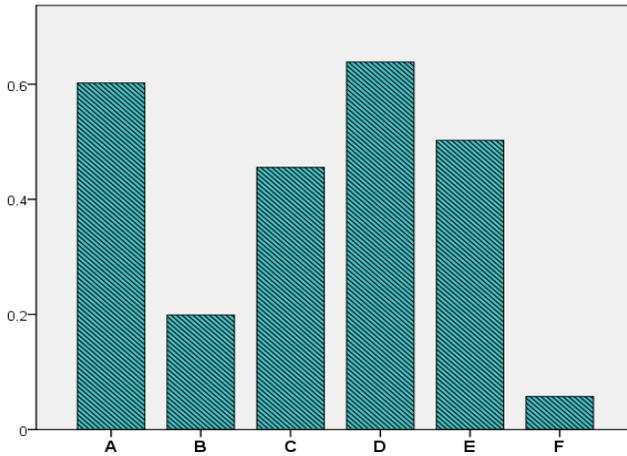A.Very Good   B.Good   C.Neutral   D.Bad   E.Very bad

As shown in Figure 9, 0.5% people think the quality of cosmetics they purchased from We-Chat is very good while 6.8% people think it is good. 70.7% people the quality is normal. 14.7% people report it is not good while 7.3% report very bad.

4.14 What factors may influence your decision of purchasing cosmetics from WeChat?

Figure 10

A. Know the seller   B. Seller exhibition of the product
C. Fair price   D. Assurance of product quality
E. Assurance of after sales service   F. Other

Figure 10 shows that 60.2% people think knowing the seller is the main factor that influence their purchasing decision on WeChat. 19.9% people report the product exhibition provided by the seller has impact. Additionally, 45.6% people rated fair price，63.9% people choose assurance of product quality and 50.3% people think the assurance of after sales service is the main factor.

4.15 What type of promotion program may attract customers in W-shopping?

Figure 11
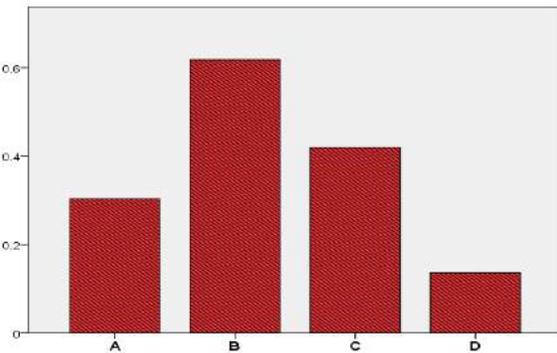
A. Thumb-up discount   B.Forwarding message discount
C.Holiday discount   D.Quantity discount
E.Other

The result shows that more than 30% people think "thumb-up" discount may attract them. 61.8% people are attracted by holiday discount. 41.9% people are interested in quantity discount. 13.6% people choose other ways。

4.16 Hypothesis testing

To test whether perceived quality is related to trust, we use χ^2 test of independence with $\alpha = 0.05$ as criterion for significance. The results show it is statistically significant, χ^2 (16, N=191) = 314.906, p < .01 Based on this finding, we can infer consumers are more likely to trust W-shopping when they perceive high quality products on WeChat. Thus, hypothesis 1 is supported.

To test whether trust is related to satisfaction, we use χ^2 test of independence with $\alpha = 0.05$ as criterion for significance. The results show it is statistically significant, χ^2 (20, N=191) = 99.35, p < .01. This supports the notion that consumers are more likely to be satisfied with W-shopping when they trust WeChat sellers. Thus, hypothesis 2 is supported.

Finally, to test whether satisfaction is related to customer purchase, we use χ^2 test of independence with $\alpha = 0.05$ as criterion for significance. The results show it is statistically significant, χ^2 (4, N=191) = 87.703, p < .01, which indicates that consumers are more likely to purchase on WeChat when they are satisfied with W-shopping. Thus, hypothesis 3 is supported.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

This paper reports Chinese college students shopping experience on WeChat. It further examines the roles of perceived product quality and trust in customer satisfaction and purchase judgments in the process of W-shopping. The results support that pre-purchase perceived quality relates to trust, which in turn affects post purchase consumer satisfaction leading to customer loyalty in W-shopping. These results validate Singh and Sirdeshmukh (2000) research model in the new W-shopping environment.

