

# The mechanism leads to successful clickbait promotion in WeChat social media platforms

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to examine how the clickbait headlines influence the perceived source credibility, subjective norm, perceived benefit and purchasing intention of customers on social commerce through social media platforms in different interpersonal relationship strength scenarios.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A total of three studies were employed online to test the hypotheses. Study 1 used a single-factor, two-condition (clickbait: yes vs no) between-subject design. Both study 2 and study 3 employed a 2 (clickbait: yes vs no) × 2 (relationships: close friend vs stranger) between-subject design. All data were sourced randomly from 729 respondents in China. Data and models were analyzed by using SPSS and Mplus.

**Findings** – Study 1 illustrated that clickbait has a negative effect on perceived credibility and purchase intention, and the perceived credibility mediated the relationship between clickbait and purchase intention. Study 2 replicated such finding and demonstrated that the interpersonal relationship strength interacts with the influence from clickbait to purchase intention. Study 3 enhanced the mechanism of source credibility found in the above studies and further revealed that perceived benefit and perceived norm had a mediating role in the purchase-making process online.

**Originality/value** – Research efforts to date concentrate on how to detect and reduce clickbait headlines. This paper adopts a different perspective, considering the consequences of clickbait in the marketing domain. This study reveals the effects of clickbait on purchase intention and the mechanism behind this process under different scenarios.

**Keywords** Clickbait, Source credibility, Relationship quality, Social media, E-commerce

**Paper type** Case study

## 1. Introduction

Social commerce is a newly emerging type of e-commerce (Zhang *et al.*, 2017; Zhao *et al.*, 2019b), by which business is conducted through social networking platforms (Zhao *et al.*, 2019b; Liang *et al.*, 2011). McKinsey & Company reported their observation in 2016 that consumers became more satisfied with social media and social commerce, and this trend would intensify in the future. This prediction has been proved in the past several years, for example, Chinese marketing, with 855 m digital consumers and the most active mobile social user group, has long been one of the targets of global consumer goods and retailers (McKinsey and Company, 2020).

Since the amount of information on social media is huge and competition among merchants on the platform is fierce, therefore, how to direct the customer's attention to the target product or information is very critical (Stroud, 2017). Many business owners and marketing agencies like to use the clickbait strategy because it is a quick method of



generating network traffic (Chen *et al.*, 2015). Clickbait also acts as an umbrella term that involves all kinds of teaser messages in social media capable of instigating an increased click-through (Potthast *et al.*, 2016). As the information behind these headings was incomplete and often inconsistent with the content, research has confirmed that clickbait can cause confusion and deception among readers, and even negative attitudes which question online media's credibility are becoming increasingly common (Chen *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, clickbait has high risk to be caught in the vortex of business ethics discussions because of its "trick" on information transfer (Park and Lee, 2017), which further leads to the concern that clickbait is considered to be untrustworthy (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). Hence, clickbait may have an adverse influence on consumer perceived credibility. Considering the advantages and disadvantages of clickbait, it can gain traffic for promoters but whether it can boost sales is unclear (Stroud, 2017; Zhang *et al.*, 2020).

Most research going into clickbait is concentrated on how to detect and reduce clickbait headlines. For example, researchers have studied potential methods, including text and nontext click cues, which can automatically detect clickbait (Chen *et al.*, 2015). However, few studies have investigated the outcome of clickbait on social commerce and whether clickbait would boost or decrease sales on social commerce. To fill an existing gap in the literature, the current research aims at expanding the scenarios during our investigations, specifically, identifying that the clickbait headlines have an impact on consumer perceived credibility and purchase decision (study 1) and testing the moderating impact of buyer–seller relationship quality (study 2) and exploring customers' perception in the clickbait–perceived credibility–purchase intention process via perceived benefit toward commodities and perceived attitudes from surroundings (study 3).

## 2. Literature review and hypotheses

### 2.1 Clickbait

Getting forwarded or clicked is an important bridge for companies or social network media (SNM) to gain traffic or customers (Molyneux and Coddington, 2020). Therefore, the headlines of messages or online articles are inclined to be catchy and exaggerated; thus, they are usually referred to as "clickbait headlines." For content providers, the purpose of clickbait headlines is to attract as many people as possible, in order to maximize the number of visitors to the particular portal (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). It enables businesses with the page view boost and increases interaction with their customers. However, some malicious content publishers may misapply social media to manipulate as many users as possible to visit their websites using clickbait messages (Potthast *et al.*, 2016), which may trigger some readers' antipathy toward clickbait headlines.

The rationale why clickbait works is widely attributed to the fact that the preview message opens a so-called "curiosity gap," thereby increasing the likelihood that readers will click on the target link to satisfy their curiosity. However, no matter how attractive, the news that starts with clickbait headlines increasingly becomes the subject of expert criticism for the inconsistency between the title and the content. Namely, these headlines usually hide actual information (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). Thus, clickbait is a valuable technique to attract users to the web, but it could make a loss of credibility and threaten to block social media channels (Potthast *et al.*, 2016). Hence, although the propagable, engrossing and communicative potentials of clickbait make it proliferate in social media context and frequently adopted by public relations (PR) or marketer as an effective communication tool, the question of whether clickbait strategy has detrimental effects on social commerce remains unattested.

### 2.2 Source credibility

Source credibility, which used to imply a communicator's positive characteristics that affect the receiver's acceptance of a message (Ohanian, 1990), can be conceptualized as a

“weight” that can enhance the value of information in a message. Credibility based on trust, which usually relies on reputation, refers to the belief that the other party in a transaction is reliable and honest (Zhao *et al.*, 2019a). A customer tends to endorse a provider who has previous experience with and confidence in the products/services advertised on WeChat (the largest social network platform in China, had around 1.2 bn monthly active users worldwide in the first quarter of 2020). Consumer trust is still the basis for selling products or services (Liu *et al.*, 2013). It was found to have a significant positive effect on both the intention to use social networking sites (Sledgianowski and Kulviwat, 2009) and their users’ willingness to engage in word-of-mouth (WOM) communications (Chu and Kim, 2011; Liu *et al.*, 2013), reflecting the vital role of trust in the social network site. As in the context of consumer-to-consumer (C2C) online communities, argument quality, source credibility and tie strength exert an effect on consumer purchase decisions through product usefulness evaluation (Zhao *et al.*, 2019a).

