

Consumer Involvement in In-Feed Advertising: Implications for Chinese Cross-Border SMEs from a Comparative Analysis of WeChat and Zalo Users in China and Vietnam

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Abstract

With the global proliferation of mobile instant messaging (MIM) apps, in-feed advertising has become a core marketing channel in emerging Asian markets. This study compares the factors influencing consumer involvement in in-feed advertising via WeChat (China) and Zalo (Vietnam), drawing on data from 873 respondents (444 Chinese, 429 Vietnamese). The empirical results show that consumer attitude serves as a critical mediating variable for involvement in both markets, while trust in e-vendors exhibits no predictive power across the two samples. However, there are some key differences between the two countries: social influence, self-presentation, and trust in the app positively drive Chinese users' attitudes, whereas Vietnamese users' attitudes are shaped solely by advertising informativeness and entertainment. Through this empirical study, this paper hopes to remind Chinese SMEs to recognize the differences and to provide insights for Chinese SMEs entering Vietnam's cross-border e-commerce market.

Keywords: Consumer involvement; WeChat; Zalo; Cross-border e-commerce

1. Introduction

The integration of mobile technology and e-commerce has transformed advertising paradigms, with MIM apps emerging as dominant platforms for in-feed advertising (Khasawneh & Shuhaimer, 2018). China and Vietnam represent two high-potential Asian markets: China's mobile advertising market is mature which is valued at \$120 billion in 2023 with WeChat as the ecosystem core, while Vietnam's market is emerging but dynamic (mobile advertising growth rate of 30% in 2023) led by Zalo (eMarketer, 2024). Smartphone penetration, a foundational driver, has surged in both markets: China's rate reached 85% in 2024 (Tencent, 2024), while Vietnam's reached 89% (Ken Research, 2024). WeChat, launched by Tencent in 2011, has evolved into a super-app with 1.32 billion monthly active users (MAU) in 2024 according to Tencent earning report, integrating social networking, payments, and e-commerce. Zalo, developed by Vietnam's VNG in 2012, is a leading digital platform in Vietnam with nearly 78 million monthly users and strengthened its e-commerce capabilities via Zalo Pay (Vietnam.vn, 2025).

Both WeChat (in China) and Zalo (in Vietnam) are household apps, and merchants in both countries regard them as essential channels to reach consumers. In-feed advertising is one of the most widely used approaches in both markets. To better align with the research objectives, this paper specifically defines in-feed advertising as WeChat Moments Advertising (Ads) in China and Zalo Timeline Advertising (Ads) in Vietnam. WeChat Moments Ads have gained widespread recognition among users in China, and researchers have also revealed their effectiveness in marketing practices through various investigations. However, for Chinese cross-border small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) aiming to export to Vietnam, they have to consider the following critical questions: how to effectively reach Vietnamese consumers? Can they directly

apply their WeChat Moments Ads experience to Zalo Timeline Ads? In other words, do the factors affecting Chinese users' WeChat Moments Ads involvement also exert a comparable impact on Vietnamese users' involvement in Zalo Timeline Ads? To address these research questions, this study conducts a comparative analysis of users' involvement behaviors with in-feed advertising across the two countries and performs empirical testing based on data collected separately from China and Vietnam.

2. Consumer Involvement and Its Antecedents

Consumer involvement is defined as the degree of cognitive and behavioral engagement with advertising content (Michaelidou & Dibb, 2008). It is rooted in social psychology and marketing theory. Over the past several decades, the concept of involvement has been explored by researchers from different perspectives. Ducoffe's (1995) advertising value model identifies entertainment and informativeness as universal drivers, as mobile users prioritize content that aligns with their needs for leisure and efficiency. Researchers (e.g., Li et al., 2022) confirm these factors remain critical, particularly in emerging markets where mobile usage is utility-driven. Therefore, in the context of in-feed advertising, it is believed that consumer involvement is a key variable that directly influence and is closely associated with consumers' purchase behavior. Consequently, consumer involvement is identified as the dependent variable, which is generally influenced by consumers' attitudes toward the in-feed ads. Individuals' attitudes toward a technology have been well studied by researchers in IS/IT adoption research and attitudes are posited to influence consumer responses in the context of in-feed advertising. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: The more positive consumers' attitudes toward WeChat Moments and Zalo Timeline advertising are, the greater their involvement in such advertising will be.

