

The use of social networks as marketing tools and its impact on online shopping among university students in the Chinese city of Nanjing, 2020

El uso de las redes sociales como herramientas de marketing y su impacto en la compra en línea entre los universitarios de la ciudad china de Nanjing, 2020

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RESUMEN

Introducción. En la era digital, las redes sociales como WeChat, QQ, Sina Weibo y TikTok, etc. son una herramienta indispensable entre los universitarios chinos para comunicarse y divertirse en la vida cotidiana, pero también para hacer compras en línea. En los últimos años, hacer compras en las redes sociales se ha convertido en un nuevo modelo de compra online y en un comportamiento muy popular entre la juventud china. **Objetivos.** El presente trabajo trata de resolver los siguientes interrogantes: ¿Qué tipo de impactos está generando este uso y consumo entre la juventud china y sobre los nuevos modelos de negocio chinos? **Metodología.** Se procede al análisis de estos interrogantes, examinamos la red social más atractiva entre los universitarios de la ciudad de Nanjing y observamos sus características y peculiaridades de uso y consumo. Para ello, investigamos el uso de las redes sociales como herramientas de marketing sobre una muestra compuesta por un total de 436 estudiantes de 20 universidades de Nanjing en 2020. Mediante software SPSS analizamos la correlación entre el grado de atención de los estudiantes encuestados y los productos recomendados en las redes sociales, entre el grado de confianza de dichos productos recomendados y entre el grado de frecuencia de compra. Al mismo tiempo, también aplicamos análisis de regresión múltiple para analizar el grado de confianza y de atención de los estudiantes universitarios hacia los productos recomendados en las redes sociales

y la frecuencia de compra. **Resultados.** Los principales entre ellos nos indican que: la frecuencia de compras de los estudiantes universitarios a través de las redes sociales está más estrechamente relacionada con la atención al producto (0,646), seguida por el grado de confianza en los productos (0,625), siendo la correlación entre el grado de confianza en el producto y el grado de atención la más pequeña (0,549). **Conclusiones.** En consecuencia, los coeficientes de correlación entre los grados analizados son estadísticamente significativos, es decir, existe una correlación entre los tres. El uso de las redes sociales como herramienta de marketing sí tiene un impacto positivo en las compras online de los estudiantes universitarios, en especial, se concluye que tanto la confianza de los universitarios en los productos recomendados por las redes sociales como su atención a los productos recomendados tienen un impacto positivo y significativo en la frecuencia de compra de estos productos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: redes sociales; marketing; compras en redes sociales; impacto; universitarios; Nanjing

ABSTRACT

Introduction. In the digital age, social networks such as WeChat, QQ, Sina Weibo and TikTok, etc. They are an indispensable tool to communicate and have fun in everyday life for Chinese university students, but also to shop online. In recent years, making purchases on social networks has become a new online shopping model and a very popular behavior among Chinese youth. **Objectives.** The present work mainly analyses the following questions: what kind of impact is this use and consumption in the Youth of China generating? And about the new Chinese business models? **Methodology.** These questions are solved, we examined the most attractive social network among the university students in the city of Nanjing, and we observe its characteristics and peculiarities of uses and consumption. For this, we investigate the use of social networks as marketing tools for a total of 436 students from 20 universities in Nanjing by 2020. Through SPSS software, we analyze the correlation between the degree of students surveyed to the recommended products of social networks, At the same time, we also use multiple regression analysis to analyze the degree of confidence and attention from college students towards the recommended products in social networks and the frequency of purchase. **Results.** The main consequences are that, among them, the frequency of purchases of university students through social networks is more closely related to attention to the product (0.646), followed by the degree of trust in the products (0.625), being the correlation between the degree of trust in the product and the degree of attention the smallest (0.549). **Conclusions.** In the end, we found that the correlation coefficients between the analyzed grades are statistically significant, that is, there is a correlation between the three. The use of social networks as a marketing tool does have a positive impact on online purchases of university students, especially, it is concluded that both the trust of university students in the products recommended by social networks and their attention to the products recommended products have a positive and significant impact on the frequency of purchase of recommended products on social networks.

KEYWORDS: social media; marketing; shopping on social media; impact; university student; Nanjing

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Translation by **Paula González** (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Venezuela)

1. Introduction

Social networks are progressively taking root in political strategies, national defense methods, public policies, advertising, item management, and even interaction within the organization (Sajid, 2016). In China, social networks have been developed as an app to cover practically all the daily services of citizens, integrating many multi-platform functions, among others, the shopping platform function that has emerged in recent years as a new model at the service of the consumer.