In our study, we use source credibility to evaluate the seller’s credibility which refers to how much the message receiver trusts the sender. Considering that clickbait may cause confusion and deception on receivers and incurs their negative impression on the media or publisher, we propose that the clickbait will have a negative impact on perceived credibility which would then lead to a decrease in consumers’ purchase intention. Drawing on the previous literature, we hypothesize the following:

- H1.* The impact of clickbait on purchase intention in social commerce is mediated by source credibility.

### *2.3 Relationship quality*

Relationship quality refers to relationship closeness or strength, and it is one of the critical determinants of customer loyalty and has been evidenced can positively affect purchase in consumers (Hajli *et al.*, 2017). For many people, purchase is a social experience, and they usually want to consult their friends before buying (Zhao *et al.*, 2019b). These personalized recommendations based on social interactions or preferences are regarded as huge opportunities for sellers since the sellers with closer social relationships to others are much worth to be believed (Chau and Xu, 2007) and are much more powerful in influencing others. Thus, the relationship quality with customers is paramount in social commerce scenario (Zhao *et al.*, 2019b). Researchers define strong relationship ties comprise members with high degree of trust and social capital connections and is crucial to referral behavior (Hajli *et al.*, 2017; Chau and Xu, 2007), whilst weak relationship ties show low degrees of trust and share less information and is futile in influencing purchase intention (Hajli *et al.*, 2017; Liang *et al.*, 2011). Previous research has indicated that the quality of user relationships has a significant influence on product purchase intention (Liang *et al.*, 2011).

As the great power of social ties in affecting consumers’ preference shift has been recognized by extant studies with a focus on strong tie relationships (Liang *et al.*, 2011), it is more likely that recipients attempt to accept a referral from someone with whom they have a strong interpersonal relationship (Liu *et al.*, 2019). Thus, it is advisable to consider different relationship qualities for the purchase decision-making process in a social commerce setting. So, relationship quality is predicted to have a moderating effect on the relationship between source credibility and purchase intention. We thus propose,

- H2.* Relationship quality moderates the association between source credibility and purchase intentions, in that the association is weaker when the relationship quality between message sender and receiver is higher, while stronger when the relationship quality is lower.

2.4 Source credibility, perceived benefit, perceived norm and purchase intention

Source credibility relates to information receiver’s trustworthiness toward the origin of information, regardless of the information itself (Liu and Brock, 2011; Aladwani and Dwivedi, 2018) and is indicated as one factor readers can use to navigate through this eWOM information (Dou et al., 2012; Gunawan and Huarng, 2015). Evidence has shown that the receiver of the eWOM process is more likely to consider the information in their decision-making routine if they perceive information sender as credible, which will foster receiver’s purchase intention in SNM scenarios (Aladwani and Dwivedi, 2018). Meanwhile, source credibility is also considered to impact the perceived benefit (Visentin et al., 2019) and then further influence customer’s purchase intention (Shang et al., 2017). Therefore, the mediation effect of perceived benefit on source credibility and purchase intention is very worth exploring (see Figure 1).

Besides, according to the theory of reasoned action (TRA), subjective norm is a vital factor that influences behavioral intention and the impact also confirmed in the internal social commerce context (Shang et al., 2017) since the more intimate the relationship between the information sender and the recipient, the more attention will be given to their message (Zhao et al., 2019b). In Chinese purchasing circumstances, demographic factors of information senders could be an indicator of their credibility which is influential to consumers’ purchasing perceptions (Liu et al., 2020). In addition, Chinese consumers are more likely to consider buying a certain product if the product is widely followed on social media and have been positively portrayed and discussed on social media platforms or if their friends or others recommended (Chiu et al., 2012). When similar information is spread in the Moments at the same time, it will strengthen the perceived norms and trust of the information receiver, which will further affect their intention to purchase goods (Chu et al., 2019). Therefore, in the Chinese SNM commerce context, it is meaningful to detect if subjective norm mediates the relationship source credibility and customer’s purchase intention. We thus propose that

- H3. The impact of source credibility on purchase intention in social commerce is mediated by perceived benefit.
- H4. The impact of source credibility on purchase intention in social commerce is mediated by perceived norm.

3. Study 1: mediating role of source credibility

The objective of study 1 was to test Hypothesis 1. Specially, we examine how perceived credibility mediates the impact of clickbait on consumers’ purchase intention.

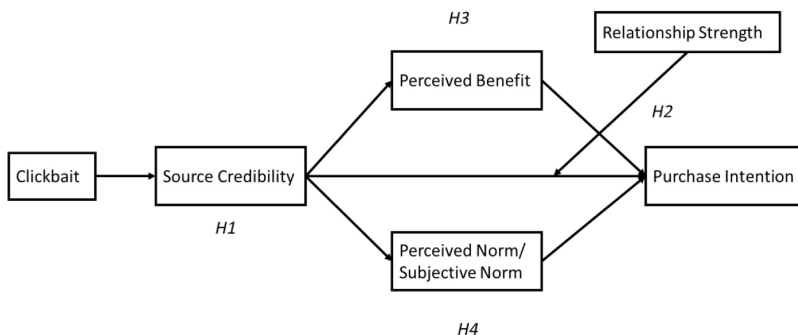


Figure 1.  
Conceptual framework

### 3.1 Methodology

**3.1.1 Design.** WeChat is the most widely used social media platform in China (with about 1.2 bn active users), and the Moments (a posting function of WeChat, similar to Instagram) is one of its most welcome functions. WeChat social commerce evolved quickly and became vitally important in China, thus making China an ideal setting for investigating consumer online buying in social commerce. So, we chose WeChat Moments users as the research subjects.

Study 1 set up two different scenarios for the control group and the clickbait group. The sample, consisted of 70 participants, with 35 people in each group, was randomly collected through the popular online survey platform WJX ([www.wjx.cn](http://www.wjx.cn)) (which is a professional online survey, evaluation and voting platform with nearly 50 m users in China) in March 2019. The mean age of the sample was 29.3 years, and 80% were female. In total, 93% of the participants have received higher education. We had screening questions to ensure that all respondents were WeChat Moments users.

**3.1.2 Procedure.** Firstly, participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to test the marketing strategy on social commerce. They were randomly assigned to two groups. To manipulate the clickbait, we set up two different scenarios. In the control group, participants were provided product recommendation only, which was a face cream. While in the clickbait group, participants were provided a recommendation of the same product but adding seven previous posts which were all clickbait headlines (see [Appendix 1](#)). After reading the scenario, participants were asked to fill in the evaluation form about purchase intention and source credibility. Lastly, participants completed questions related to manipulation checks and demographics.