Based on Ducoffe's (1995) research, it's reasonable to argue that consumers' perceived entertainment and informativeness derived from in-feed ads act as key drivers shaping their attitudes toward these advertisements. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2: Consumers' perceived entertainment from WeChat Moments and Zalo Timeline ads positively influences their attitudes toward such ads.

H3: Consumers' perceived informativeness from WeChat Moments and Zalo Timeline ads positively influences their attitudes toward such ads.

Trust is another variable that has been widely examined by IS/IT researchers and it is indispensable in the e-commerce context—given the inherent uncertainties in online transactions (Teo and Liu, 2007). Based on previous studies, it is undeniable that trust significantly influences consumers' attitudes and behaviors. In addition, according to some researchers (Hsu, 2014; Le & Nguyen, 2014), consumers' perceptions of trust in mobile advertisements are affected by cues related the platform assurance and e-vendor credibility. Therefore, trust in the current study—including trust in the apps and trust in e-vendors—is critical in e-commerce but varies by market maturity. For instance, mature markets with regulated ecosystems (e.g., China) foster higher levels of platform trust (Tang et al., 2022), whereas emerging markets (e.g., Vietnam) grapple with counterfeiting and data security challenges, which weakens e-vendor trust. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: Trust in WeChat and Zalo positively predicts customers' attitudes toward advertising on WeChat Moments and Zalo Timeline.

H5: Trust in e-vendors positively predicts customers' attitudes toward advertising on WeChat Moments and Zalo Timeline.

In addition to the entertainment and informativeness of in-feed ads, social influence and self-presentation are also believed to affect consumers' attitudes, and both are context-dependent. Social influence refers to "the process whereby attitudes and behavior are influenced by the real or imagined presence of other people" (Hogg & Vaughan, 2011). It thrives in closed social networks with strong-tie relationships (Ng, 2016), as observed in WeChat Moments. Therefore, an individual's attitude toward an in-feed ad is affected by social influence.

H6: Social influence positively influences consumers' attitudes toward WeChat Moments and Zalo Timeline ads.

Self-presentation is defined as the process through which an individual construct and conveys a specific self-image to others (Kim et al., 2012). In other words, it refers to the activity that may shape how others perceive an individual. Self-presentation, linked to identity construction (Choi et al., 2014), is particularly relevant to platforms where users curate personal brands—a behavior that has grown increasingly prominent amid China's mature social-commerce ecosystem (Gan et al., 2021). WeChat Moments ads are perceived as extensions of users' self-presentation. Consumers may like or share the ads they are interested in, and these behaviors help them address their desired identities (e.g., taste, status). However, in Vietnam, Zalo Timeline is a weak-tie, information-focused platform. Vietnamese users engage with its ads based on utility or entertainment, not image maintenance. In other words, self-presentation plays no meaningful role in ad decision-making in Vietnam. Therefore, self-presentation only exert influence on Chinese users. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: Self presentation positively influences Chinese users' attitudes toward WeChat Moments ads.

3. Data Collection and Demographic Profile

3.1. Data Collection

In order to empirically test the hypotheses, two questionnaires were designed and distributed: one to WeChat users in China, and the other to Zalo users in Vietnam. All the questionnaire items were adapted from previous studies. Potential participants were recruited from two groups: Chinese users of WeChat, and Vietnamese users of both WeChat and Zalo. Eligibility criteria were restricted to respondents who had encountered ads on WeChat Moments or Zalo Timeline—given that this subset of users possesses direct exposure to in-feed advertising. SPSS was used to present frequency and percentage of demographic information and online behaviors.