This shopping model is based on the maturation of online shopping platforms and social media platforms, integrating the characteristics of the large volume of users of social platforms and the high profitability capacity of online shopping platforms. Although this model is in the initial stage of its development, it has good prospects and a large room for growth. Most of the research on the impact of social media marketing on college students has focused on WeChat, Weibo to delve into the influence factors and their marketing model among college students, the extent of student engagement in marketing activities, or the influence of word of mouth on the Internet (Yadav and Rahman, 2018) and the effect of "opinion leader" (Hung, Cheng, and Lee, 2021), etc. For example: research on the mechanism of influence of mobile social interaction on online purchase intention (Wen, P. (2015) (Zheng, 2020), the marketing role of social networks (2016), etc. However, there are few studies on which social network is the most efficient and attractive for students or on the impact of social network marketing on Chinese university students' online purchases given that, according to official data¹, netizens under 30-year-olds accounted for 38.2% of the total number of netizens in June 2020. The number of online shopping users in China reached 749 million, accounting for 79.7% of the total number of Internet users.

Among e-commerce users, the group of university students is certainly high. There are currently three main social networks used for marketing in China. Each of them has its own characteristics and market development models. Therefore, studying the impact of social media marketing on college students' online purchases can not only help us know what types of social media marketing methods are attractive to users but also help us know if social networks as a marketing tool influence guiding young people to buy.

1.1. Social network marketing

Social network marketing refers to those digital marketing activities by which the company makes use of social media to gain the adhesion of consumers and involve them in communications about the brand (Rodríguez-Ardura, 2014). Compared with traditional marketing, social media marketing has more advantages such as more accurate marketing, lower cost, and timely market information (Zi, 2021). Social media marketing allows companies to establish a communication channel with their customers, market their products, generate brand value, and boost customer loyalty. However, being a two-way channel, it requires effort and care to manage this communication. Thanks to the advantages offered by the Internet, such as the speed of information dissemination and the ease of forwarding it to

other users to share it, social networks facilitate the arrival of descriptive content of the product, such as images, video, and text, to the screens of mobile devices around the world. Social networks as platforms for publishing and forwarding information not only make it possible for sellers to publish their information to recipients but also for recipients to share the received information with their friends, relatives, and even strangers according to their own preferences.

The main factors by which social networks influence the participation of consumers in marketing activities are: the personality characteristics of consumers, the risk factor and the form, content, and phases of marketing. There are three main types of social media marketing interaction modes: a) shopping assistants and recommendations; b) group topics; c) emotional partners; they are usually connected and coexist throughout the process of commercial interaction. One of the most popular Internet terms in China, the so-called “online product recommendation (Mandarin Chinese: zhòng cǎo)”, is a typical case: it literally means a way of growing grass artificially. On the Internet, it means sharing and recommending the excellent quality of a product to stimulate the purchase desire of others. The traditional marketing model is no longer adapted to the needs of the age of Internet consumption. The “planting grass” marketing model on social media platforms is gaining increasing support among young consumers, which has led to an increase in consumption frequency and consumption spending by college students (Xu, Zeng, and Zeng, 2020).

At present, China's main social media marketing forms include webcast, WeChat Moments², Qzone³, Sina Weibo advertisement, WeChat official accounts⁴, subscription accounts⁵, and We Chat mini-programs⁶, among which Sina Weibo is one of the most popular forms since blogs offer important territory for digital advertising. As the social network with the largest number of users, WeChat has spawned a new model of social media marketing – “mini crowd shopping programs”. The key to the success of mini crowd shopping programs has been consolidated as a successful positioning strategy. Its essence is in the decentralization and reconstruction of the relationship between agents, products, and places, that is, improving efficiency (Deng, Zhao, and Yao, 2021).

1.2. Social network marketing

E-commerce strategies based on social networks entail the specific development of tools and apps that allow consumers to interact simultaneously with other users with whom they maintain interpersonal relationships and, in this framework, it is possible to share knowledge, exchange information, and, of course, even promote purchase decisions: some of these acquisitions can even be forged as cooperative purchases between a broader base of various users/consumers. With the new possibilities, therefore, social networks become a great showcase in which to buy those products that are talked about or that become relevant in social or viral conversations.