**3.1.3 Measures.** Regarding the measurement of purchase intention ( $\alpha = 0.955$ ), we adapted a four-item scale from previous studies ([Putrevu and Lord, 1994](#); [Coyle and Thorson, 2001](#)) measured in the five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from “strongly disagree (1)” to “strongly agree (5).” For the measurement of source credibility ( $\alpha = 0.972$ ), items were adapted from [Ohanian \(1990\)](#), which consisted of three subdimensions, trustworthiness, expertness and attractiveness. Previous research has pointed out that attraction was not appropriate for measuring the source credibility of eWOM because it generated in the environment where an information source is revealed to an information receiver ([Cho et al., 2009](#)). Therefore, this research only used the other two subdimensions, expertness and trustworthiness, to measure message source credibility. Each subdimension was measured using a five-item Likert five-point scale, ranging from “strongly disagree (1)” to “strongly agree (5).” In addition, to ensure the validity of the experimental setting of clickbait, participants were asked to rate the manipulation check items. Then, they filled demographic information including gender, age and education.

We followed the translation-back-translation procedure to translate the original English language questionnaire into Chinese. The resource of all measurement scales for constructs in study 1 was shown in [Appendix 2](#).

### 3.2 Results

**3.2.1 Manipulation check.** To check the effectiveness of the clickbait cue manipulated in the WeChat post, participants responded to a single-item question, “What he had posted on WeChat Moments was meaningful, and most of them are not clickbait headlines. Do you agree or disagree?” with five-scale anchors of “strongly disagree/strongly agree.” Independent samples *t*-test suggested that the clickbait cues manipulation was successful as significant differences were found between the control condition ( $M_{\text{no clickbait}} = 2.27$ ;  $SD_{\text{no clickbait}} = 1.06$ ) and the clickbait condition ( $M_{\text{clickbait}} = 2.17$ ;  $SD_{\text{clickbait}} = 1.10$ ;  $p < 0.005$ ).

**3.2.2 Tests of mediated effects of source credibility.** We first ran an independent samples *t*-test to assess whether the differences in source credibility and purchase intention from those

two groups were significant. For the control group, the mean of source credibility ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) was significantly higher than the clickbait group ( $M = 2.66$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ,  $p = 0.02 < 0.05$ ). Furthermore, participants rated their willingness to purchase on control condition ( $M = 3.12$ ;  $SD = 1.20$ ) was also significantly higher than on the clickbait condition ( $M = 2.26$ ;  $SD = 1.25$ ;  $p = 0.005 < 0.05$ ). As expected, source credibility and purchase intention were significantly different in two conditions.

To test [Hypothesis 1](#), we used PROCESS macro based on model 4, proposed by [Preacher and Hayes \(2008\)](#). Analyses were conducted through bootstrapping (5,000 bootstrap samples) to test the mediating effect of source credibility between clickbait (coded “1” = clickbait condition; “0” = control condition) and purchase intention and set the confidence interval (CI) to 95%. The test results are shown in [Tables 1 and 2](#). The total effect of clickbait on purchase intention was significant ( $\beta = -0.851$ ,  $t = -2.93$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The effect from clickbait to source credibility was significant ( $\beta = -0.577$ ,  $t = -2.505$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Controlling for clickbait, source credibility had a significant and positive effect on purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.785$ ,  $t = 10.813$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Controlling for source credibility, clickbait no longer had a significant impact on purchase intention ( $\beta = -0.211$ ,  $t = -1.472$ ,  $p > 0.100$ ). The indirect path of the effects of clickbait on source credibility toward purchase intention was significant, with the 95% CI excluding 0 [-1.012, -0.120], indicating that source credibility had a significant indirect effect on purchase intention through source credibility. Therefore, [Hypothesis 1](#) was supported.

### 3.3 Discussion

Study 1 has confirmed the mediation effect of source credibility between clickbait and purchase intention and clickbait negatively impacted on source credibility and then source credibility positively impacted on purchase intention. The results are in line with most researchers ([Sledgianowski and Kulviwat, 2009](#); [Chu and Kim, 2011](#); [Zhao et al., 2019a](#)). In the social commerce context, based on the findings, the researcher is determined to explore if the social relationship between product information sender and receiver will interact with the receiver’s purchase intention.

## 4. Study 2: moderating role of relationship quality

The objective of study 2 was to test the moderating effect of relationship strength and the robustness of the finding in study 1 by using a different product category under different buyer–seller relationship scenarios.

### 4.1 Methodology

**4.1.1 Design.** The data of study 2 were collected in March 2019. This study employed a two (clickbait: yes vs no)  $\times$  two (relationship: close friend vs stranger) between-subject design.

Output	Beta	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Source credibility</i>			
Clickbait ( <i>X</i> )	-0.577	-2.505	0.015
<i>Purchase intention</i>			
Clickbait ( <i>X</i> )	-0.211	-1.472	0.146
Source credibility	0.785	10.813	0.000
<i>Purchase intention</i>			
Clickbait ( <i>X</i> )	-0.851	-2.933	0.005

**Table 1.**  
Regression results  
(study 1)

**Table 2.**  
Bootstrap results  
(study 1)

	Direct effect on PI		Indirect effect on PI		Total effect on PI	
	Beta	SE	Beta	SE	Beta	SE
Clickbait (X)	-0.273	0.186	-0.584**	0.278	-0.857**	0.292
		[-0.644, 0.097]		[-1.012, -0.120]		[-1.440, -0.274]
		Confidence interval		Confidence interval		Confidence interval

**Note(s):** 5,000 bootstrap sample, \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ,  $N = 70$

The sample consisted of 380 participants on the well-known online survey platform WJX ([www.wjx.cn](http://www.wjx.cn)) in China. The participants were randomly assigned to either condition. The mean age of the sample was 30.7 years, and 58% were female. In total, 92% of the participants have received higher education.

**4.1.2 Procedure.** Firstly, two by two conditions were set up which were clickbait (yes vs no) and relationship (close friend vs stranger). Participants were randomly assigned to either condition. For the first two conditions, we assumed participants would see a stimulus picture posted by their best friend promoting a bracelet with or without clickbait headlines. The best friend was considered the one who had a strong and close relationship with the participant for this study. Likewise, for the next two conditions, we assumed participants to see a stimulus picture posted by a stranger promoting the same bracelet with or without clickbait headlines (see [Appendix 1](#)). This stranger was considered as the one who had a weak relationship with the participant for this study. After reading the stimulus picture, participants filled up the measurements of source credibility and purchase intention. Then, they did the manipulation check for relationship closeness with the revised inclusion-of-other-in-the-self (IOS) scale ([Aron et al., 1992](#)). Lastly, participants filled demographic information including gender, age and education.