This study also has many practical implications. Even though W-shopping is conducted in a friend circle, it is still critical for sellers to create trust and satisfactory shopping process because some sellers may sell inferior products, sell generic products at higher price, or fail to provide post-purchase customer service. In the early development stage, product quality is a key factor that determines the growth and success of W-shopping in the future. In order for WeChat to grow effectively, it must establish trust between buyers and sellers.

Based on a recent report concerning W-shopping ("Techinasia.com"), issues with quality of products purchase via WeChat commerce are still prevalent. At the moment, it lacks the oversight of a traditional ecommerce platform. As one Sina (one of the largest Chinese online media company) commenter put it: "Taobao has fake products but at least there's platform supervision. On WeChat you just have to trust that [the seller] has a conscience. It's unreliable" ("Uschinahpa.com"). In W-shopping context, perceived product quality is a critical element of prepurchase assessment. In lieu of institutional safeguards (e.g., regulations) sellers can take action themselves to convey trust to the buyer and legitimize the purchasing process through W-shopping. The sellers could exhibit products in a group, provide an official certificate for the product, issue official receipts after purchase, encourage user review/comments, or even combine with brick and mortar store to convince "friends" in the WeChat group to buy. It is also important for sellers to ensure the product quality through offering fair price, and improving after sales services such as offering detailed product return or exchange policies to increase trust which will lead to higher satisfaction and attract repeat buyers.

Interestingly, for those people who ever shopped on WeChat, only 3.84% were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the products as indicated on Table 1. It proves W-shopping channel does have big potential in China. The question of how to promote products on WeChat and attract more people to W-shopping remains critical for the expansion of business.

Asked about the trustworthiness of W-shopping, a quarter respondents report either "not trust" or "absolutely not trust" (Figure 6). Overall trustworthiness of W-shopping remains low in comparison to e-commerce websites. "Product certification", "combination with physical store",

"invoice", and "user reviews" are listed as top factors that could enhance the level of W-shopping trust (Table 6).

The results show 63.9% of respondents can accept 1 to 3 WeChat ads on a daily basis, while 26.2% report they do not like ads on WeChat at all (Figure 7). WeChat is a friends circle. The group is formed based on either the connections of people or the common hobbies or topics in life or work. Ads on WeChat should be carefully chosen and designed to meet the common interests of the group, or either the advertiser could be blocked from the group..

Regarding cosmetic products shopping on WeChat, only 2.1% bought from WeChat. A majority customers purchased from either boutiques or supermarkets (Figure 8). It seems cosmetics users want to try the product in person first instead of taking the risk of purchasing online without experiencing it first.

This study reports "product quality", "knowing the seller", "after sales service", and "fair price" are some top factors influencing customers' purchase decision on WeChat. Because all respondents are college students whose purchasing power is limited, low price may become an important factor, however the quality of some products may be affected by the low price. That may be why 22% people who ever bought products on WeChat report quality problem (Figure 9). Since "Know the seller" is one of top factors leading to a purchase, sellers should increase interactions with group members on WeChat.

LIMITATIONS/DIRECTIONS OF FUTURE RESEARCH

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first empirical study in emerging area of W-shopping, and it presents a solid foundation for future research. W-shopping has massive potential in China and beyond. According to Shao's (2015) report, the e-commerce market in China was $198 billion in 2014, and is showing strong growth. Additionally, B2C Internet-shopping was close to $40 billion and 520 million people shopped online while 22.9% of them used cell phone for internet shopping in 2014. Future research could also specifically focus on smaller sellers to determine potentially unknown barriers to entry in this market. Currently only 11% of private WeChat sellers' monthly sales volume is above $16,000 and there are only 3% above $166,000 on average. It is critically important to examine the W-shopping process in order to increase the sales volume of W-shopping among the majority of sellers in the market.

Future studies should also expand beyond college students to determine the generalizeability of the results to other demographics. Additionally, more research is needed to further consider other antecedents of trust, along with risk, perceived benefits, and customer loyalty.

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