3.2. Demographic Characteristics

A total of 873 individuals participated in the survey, comprising 444 Chinese respondents and 429 Vietnamese respondents. Notably, over 90% (N = 401) of Chinese WeChat users completed the questionnaire after confirming they had encountered advertisements on WeChat Moments, whereas only approximately 70% (N=302) of Vietnamese Zalo users did so after verifying they had received ads on Zalo Timeline. The demographic characteristics of these two samples are presented in Table 1. Data showed that most Chinese respondents (N=401) are female (57.6%), concentrated in 26-50 years old (61.6%), and had a balanced mix of bachelor's (43.1%) and master's or above (18.5%) degrees; 55.4% were single, and 41.9% earned less

than 5,000 RMB monthly. Vietnamese participants (N=302) showed near-gender parity (49.7% male), a younger skew (36.7% aged 18-30), a dominant bachelor's rate (46.7%), and a higher single proportion (64.6%). Their income was more distributed: 36.4% earned 10-20m VND monthly, with only 18.5% in the lowest bracket.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Constructs	China (N=401)		Vietnam (N=302)	
	Items	Frequency/Percentage	Items	Frequency/Percentage
Gender	Male	170 (42.4%)	Male	150 (49.7%)
	Female	231 (57.6%)	Female	152 (50.3%)
Age	Under 18	13 (3.2%)	Under 18	36 (11.9%)
	18-25	76 (19%)	18-25	75 (24.8%)
	26-30	122 (30.4%)	26-30	108 (35.8%)
	31-50	125 (31.2%)	31-50	55 (18.2%)
	Over 50	65 (16.2%)	Over 50	28 (9.3%)
Education Level	High school or below	49 (12.2%)	High school or below	53 (17.5%)
	College	105 (26.2%)	College	68 (22.5%)
	Bachelor	173 (43.1%)	Bachelor	141 (46.7%)
	Master or above	74 (18.5%)	Master or above	40 (13.2%)
Marital Status	Single	222 (55.4%)	Single	195 (64.6%)
	Married	179 (44.6%)	Married	107 (35.4%)
Monthly Income	Less than 5000 RMB	168 (41.9%)	Less than 5 m. VND	56 (18.5%)
	5000-8000 RMB	134 (33.4%)	5-10 m. VND	97 (32.1%)
	8000-15000 RMB	63 (15.7%)	10-20 m. VND	110 (36.4%)
	More than 15000 RMB	36 (9.0%)	More than 20 m. VND	39 (12.9%)

3.3. Online Behavior of Respondents

The respondents from both countries were required to answer questions about their online behavior, including their time spent on WeChat/Zalo and WeChat Moments/Zalo Timeline ads. The details are presented in Table 2. As data reveals, for average platform usage frequency, Chinese respondents (N=401) showed higher daily engagement: 70.57% used WeChat "many times a day," versus 62.3% of Vietnamese (N=302) using Zalo this frequently. Conversely, Vietnamese users had higher low-frequency adoption (e.g., 7.8% used Zalo "less than once a week," vs. 4.49% for WeChat).

Regarding daily time spent on the platforms' feed features (Moments/Timeline): both groups had similar shares in the less than 30 minutes (29.43% China; 25.8% Vietnam) and 30 minutes-1hour (26.43% China; 27.5% Vietnam) brackets. However, Chinese users spent more time on longer sessions: 13.47% used more than 3 hours daily, nearly double Vietnam's 7.3%. In contrast, Vietnamese users (25.8%) were more likely to spend 1-2 hours daily than Chinese respondents (19.45%). Overall, Chinese users exhibit more frequent, longer daily engagement with WeChat's feed, while Vietnamese Zalo users have slightly lower frequency and more balanced mid-length session distribution.