**4.1.3 Measures.** The same measurement scales adapted from previous research ([Putrevu and Lord, 1994](#); [Coyle and Thorson, 2001](#); [Ohanian, 1990](#)) as study 1 were used to evaluate source credibility ( $\alpha = 0.897$ ) and purchase intention ( $\alpha = 0.873$ ) by using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The resource of all measurement scales for constructs in study 2 was shown in [Appendix 2](#).

## 4.2 Results

**4.2.1 Manipulation check.** To check the effectiveness of the relationship manipulation on the WeChat post, participants responded to “which image best describes your relationship with the people who post on WeChat Moments” and measured by the revised IOS scale which is derived from social psychology to measure the closeness of bilateral personal and social relationships between individuals ([Aron et al., 1992](#)). We adjusted the IOS scale by replacing the circles with humanoid images and estimated the distance between the two humanoid images with a seven-grid scale rather than comparing the distance between two circle centers, allowing the participants to have a more intuitive understanding of the relationship strength (see [Figure 2](#)). Participants were asked to select the image that best describes their relationship with A, which is the person who posted WeChat Moments the participants read at the beginning. From 1 to 7 represent the closeness from weak to strong.

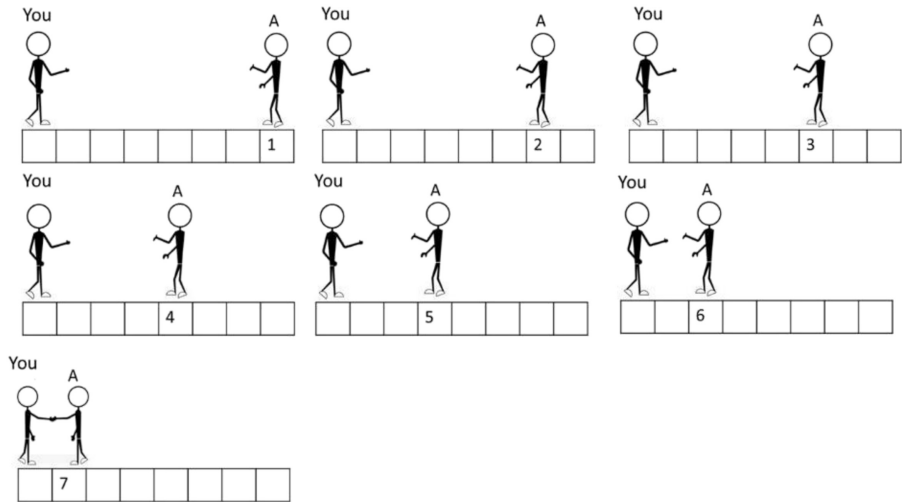
Independent samples *t*-test suggested that the relationship strength manipulation was successful as significant differences were found between the best friend condition ( $M_{\text{friend}} = 3.38$ ;  $SD_{\text{friend}} = 1.70$ ) and the stranger condition ( $M_{\text{stranger}} = 2.72$ ;  $SD_{\text{stranger}} = 1.64$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

We also conducted an independent samples *t*-test to check clickbait manipulation. The significant differences had been found between the control condition ( $M_{\text{no clickbait}} = 2.71$ ;  $SD_{\text{no clickbait}} = 1.63$ ) and the clickbait condition ( $M_{\text{clickbait}} = 2.17$ ;  $SD_{\text{clickbait}} = 1.70$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, the manipulations of different strength of the relationship and clickbait were successful.

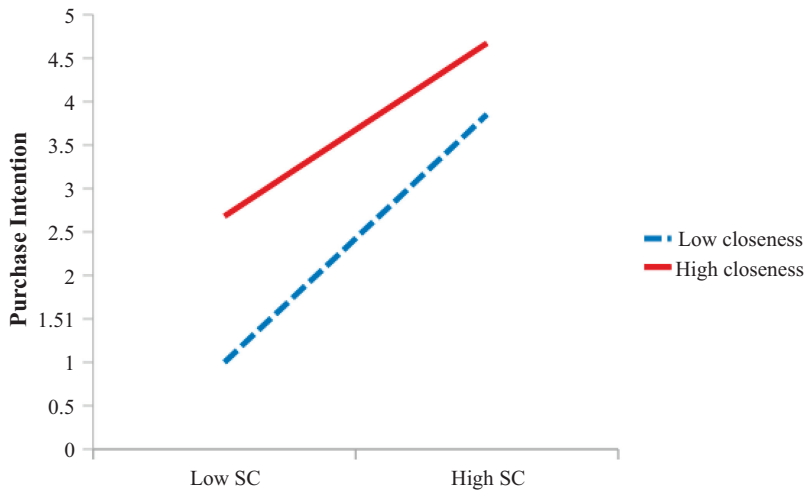
**4.2.2 Moderated mediation effects.** We tested the moderated mediation model using a bootstrapping mediation method with 5,000 resamples ([Preacher and Hayes, 2008](#)). Specifically, we used PROCESS Model 14, which allows for moderated mediation (see [Figure 3](#)).

As shown in [Tables 3](#) and [4](#), within the mediational model, the effects from clickbait (coded “1” = clickbait condition; “0” = control condition) to source credibility and from source credibility to purchase intention are significant ( $\beta = -0.401$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta = 0.982$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ),





**Figure 2.**  
The revised IOS scale



**Figure 3.**  
The moderating effect  
of relationship quality

**Note(s):** SC = Source credibility

respectively, whereas the direct effect from clickbait to purchase intention is no longer significant ( $\beta = -0.401, p = 0.291$ ). Besides, the 95% bootstrapped CI for the direct effect of clickbait on purchase intention includes 0 (95% CI =  $[-0.230, 0.070]$ ), also indicating the insignificant direct relationship. Further, the 95% bootstrapped CI for the indirect effect of clickbait on purchase intention through the mediator, source credibility, moderated by relationship quality, does not include 0 ( $\beta_{\text{stranger}} = -0.442, 95\% \text{ CI}_{\text{stranger}} = [-0.616, -0.265]$ ;  $\beta_{\text{friend}} = -0.347, 95\% \text{ CI}_{\text{friend}} = [-0.493, -0.203]$ ); **Hypotheses 2** was proposed to examine the moderating effect of relationship quality on the effects of clickbait and credibility on purchase

intention. Results presented in study 2 also show that the interaction term source credibility  $\times$  relationship quality is significant ( $\gamma = -0.235, p < 0.05$ ), indicating that the effect of source credibility on purchase intention is stronger when the relationship quality is low than when it is high. Together, these results show that the indirect effect of clickbait (yes vs no) on purchase intention mediated by source credibility is significant (Hypothesis 1) and that relationship quality moderates this indirect effect (Hypothesis 2). However, the direct route from clickbait to purchase intention is not significant, nor is its moderation by relationship strength.