In general, there are three forms of purchases that we can call social. The first is that consumers use social media platforms (such as Sina Weibo) to communicate, spread, and evaluate products and business information with others; the second way is found in shopping websites (such as Taobao), where communication and interactive exchanges between consumers are strengthened; the third is to establish some new social shopping platforms or communities (such as Mogujie.com⁷) to specifically support social shopping activities. Social shopping participants not only include consumers but also merchants. Both can derive different benefits from these activities (Hu, 2016).

2. Case study

Nanjing is the capital city of the Chinese province of Jiangsu and an important urban enclave in the economic zone of the Yangtze River. It is one of the three most important cities in the field of higher and

high-level education in China. Until 2017, up to a total of 700,000 students could be counted⁸. These peculiarities may help us understand the tremendous development of the use of social networks whose influence on the purchasing and consumption habits of young people in this city constitutes the focus of the analysis of this work. Also, from this case, we intend to get to know what trends in these purchase channels may be generated in the future, in the medium and long term.

3. Objectives

We intend to answer the following questions throughout the article: What social networks do university students use to view product information? Which app is the most used? What level of trust, attention, and frequency of purchases on social networks do students have in the products recommended through social networks? Is there a correlation between trust and attention to recommended products on social networks regarding the frequency of purchases? Do trust and attention to products affect the frequency of purchases on social networks?

4. Methodology

To study the impact of social media as a marketing tool on online shopping among university students, we classify and summarize the relevant literature on online shopping and social media marketing, whose representative studies mainly include: Huang and Zhou (2019) who consider that the personalized product recommendation (PPR) has a positive impact on the quality of consumer decision-making. Zhong (2013) and Cuadros and Rodríguez (2019) studied the consumer's willingness to browse and buy on the shopping site. They believe that consumers like online shopping due to factors of price, entertainment value, communication with others, social needs, etc. Social shopping sites can connect many consumers and, to some extent, expand consumers' social activities when shopping. Zhong (2013) established a research model through the "Stimulation–Organism–Response" framework to study the relationship between consumer browsing and purchase intention. The results of the study show that all three types of purchase value will affect consumers' willingness to shop on the shopping site.

Li (2021) understands that WeChat marketing is a form of business marketing using social media. The identity of socialization has been integrated, most of the friends in the WeChat friendship cycle are acquaintances in real life, and the trust level of the marketing content is high among users. Whether from WeChat or Weibo, its purpose is to allow more consumers to know and understand the company (Barrio, 2017). The company is in a passive position in this process, the consumer is in an active position, and the user has the right to choose the marketing channel that suits their needs. Siddiqui, Mannion, and Marciniak (2019) explore the behaviors and impact of consumer engagement with luxury clothing brands on the WeChat social media platform.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, between April and June 2020, we conducted a survey on the willingness to buy online with several questions aimed at students in the Chinese city of Nanjing whose age is between 18-24 years and who correspond to the data in table 1:

Table 1. *The 20 universities in Nanjing where the surveyed students study*

No.	Name	No.	Name
1	Nanjing University	11	Jiangsu Institute of Commerce
2	Nanjing Southeast University	12	Nanjing Audit University
3	Nanjing Normal University	13	Nanjing Agricultural University
4	Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications	14	Nanjing University of Science and Technology
5	Nanjing Art University	15	Jinling Institute of Technology
6	Nanjing Medical University	16	Nanjing Xiaozhuang University
7	Nanjing University of Finance and Economics	17	Nanjing Police Officers University
8	Nanjing Sanjiang University	18	Nanjing Forestry University
9	Nanjing Institute of Technology	19	Nanjing Information Science and Technology University
10	Hohai University	20	Nanjing University of Industry

Source: Own elaboration

In April 2020, we designed the questionnaire which contains 5 questions, 3 single choice questions and 2 multiple-choice questions. The single-choice questions mainly cover the basic information about students' online purchases such as the amount of monthly consumption, the frequency of online purchases, and the types of goods purchased. The multiple-choice questions are mainly to research whether the evaluations of other users will affect the students' purchasing decisions, as well as the attention of the students and the promotion of online shopping platforms. The questionnaire was distributed through the online survey platform Tencent Encuesta in April and May 2020 and a total of 436 samples were collected. The data was classified and analyzed with SPSS statistical software to perform correlation and influence analyses on product trust, attention, and purchase frequency in June 2020.