Table 2. Online Behavior of Respondents

Constructs	China (N=401)		Vietnam (N=302)	
	Items	Percentage	Items	Percentage
Average frequency of using WeChat/Zalo	Many times, a day	70.57%	Many times, a day	62.3%
	Once a day	16.71%	Once a day	16.2%
	Once a week	6.23%	Once a week	7.4%
	Less than once a week	4.49%	Less than once a week	7.8%
	Less than once a month	2%	Less than once a month	6.3%
Time spent on WeChat Moment/Zalo Timeline, daily	< 30 min	29.43%	< 30 minutes	25.8%
	30 min-1hour	26.43%	30minutes-1 hour	27.5%
	1-2 hours	19.45%	1hour-2 hours	25.8%
	2-3 hours	11.22%	2hours-3 hours	13.6%
	> 3hours	13.47%	> 3hours	7.3%

In addition, respondents were asked to recall the advertising content they had encountered. According to their responses, WeChat Moments and Zalo Timeline display a variety of ads, covering education, groceries, and recreational products and services. Chinese WeChat users reported seeing ads for educational content (42.39%), food/drinks/groceries (42.68%), beauty products/services (38.9%), and dating-related content (34.91%). The Vietnamese sample indicated that Zalo's ads focused on food/drinks/groceries (60%), cars (45.7%), dating (45.4%), and education (34.1%) to increase user engagement.

To conclude, these samples from China and Vietnam are sufficiently large to support robust structural equation modeling (SEM), as they meet the 1:10 ratio of construct-based items to respondents. Most participants are young users, who exhibit stronger affinity for WeChat and Zalo and spend more time on the apps' Moments/Timeline features. Thus, we can confidently state that these survey samples are sufficiently representative to reflect the characteristics of the target populations in the Chinese and Vietnamese markets.

4. Data Analysis and Hypotheses Test

4.1. Reliability and Validity Test

Reliability (assessed via SPSS using Cronbach's Alpha (CA), Corrected Item-Total Correlation (CITC), and CA if Item Deleted) measures item consistency. Per standards, CA should exceed 0.7, CITC \geq 0.3, and CA if Item Deleted should not surpass the total CA. For Zalo's model, all construct items met these criteria, confirming reliability. For WeChat's model, item TRV1 (in the Trust in e-vendors construct) was removed: its CA if Item Deleted (0.944) exceeded the construct's total CA (0.929), failing reliability requirements. Post-adjustment, WeChat's remaining items also satisfied reliability standards.

Construct validity of both models (WeChat for China, Zalo for Vietnam) were confirmed through convergent and discriminant validity assessments. For convergent validity: (1) All constructs achieved

Average Variance Extracted (AVE) ≥ 0.75 (Zalo) and ≥ 0.83 (WeChat), far exceeding the 0.5 threshold; (2) Composite reliability (all >0.9) and Cronbach's Alpha (≥ 0.88 for Zalo, ≥ 0.938 for WeChat) also surpassed the 0.7 benchmark, ensuring internal consistency; (3) Loadings of all retained items (after removing TRV1) exceeded 0.9, indicating strong indicator-latent variable correlations. For discriminant validity, all constructs met the criterion (values <0.9), confirming clear distinctions between variables.

Overall, the measurement models (after excluding TRV1) satisfy reliability and validity standards, making them suitable for subsequent analyses.

4.2. Hypotheses Test

SmartPLS 3.2.8 was used to test the relationships among constructs. The path coefficients and hypothesis testing results for the WeChat sample are presented in Table 3, while those for the Zalo sample are displayed in Table 4.

4.2.1. Hypotheses Test in China Sample

From Table 3 (WeChat sample), Hypothesis 5 (H5: TRV \rightarrow ATT) is rejected, indicating that trust in e-vendors does not positively predict users' attitude toward WeChat Moments ads. Notably, Hypothesis 1 (H1: ATT \rightarrow INV) shows a strong, significant positive effect: users' attitude toward ads strongly predicts their advertising involvement ($\beta = 0.843$, $t = 55.949$, $p < 0.001$). Hypotheses 2 (H2: ENT \rightarrow ATT) and 3 (H3: INF \rightarrow ATT) are also supported (both $p < 0.001$), meaning entertainment ($\beta = 0.424$, $t = 8.884$) and informativeness ($\beta = 0.27$, $t = 5.42$) positively influence users' attitude toward ads (which in turn relates to their involvement).