#### 4.3 Discussion

In summary, our results suggest that the impact of source credibility on purchase intention is more negative when the relationship between social media users is weak. These findings highlight the notion that relationship strength does influence purchase intention. If the buyer and the seller's relationship strength is weak, the seller will have lower source credibility. This weak relationship is more likely to be noticed and attended to attenuate the influence of source credibility to purchase intention (moderation). In contrast, if the sellers and the buyers are close friends, they may have a trust-based relationship. So, buyers may have more tolerance for clickbait information. As a result, their purchase decisions were less reduced than those buyers who have a weak relationship with sellers. Such a moderating effect reveals that closer relationships between people reduced negative influences on consumers' purchase intention when exposed to intentionally overpromising and under-delivering headlines.

### 5. Study 3: mediating role of perceived benefit and perceived norm

The objective of study 3 was to test the mediating effect of perceived benefit (Hypothesis 3) and perceived norm (Hypothesis 4) and examine the mediating role of source credibility

Antecedent	$\beta$	<i>M</i> (SC) SE	Consequent		<i>Y</i> (PI) SE	<i>p</i>
			<i>p</i>	$\beta$		
<i>X</i> (clickbait)	-0.401	0.080	***	-0.080	0.076	0.291
<i>M</i> (SC)				0.982	0.051	***
<i>W</i> (CL)				0.080	0.073	0.274
<i>M</i> $\times$ <i>W</i>				-0.235	0.099	0.018*
Constant	0.196	0.056	***	2.728	0.052	***

**Note(s):** *X*: independent variable ("1" = clickbait; "0" = control); SC: source credibility; CL: closeness ("1" = close friend; "0" = stranger); *M*: mediator; *W*: moderator

**Table 3.**  
Regression results  
(study 2)

Path	Moderator	Level	Direct effect	Indirect effect	95% bias-corrected bootstrap CI
Clickbait $\rightarrow$ SC $\rightarrow$ PI	CL	Low		-0.442	[-0.616, -0.265]
		High		-0.347	[-0.493, -0.203]
		Differences		-0.095	[-0.123, -0.063]
clickbait $\rightarrow$ PI			-0.802		[-0.230, 0.070]

**Note(s):** *X*: independent variable ("1" = clickbait; "0" = control); SC: source credibility; CL: closeness ("1" = close friend; "0" = stranger); *M*: mediator; *W*: moderator

**Table 4.**  
Bootstrap results  
(study 2)

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between clickbait and purchase intention (study 1) as well as the moderating role of relationship strength between source credibility and purchase intention (study 2).

### 5.1 Methodology

**5.1.1 Design.** Study 3 was conducted in March 2020. We collected study 3 data, in part, to demonstrate that our findings can be replicated using data from different participants. We also improved our study 2's design in a number of important ways. First, the product information used in study 1 and study 2 is related to skin care products and jewelry, respectively, which are not expensive. Therefore, we selected real estate information to stimulate study 3, to reconfirm whether the relationship involved in the previous studies still exists when the related products are relatively expensive, in order to provide evidence of the robustness of our model. Second, drawing on TRA, study 3 took two more constructs, perceived benefit and perceived norm, into consideration to test the mechanism of TRA in this scenario.

Based on study 2, study 3 also employed a two (clickbait: yes vs no)  $\times$  two (relationship: close friend vs stranger) between-subject design. The sample consisted of 279 participants on online survey platform WJX ([www.wjx.cn](http://www.wjx.cn)). The participants were randomly assigned to four groups (each group comprised around 70 people). The mean age of the sample was 32.7 years, and 54.5% were female. In total, 93.2% of the participants have received higher education.

**5.1.2 Procedure.** Firstly, similar to study 2, two (clickbait: yes vs no) by two (relationship: close friend vs stranger) conditions were set up forming four groups. Different from study 2, in the condition design of study 3, we use real estate sales information as stimulus rather than a bracelet (see [Appendix 1](#)). All participants were randomly assigned to either group. After reading the stimulus picture, participants filled up the measurements of source credibility, perceived benefit, perceived norm and purchase intention (see [Appendix 2](#)). Then, they did the manipulation check with the revised IOS scale for relationship closeness like in study 2. Lastly, participants filled demographic information including gender, age and education.

**5.1.3 Measures.** The measurement scales of source credibility ( $\alpha = 0.893$ ) and purchase intention ( $\alpha = 0.886$ ) in study 3 are the same as studies 1 and 2 ([Putrevu and Lord, 1994](#); [Coyle and Thorson, 2001](#); [Ohanian, 1990](#)). The measurement scales of perceived benefit ( $\alpha = 0.678$ ) and perceived norm ( $\alpha = 0.890$ ) are adapted from previous research ([Shimp and Kavas, 1984](#); [Gunawan and Huarng, 2015](#)) by using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Besides, we still used a manipulation check by using the IOS scale, which has been adapted in study 2, to measure the closeness of bilateral personal and social relationships between individuals.

## 5.2 Results

**5.2.1 Manipulation check.** Independent samples *t*-test of closeness evaluation with the revised IOS scale suggested that the relationship strength manipulation was successful as significant differences were found between the close friend condition ( $M_{\text{friend}} = 5.04$ ;  $SD_{\text{friend}} = 0.924$ ) and the stranger condition ( $M_{\text{stranger}} = 2.45$ ;  $SD_{\text{stranger}} = 0.969$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ).

We also conducted an independent sample *t*-test to check clickbait manipulation. The significant differences had been found between the clickbait condition ( $M_{\text{clickbait}} = 2.97$ ;  $SD_{\text{clickbait}} = 0.971$ ) and the control condition ( $M_{\text{no clickbait}} = 3.21$ ;  $SD_{\text{no clickbait}} = 1.138$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Therefore, the manipulations of different strengths of the relationship and clickbait were successful.