5. Results

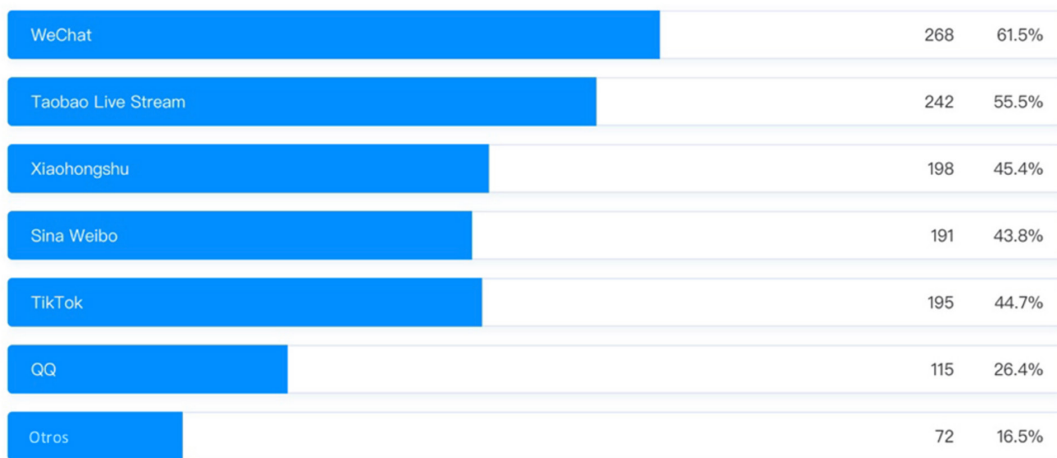
5.1. As a social network marketing tool, WeChat is the most attractive to respondents

The data obtained in the question about whether social networks are used to learn about products show that 100% of the students surveyed use them to see products. WeChat is the most popular and used social network app among students with a percentage of 61.5%, followed by Taobao Live Stream with a percentage of 55.5%, TikTok and Xiaohongshu with a percentage of 44.7% and a 45.4% respectively, followed by QQ with 26.4%. The remaining 16.5% of students use other social network apps such as Dianping.com and Douban to view products.

Among the social network apps selected by the surveyed students, WeChat integrates various functions and services such as instant messaging, "We Media", mobile payment, and mini-programs for purchases and services, and its marketing method is the most attractive to them. The second is Taobao Live Stream, a live streaming app developed by China's largest online shopping platform, Taobao, specifically for product marketing. Taobao Live Stream has attracted more than half of student users thanks to Taobao's huge user base and the way "Internet celebrities" present products through live streams. Xiaohongshu is a social shopping software that integrates user interaction and online shopping. Its marketing model is mainly that Internet users publish and exchange information about the product on the platform, and users who are willing to buy the product can directly enter the purchase page to purchase it. Sina Weibo's marketing model is mainly to place advertisements and posts online about products launched

by some companies or individuals. TikTok's marketing model is relatively simple. Registered accounts can only perform the shopping link marketing content in a short video with a maximum duration of 60 seconds. QQ is one of the earliest social media platforms used by young people born after the 1990s in China, but its number of users has decreased by 52 million in 2020, and more and more QQ users have started using WeChat (Wan, 2021). The decline in the number of QQ users means that its appeal to young people in social marketing has a negative impact compared to those social media platforms with a large number of users. This is reflected in the data in Figure 1, among the respondents, the percentage of WeChat usage is 61.5%, and QQ usage is 16.5%. Therefore, the social network with the most innovative features may be more attractive to college students when used as a marketing tool. This innovative feature should be able to improve efficiency (2021).