Additionally, H4 (TRA \rightarrow ATT: $\beta = 0.116$, $t = 2.989$, $p < 0.01$), H6 (SI \rightarrow ATT: $\beta = 0.134$, $t = 3.262$, $p < 0.001$), and H7 (SP \rightarrow ATT: $\beta = 0.094$, $t = 2.346$, $p < 0.05$) are not rejected. These results confirm that trust in the app, social influence, and social presentation are all associated with a relatively positive attitude toward WeChat Moments ads.

Table 3. Path coefficients and hypotheses results (WeChat)

Path	H#	Path coefficients	β	Standard Deviation	T-Value	Decision
ATT \rightarrow INV	H1	0.843	0.843	0.015	55.949***	Not Rejected
ENT \rightarrow ATT	H2	0.426	0.424	0.048	8.884***	Not Rejected
INF \rightarrow ATT	H3	0.269	0.27	0.05	5.42***	Not Rejected
TRA \rightarrow ATT	H4	0.116	0.116	0.039	2.989**	Not Rejected
TRV \rightarrow ATT	H5	-0.021	-0.022	0.042	0.497	Rejected
SI \rightarrow ATT	H6	0.133	0.134	0.041	3.262***	Not Rejected
SP \rightarrow ATT	H7	0.093	0.094	0.04	2.346*	Not Rejected

*Significant at 0.05; **Significant at 0.01, ***Significant at 0.001

ATT=Attitude; INV=Involvement; ENT=Entertainment; INF=Informativeness; TRA=Trust in the Apps; TRV=Trust in E-Vendors; SI=Social Influence; SP=Social Presentation

4.2.2. Hypotheses Test in Vietnam Sample

For the Vietnamese (Zalo) sample as shown in Table 4, Hypothesis 1 (H1: ATT \rightarrow INV) yields

results highly consistent with the Chinese sample: users' attitude toward ads strongly predicts their advertising involvement ($\beta = 0.802$, $t = 29.477$, $p < 0.001$). Hypotheses 2 (H2: ENT→ATT) and 3 (H3: INF→ATT) are also supported (both $p < 0.001$), indicating that entertainment ($\beta = 0.358$, $t = 6.053$) and informativeness ($\beta = 0.377$, $t = 5.973$) positively shape Vietnamese users' attitude toward Zalo Timeline ads.

In contrast, Hypotheses 4 (H4: TRA→ATT), 5 (H5: TRV→ATT), and 6 (H6: SI→ATT) are rejected (all $p > 0.05$): trust in the app ($\beta = 0.077$, $t = 1.238$), trust in e-vendors ($\beta = -0.015$, $t = 0.248$), and social influence ($\beta = -0.014$, $t = 0.314$) do not predict users' attitude toward these ads.

Table 4. Path coefficients and hypotheses results (Zalo)

Path	H#	Path coefficients	β	Standard Deviation	T-Value	Decision
ATT→INV	H1	0.802	0.802	0.027	29.477***	Not Rejected
ENT→ATT	H2	0.357	0.358	0.059	6.053***	Not Rejected
INF→ATT	H3	0.378	0.377	0.063	5.973***	Not Rejected
TRA→ATT	H4	0.075	0.077	0.061	1.238	Rejected
TRV→ATT	H5	-0.015	-0.015	0.06	0.248	Rejected
SI →ATT	H6	-0.016	-0.014	0.05	0.314	Rejected

*Significant at 0.05; **Significant at 0.01, ***Significant at 0.001

ATT=Attitude; INV=Involvement; ENT=Entertainment; INF=Informativeness; TRA=Trust in the Apps; TRV=Trust in E-Vendors; SI=Social Influence

To summarize, only H5 was rejected in the Chinese (WeChat) sample, whereas three of six hypotheses (H4, H5, H6) failed in the Vietnamese sample. The model strongly explains WeChat users' ad involvement via attitude as a mediator, but it is less effective at capturing the drivers of Zalo users' ad involvement.