**5.2.2 Moderated mediation effects.** We used Mplus 7.4 to test the moderated mediation model using a bootstrapping mediation method with 5,000 resamples ([Preacher and Hayes, 2008](#)).

As shown in Tables 5 and 6, the interaction effect is significant ( $\beta = 0.055, p < 0.05$ ). The positive relationship between source credibility and purchase intention was stronger when relationship quality was high (simple slope  $\beta_{\text{friend}} = 0.626, p_{\text{friend}} < 0.001$ ) than when it was low (simple slope  $\beta_{\text{stranger}} = 0.450, p_{\text{stranger}} < 0.001$ ), partly supporting Hypothesis 2. The 95% bootstrapped CI for the indirect effect of clickbait on the purchase intention through the mediator, source credibility, did not include 0 ( $\beta_{\text{stranger}} = -0.105, 95\% \text{ CI}_{\text{stranger}} = [-0.209, -0.030]; \beta_{\text{friend}} = -0.146, 95\% \text{ CI}_{\text{friend}} = [-0.267, -0.043]$ ), supporting Hypothesis 1. The indirect effects from source credibility to purchase intention through perceived benefit and perceived norm parallelly are significant ( $\beta = -0.025, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.063, -0.005]; \beta = -0.039, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.090, -0.011]$ ), supporting Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4, respectively.

### 5.3 Discussion

Study 3 reconfirmed the findings of study 1 and study 2, indicating that clickbait has a negative effect on purchase intention through the mediating role of source credibility and relationship strength which interacts with the impact from source credibility to purchase intention which furtherly will interact with the indirect influence from clickbait to purchase intention. The relationship quality shows moderating influence in study 3 that higher relationship quality will heighten the promotion of purchase intention caused by source credibility, while lower relationship quality will attenuate the positive effect. Besides, study 3 also demonstrated the mediating role of perceived benefit and norm, indicating the mechanism behind the source credibility–purchase intention process which draws on consumers' assessment of benefit and attitudes of surroundings.

## 6. Conclusion

The rise of social media and its impact on communication efficiency and effectiveness have attracted researchers' attention to social business research. Consumers spend a lot of time on social media in their daily lives (Chiu *et al.*, 2012; Zhang *et al.*, 2017). In the online context, new media providers often use clickbait strategies to try to get online users to visit their websites so that they can profit from the traffic and advertising. However, in the current research, across a series of three studies, the result identified that that clickbait strategy will attenuate customers' purchasing intention via the mediation effect of source credibility, perceived norm and perceived benefit and the moderating effect from social connection. Thus, this research can contribute from the following perspectives:

### 6.1 Theoretical contributions

First, the current research contributes to the study of consumer purchase behavior in the e-commerce domain. Our finding reveals that people who like to forward clickbait headline articles would be perceived to have significantly lower credibility than those who do not forward anything. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Chen *et al.*, 2015; Potthast *et al.*, 2016). Those clickbait readers may feel tricked or used when their expectations are not consistent with fact, which may lead to decreased perception of trustworthiness, expertise that relates directly to the credibility level of the source (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). If the seller is regarded as having higher credibility, consumers are more likely to follow his/her recommendation in their purchase decisions. The most evident in finding is that regarding the same source seller received a significantly lower credibility rating when the he/she employed clickbait headlines strategy, which echos previous clickbait literature, suggesting that the presence of clickbait headlines does indeed result in the lower perceived credibility of

**Table 5.**  
Regression results  
(study 3)

Antecedent	M(SC)			p	$\beta$	M(PB)			p	Consequent			p
	$\beta$	SE	M(SC)			SE	M(PB)	SE		M(SN)	SE	M(SN)	
X (clickbait)	-0.233	0.082	0.004	0.004	0.669	0.055	<0.001	0.852	0.047	<0.001	0.335	0.139	<0.05
M(SC)											0.163	0.065	<0.05
M(PB)											0.196	0.064	<0.01
M(PN)											-0.040	0.088	0.628
W (CL)											0.055	0.027	<0.05
M(SC) × W											0.141	0.335	0.675
Constant	3.373	0.055	<0.001	1.155	0.192	<0.001	0.390	0.164	0.164	<0.05			

**Note(s):** X: independent variable ("1" = clickbait; "0" = control); M: mediator; W: moderator; W: moderator; SC: source credibility; PB: perceived benefit; PN: perceived norm; CL: closeness ("1" = close friend; "0" = stranger)

the source entity (Potthast *et al.*, 2016). We also identified that source credibility is an important mediator in consumers' purchase consideration.

Second, the present research also enriches the related relationship quality literature on social commerce. We investigate the relationship quality between buyer and seller on purchase intention in social commerce. Previous studies indicated that the relationship strength can impact buyer's purchase intention (Hajli *et al.*, 2017). In study 2, we set up two levels of relationship quality groups: close friend (strong relationship) and stranger (weak relationship) to investigate the vital role of different relationship quality in social commerce. Our findings have shown that the clickbait leads to perceived lower credibility and the perceived source credibility of the buyer is weighted more heavily when the relationship between buyer and seller is weak (stranger) than it is strong (close friend). The results echo earlier academic detection (Liang *et al.*, 2011). This is because people originally have trust in the seller and pay less attention to irrelevant information when they are engaged in a strong and tight relationship with the seller. The existence of a strong relationship could interact with the perceived credibility in influencing the consumer's purchase decision.

Third, the present research enriches the literature on benefit-perception relation and decision-making process. The result from our study confirmed the interaction on perceived benefit, subjective norm and purchase intentions. In study 3, we set up two levels of relationship quality groups (close friend vs stranger) to detect the relationship strength on social commerce toward real estate. The results confirm our findings in study 3's scenario, indicating that clickbait will weaken the purchase intention through reducing perceived source credibility, and the perceived benefit and subjective norm will partially mediate the relationship between source credibility and purchasing intention. The finding is similar to that in the previous research (Chu *et al.*, 2019).