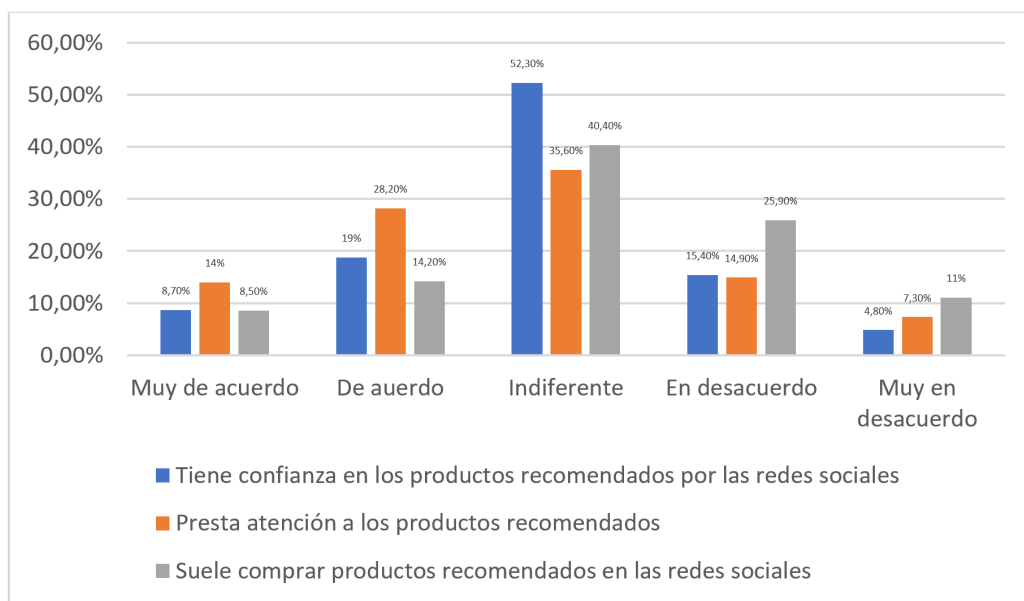
Figure 1. *The social networks used by students to learn about products*



Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained from the survey, 2020

5.2. Trust, attention, and frequency of buying social media recommended products

Figure 2. *Percentage of trust, attention, and frequency of buying products in social networks*



Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained from the survey, 2020

Chart 2 shows that only 27.5% of those surveyed trust the products recommended on social networks, while 57.8% of those surveyed show a low level of attention to the products recommended on social networks. Only 42.2% tend to pay attention to recommended products. That also indicates that social media has a profound influence on this percentage of respondents. 40.4% of respondents do not know if they usually buy products recommended on social networks or not, and only 22.7% usually buy products recommended on social networks, furthermore, 36.9% express their disagreement with buying products recommended on social networks. Only a fifth of the respondents usually buy products recommended on social networks, while the rest of the respondents are not influenced by social networks.

5.3. The correlation between trust, attention, and purchase frequency. The trust and attention of social network recommendations have a positive impact on social network purchase frequency

Table 2. *The correlation between trust, attention, and purchase frequency*

	Trust	Attention	Frequency
Trust	1		
Attention	.549**	1	
Frequency	.625**	.646**	1

(Note: **means $P < 0.01$; Trust means the trust in products recommended on social networks; Attention means attention to products recommended on social networks; Frequency means the frequency of purchases of recommended products on social networks.)

Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained from the survey, 2020

Table 2 shows that there is a correlation between trust and attention to recommended products and the frequency of purchase of recommended products on social networks. The correlation between them, from highest to lowest, is: attention and purchase frequency, with a correlation coefficient of 0.646; followed by purchase frequency and trust in the product, with a correlation coefficient of 0.625; trust and attention have a low correlation. The correlation coefficient is 0.549. Furthermore, the correlation coefficients between the three are statistically significant.

Table 3. *The impact of trust and product attention on the frequency of purchases*

	Unstandardized coefficient		standardized coefficient	T	P
	B	Standard Error	Beta	value	
Constant	0.064	0.133		0.479	0.632
Trust	0.446	0.046	0.387	9.752	0.000
Attention	0.423	0.039	0.434	10.922	0.000

(Note: Trust means the trust in products recommended on social networks; Attention means attention to products recommended on social networks;)

Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained from the survey, 2020

Table 3 shows the results of the regression analysis of trust and attention to recommended products versus the frequency of purchases on social networks. It can be seen that both trust and product attention have a significant positive impact on purchase frequency ($P < 0.001$), and their impact values are 0.446 and 0.423, respectively, that is, the impact value of trust is slightly higher than the attention to products.

6. Conclusion and discussion

The conclusions obtained through the present study (which provides empirical data on the impact of the use of social networks as a marketing tool on the purchasing behavior of recommended products among Nanjing university students) are the following:

- a) A social network platform like WeChat that integrates instant messaging, personal network space, online payment, and mini-program functions as a marketing tool is the most attractive for college students.
- b) The level of trust, attention, and frequency of purchase of the recommended products on social network platforms is not high among university students and none exceeds 50%.
- c) Trust and attention to products are correlated with the frequency of purchases. Among them, attention and frequency of purchase are high, with a correlation coefficient of 0.646, and the correlation coefficient of frequency of purchase and trust in the product is 0.625. The correlation coefficient of trust and attention is 0.549. Trust and attention to products recommended on social networks affect the frequency of purchases on social networks, and their impact values are 0.446 and 0.423, respectively. The trust in recommended products has more impact on the frequency of purchases of students. As a marketing tool, social media plays a very good role in the process of product awareness for college students and has a positive impact on online shopping among surveyed college students in Nanjing.