5. Results Discussion

This study identifies and validates the drivers of consumer involvement in mobile advertising, using empirical data from WeChat users in China and Zalo users in Vietnam. A core finding is that consumer attitude serves as a significant mediating variable in predicting involvement in WeChat Moments and Zalo Timeline ads across both markets, while trust in e-vendors shows no association with ad attitudes in either sample.

Notably, respondents in both countries hold favorable attitudes toward mobile ads, which contrasts with the argument that mobile users perceive ads as intrusive (Watson et al., 2013) but aligns with Le and Nguyen's (2014) observation of positive or neutral attitudes among Vietnamese consumers. Two consistent predictors of positive ad attitudes emerge across samples: entertainment (the most influential factor) and informativeness. This supports earlier studies (Khasawneh & Shuhaiber, 2018) emphasizing entertainment value in ad design, while the significance of informativeness resolves discrepancies with Le and Nguyen (2014) — likely due to the widespread adoption of large-screen smartphones.

Key cross-market differences are identified: social influence, self-presentation, and trust in the app positively predict ad attitudes among Chinese WeChat users (consistent with Ng, 2014, 2016) but not among Vietnamese Zalo users. Zalo's lack of ad-related "like" and comment functions, strict privacy policies, and intense market competition (e.g., with Facebook and WhatsApp) explain these null effects, as supported by Vietnamese users' calls for enhanced interactive features. Trust in WeChat is reinforced by its strict privacy practices and limited global competition, whereas Zalo's nascent development and the 2018 Facebook data leakage scandal undermine user trust.

Practical implications include designing ads with engaging, concise, and personalized content to enhance entertainment and informativeness. Zalo should introduce interactive features and strengthen privacy protections, while e-vendors must improve credibility through transparent advertising to address low consumer trust in both markets (Clemons et al., 2013; Vietnam News, 2016). The model demonstrates strong explanatory power for WeChat users but only partial validity for Zalo users, with half of the hypotheses rejected, highlighting the need to adapt to platform-specific characteristics.

Overall, the findings underscore the importance of tailoring mobile advertising strategies to cultural and platform differences, while prioritizing attitude-shaping factors (entertainment, informativeness) and trust-building measures to boost consumer involvement.

6. Implications for Chinese Cross-Border SMEs Entering Vietnam's Market

Based on the empirical analysis in this study, Chinese cross-border SMEs must understand that they cannot directly replicate WeChat marketing models to Vietnam markets. They must tailor strategies to Zalo users' unique characteristics. Specifically, as data reveals in this paper, SMEs need to prioritize advertising entertainment and informativeness—the only two validated drivers of Vietnamese users' attitudes. Design concise, visually engaging ads (e.g., short videos, infographics) with clear product value propositions, aligning with Zalo users' preference for mid-length sessions (1-2 hours daily) and focus on utility, and avoid overemphasizing social influence.

Since trust in the app and e-vendors does not predict Vietnamese users' attitudes, SMEs could partner with reputable local entities to enhance credibility and ensure transparent product information to mitigate concerns about counterfeiting. As Zalo's weak-tie network reduces users' motivation to engage with ads for identity construction, SMEs aiming to enter Vietnam markets don't need to invest too much on leveraging self-presentation tactics effective on WeChat.

Finally, adapt ad content to local preferences—prioritize food/drinks, cars, and dating-related themes (top ad categories for Zalo users) over education or beauty-focused content popular on WeChat. By aligning with these market-specific insights, SMEs can effectively boost Vietnamese users' ad involvement and gain a foothold in Vietnam's dynamic cross-border e-commerce landscape.

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