### 6.2 Practical implications

Our findings offer several broad managerial insights for markers and WeChat business operators. Customers who are not very familiar with the sellers may pay more attention to their previous posts, collecting more relevant information to evaluate the seller's credibility to make a purchase decision. Thus, we suggest that online sellers proactively manage their every post on the social network platform to establish credible images among customers. Besides, marketers would concentrate more on the maintenance of customer relationships, especially when they do business on social network sites. The results also call on an eye at the importance of segmenting customers and personalizing promotions. WeChat or social network platforms allow e-marketers to segment consumers based on their requirements, like gender, age, interest, relationship strength and so on. It shows that when product promotion is carried out, different product promotions must be carried out based on product characteristics and customer profiles. This concept called Thousand People with Thousand Faces has been tried by some e-commerce platforms such as Taobao (a famous C2C

Path	Moderator	Level	Indirect effect	95% bias-corrected bootstrap CI
Clickbait → SC → PI	CL	Low	-0.105	[-0.209, -0.030]
		High	-0.146	[-0.267, -0.043]
		Differences	-0.041	[-0.117, -0.004]
clickbait → SC → PB → PI			-0.025	[-0.063, -0.005]
clickbait → SC → SN → PI			-0.039	[-0.090, -0.011]

**Note(s):** *X*: independent variable ("1" = clickbait; "0" = control); *M*: mediator; *W*: moderator; SC: source credibility; PB: perceived benefit; PN: perceived norm; CL: closeness ("1" = close friend; "0" = stranger)

**Table 6.**  
Bootstrap results  
(study 3)

e-commerce platform of Alibaba in China). Operators use labels to depict each customer, and the labels are symbols and targets for businesses to recommend appropriate products.

Our research results also have implications for consumer purchase decision-making processes. In an e-commerce environment, consumer data are heavily calculated and targeted for marketing. The clickbait is announced based on the analysis of markets and consumers to promote online click rate. For most consumers, the sensational marketing title does not represent the quality of the product but release hints to attract attention. When making product selections, customers need to judge the merchant's product quality and service capabilities based on the products reputation, expertise and previous interaction between the merchant and the consumer.

For policy makers, clickbait has the opportunity to get rid of the controversy and condemnation from business ethics. The use of clickbait titles has been increasingly criticized, and there has been a backlash against clickbait because people become more intolerant or recognize it more easily. Even recently, academic studies in journalism prove that the clickbait headlines may lower perceptions of credibility and quality (Molyneux and Coddington, 2020). However, as clickbait does have a brief period where specific manipulations in link titles were vastly successful at driving clicks and shares (Zhang *et al.*, 2020) and indeed attracts traffic for products and enterprises at a large scale, it is still worth to utilizing and optimizing under business ethics circumstance. Policy makers need to give merchants better guidance on the use of the clickbait in order to regulate business ethics. Considering that trust is one crucial determinant of online purchase behavior (Liu *et al.*, 2013; Shi *et al.*, 2016), there are two ways to enhance clickbait and content reading experience: one is to adjust the clickbait via keeping eye-catching terms in title and matching the content within article; the other one is to adjust the content of the article to make it more interesting and textured.

### *6.3 Limitations and future research*

Although this study offers some contributions in both theory and practice, there are some limitations that future research will need to address. First, relationship quality is a multidimensional construct that involves different measurements other than closeness, while the study focused on only two kinds of seller–buyer relationship, i.e. a good friend as a strong relationship versus stranger as a weak relationship. Future research is encouraged to investigate how different relationship strength would interact with clickbait to sway source credibility and purchase intention.

Second, other stimuli may exert potential influence on our research such as the value of commodities. In studies 2 and 3, we found that the interaction of relationship quality in the link between source credibility and purchase intention varies accordingly: when the value of goods is low (bracelet), weak relationship (stranger) is more likely to be noticed and attended to positive influence from source credibility to purchase intention (moderation), while when the value of goods is high (real estate), strong relationship (close friends) more likely to be noticed and attended to the influence toward purchase intention (moderation). For most ordinary commodities, consumers' purchase intention is stimulated by their own needs and the credibility of product information, while product value and price are factors that affect consumers' purchase intention, but this factor is not prominent (Bues *et al.*, 2017). For commodities with high value and price (e.g. real estate, investment-oriented insurance), the mechanism of consumers' purchase intention is based on different aspects, such as attitudes toward products and service providers (Pleyers and Poncin, 2020), perceived value and time pressure (Peng *et al.*, 2019). Thus, it is probable to take the value of commodities as a stimulus in online purchase-making process experiments in further research.

Third, other variables may exert potential influence on our research. In these studies, we did not take the perceived risk and product category into consideration. Previous studies

have implied the influence of price on consumer perceived risks when making purchase decisions. It had been confirmed that the perceived risk had a negative influence on individual adoption on social commerce platforms (Bues *et al.*, 2017; Liu *et al.*, 2017). Consumers' perception toward a product might vary between products, given their relative hedonic or utilitarian nature (Mo *et al.*, 2018; Chu *et al.*, 2019). People tended to search for more information about a product having a higher price than that having a lower price (Pleyers and Poncin, 2020). For this reason, people were inclined to regard low price products as less risky products and high price products as riskier products. Future studies may compare the product type from utilitarian versus hedonic product perspective in the research model.

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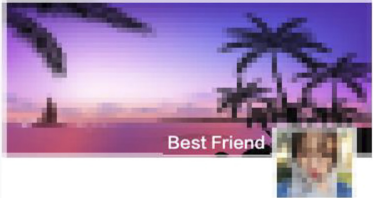


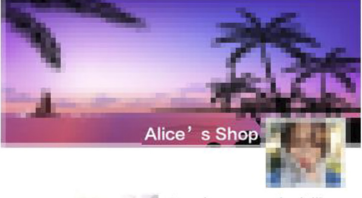


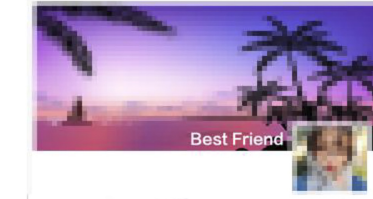


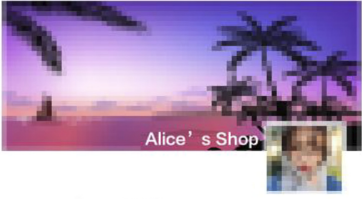


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Appendix 1

<p><b>30 Dec</b> [Moisturizing Face Cream] Soothing Oat and Rich Emollients to Nourish Dry Skin. I use this for years. It absorbs into your skin quickly, and keeps your skin feeling moisturized all day.</p> <p><b>09 Nov</b> This information is invaluable, read ten times, you will learn a lot !</p> <p><b>07 Sept</b> Delete soon, too horrible !</p> <p><b>08 Dec</b> Don't buy this, this article has gone viral</p> <p><b>29 Nov</b> Very Important, look quickly ! Delete tomorrow !</p> <p><b>02 Nov</b> We have been cheated many years, if you are a driver, repost quickly!</p> <p><b>09 Apr</b> Forward this article, let everyone know the truth.</p> <p><b>01 Mar</b> Please tell your family quickly, if you have this debit card.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>(a)</b></p>	<p><b>30 Dec</b> [Moisturizing Face Cream] Soothing Oat and Rich Emollients to Nourish Dry Skin. I use this for years. It absorbs into your skin quickly, and keeps your skin feeling moisturized all day.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>(b)</b></p>
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**Figure A1.**  
Stimuli used in study 1:  
product  
recommendation  
within (a) clickbait  
condition; (b) no  
clickbait condition