Although there are studies on consumer behavior in the omnichannel supply chain under social network services (Yan, Chen, Zhou, and Fang, 2019) and analysis of compulsive purchases by university students (Xue, Bian, Wang, Wang, and Wu, 2016), etc., research on the influences of social media marketing on Nanjing city students' purchases through social media remains scarce. The present study not only fills this gap but also provides references and empirical data for future research on social media marketing in this universe of Chinese university students.

Through the survey we conducted, we found that both the penetration rate of using social media among students and the rate of using social media to view product information is very high. Social media marketing activities are directly related to the penetration rate of social media use. As of the end of January 2020, the most used social networks in China were WeChat, TikTok, QQ, QZone, and Sina Weibo, with their monthly active user numbers reaching 1.151 million, 800 million, 731 million, 517 million, and 497 million, respectively. The penetration results of the use of social networks in this study are in line with the 2020 data mentioned, with WeChat being the most popular and used social network among the students surveyed.

In contrast to some studies such as Wang, Zhang, Zhou, and Lai (2019), Amrudhia and Nurfebriaraning (2021), Gogan, Zhang, and Matemba (2018), and Zhao, Zhao, Yuan, and Zhou (2018) that only look at the impact of a certain social network in online shopping, we expand the categories of social network apps to determine which types of social networks are the most popular among young people in Nanjing. Second, we analyze the characteristics of these social networks to get to know the usage preferences of university students. Thus, we find that the extent to which social media as a marketing tool can affect college students depends primarily on whether the social media app they use has innovative features

that they might like. In the future, if other social media platforms also add WeChat-like innovative features like online payment, official accounts, mini-programs, etc., will they give college students better use of their marketing capabilities like WeChat? Is it possible that after adding these innovations, the different types of social networks can generate differentiated marketing effects between them?

Product reviews on social networks become an important factor influencing users' purchasing decisions (Yin, 2017). Through analysis of the correlation between trust, attention, and product purchase frequency, we found that when social media is used as a marketing tool, attention to product information and trust in online shopping have a positive correlation ($P < 0.001$) on the frequency of purchase of the products for university students. Therefore, if companies want to increase user sales and purchasing frequency, they should start by improving the user experience of using social media platforms and improving user attention and trust in online shopping products.

In the future, we may continue to dig deeper into the specific reasons college students pay attention to and trust online purchases and explore which marketing methods social media is using to have the greatest influence on shopping online attitudes and behavior of college students. In future studies, it seems pertinent to continue delving into the analysis of the correlation between the reasons and the frequency of purchase, since we understand that it would help to design marketing optimization plans for the different types of social network platforms.

7. Notes

[1] CNNIC official data, which can be consulted on its website:

http://www.cac.gov.cn/2020-09/29/c_1602939918747816.htm

[2] WeChat Moments works as a social network in which users can share images, "status", messages, web pages, and other items to a select group of contacts, thus creating a private circle of communication between the user and their close friends.

[3] Qzone is a Chinese social network created in 2005 by Tencent, it offers users services such as creating blogs, personal diaries, sending photos, or listening to music, as well as sharing everything with friends.

[4] WeChat users can register on the app as an official or verified account, which allows them to send notifications to all their subscribers, interact with them, and offer them exclusive services.

[5] They can send their subscribers, at most, one notification per day. Subscription accounts can be created with either a Chinese ID or a local Chinese business license.

[6] WeChat's "mini-programs" system is a feature where developers can code programs smaller than 10 megabytes into the WeChat interface using JavaScript and Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), which users can install within the WeChat app.

[7] Mogu_inc.com: is an e-commerce website that offers a diverse shopping experience for consumers.

[8] Official data from the Jiangsu Provincial Bureau of Statistics, which can be found on its website: <http://www.jssb.gov.cn/2017nj/nj15/nj1522.htm>

[9] Dianping.com: is the world's first independent consumer review website.

[10] Douban: is a web page that provides users with information about movies, books, music, etc.

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