 <p><b>Best Friend</b></p> <p><b>Today</b>   It makes women look like... Gold Bracelet Brings you good luck and easy to match your outfit. It is great for personal use or to share</p>	 <p><b>Alice's Shop</b></p> <p><b>Today</b>   It makes women look like... Gold Bracelet Brings you good luck and easy to match your outfit. It is great for personal use or to share</p>
<p>(a)</p>	<p>(b)</p>
 <p><b>Best Friend</b></p> <p><b>Today</b>   It makes women look like... Gold Bracelet Brings you good luck and easy to match your outfit. It is great for personal use or to share</p> <p>09 Nov This information is invaluable, read ten times, you will learn a lot !</p> <p>07 Sept Delete soon, too horrible !</p> <p>08 Dec Don't buy this, this article has gone viral</p> <p>29 Nov Very Important, look quickly ! Delete tomorrow !</p> <p>02 Nov We have been cheated many years, if you are a driver, repost quickly!</p> <p>09 Apr Forward this article, let everyone know the truth.</p> <p>01 Mar Please tell your family quickly, if you have this debit card.</p>	 <p><b>Alice's Shop</b></p> <p><b>Today</b>   It makes women look like... Gold Bracelet Brings you good luck and easy to match your outfit. It is great for personal use or to share</p> <p>09 Nov This information is invaluable, read ten times, you will learn a lot !</p> <p>07 Sept Delete soon, too horrible !</p> <p>08 Dec Don't buy this, this article has gone viral</p> <p>29 Nov Very Important, look quickly ! Delete tomorrow !</p> <p>02 Nov We have been cheated many years, if you are a driver, repost quickly!</p> <p>09 Apr Forward this article, let everyone know the truth.</p> <p>01 Mar Please tell your family quickly, if you have this debit card.</p>
<p>(c)</p>	<p>(d)</p>

**Figure A2.** Stimuli used in study 2: recommendation within (a) friend \* no clickbait condition; (b) stranger \* no clickbait condition; (c) friend \* clickbait condition; (d) stranger \* clickbait condition

 <p>Good Friend A</p> <p><b>Today</b>  Located in Fenghuaili District, Wharf, with an area of 108 sqm, fine decoration, four south-facing bedrooms, complete furniture and appliances, total price of 5.1 million RMB, sincerely looking for buyers.</p>	 <p>Anju Property Agency</p> <p><b>Today</b>  Located in Fenghuaili District, Wharf, with an area of 108 sqm, fine decoration, four south-facing bedrooms, complete furniture and appliances, total price of 5.1 million RMB, sincerely looking for buyers.</p>
<p>(a)</p>	<p>(b)</p>
 <p>Good Friend A</p> <p><b>Today</b>  Located in Fenghuaili District, Wharf, with an area of 108 sqm, fine decoration, four south-facing bedrooms, complete furniture and appliances, total price of 5.1 million RMB, sincerely looking for buyers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11 Mar  Shocking news! Buyers fight! This property ignited the Suzhou real...</li> <li>09 Mar  It has started! Nanjing, Zhengzhou, Wuhan .....all start to act!</li> <li>16 Feb  New record! Just now, the park land auction results are released!</li> <li>04 Feb  Nanjing is crazy! Tyrants acted at the same time!</li> <li>30 Jan  Confirmed! Xuguan is booming!</li> <li>07 Jan  Suzhou Bay adds a large commercial center! New development plan released!</li> <li>26 Dec  Good news! Suzhou transportation will develop in an all-round way!</li> <li>11 Dec  Wu Jiang is booming! The integration of the Yangtze River Delta is taking shape!</li> </ul>	 <p>Anju Property Agency</p> <p><b>Today</b>  Located in Fenghuaili District, Wharf, with an area of 108 sqm, fine decoration, four south-facing bedrooms, complete furniture and appliances, total price of 5.1 million RMB, sincerely looking for buyers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11 Mar  Shocking news! Buyers fight! This property ignited the Suzhou real...</li> <li>09 Mar  It has started! Nanjing, Zhengzhou, Wuhan .....all start to act!</li> <li>16 Feb  New record! Just now, the park land auction results are released!</li> <li>04 Feb  Nanjing is crazy! Tyrants acted at the same time!</li> <li>30 Jan  Confirmed! Xuguan is booming!</li> <li>07 Jan  Suzhou Bay adds a large commercial center! New development plan released!</li> <li>26 Dec  Good news! Suzhou transportation will develop in an all-round way!</li> <li>11 Dec  Wu Jiang is booming! The integration of the Yangtze River Delta is taking shape!</li> </ul>
<p>(c)</p>	<p>(d)</p>

**Figure A3.**  
Stimuli used in study 3:  
product  
recommendation  
within (a) friend \* no  
clickbait condition; (b)  
stranger \* no clickbait  
condition; (c) friend \*  
clickbait condition; (d)  
stranger \* clickbait  
condition

**Appendix 2**  
**Questionnaire items for constructs (studies 1, 2 and 3)**

**1972**

Constructs	Items	References
Source Credibility	(Trustworthiness) Dependable–undependable Honest–dishonest Reliable–unreliable Sincere–insincere Trustworthy–untrustworthy (Expertise) Expert–not an expert Experienced–inexperienced Knowledgeable–unknowledgeable Qualified–unqualified Skilled–unskilled	Ohanian (1990)
Purchase intention	It is likely that I will buy products from him or her I will purchase products from him or her the next time that I need accessories If other friends called me to get my advice about which product to buy, I would advise them to buy from him or her I definitely will buy products from him or her if he or she recommends them to me	Putrevu and Lord (1994), Coyle and Thorson (2001)
Perceived benefit	This product can bring convenience to my life This product can help me make money This product can bring me social benefits, for example, I can tell others that I own this product	Guide and Li (2010), Wang <i>et al.</i> (2013)
Perceived norm	People who influence my decision think that I should purchase this product People who are important to me think that I should purchase a family takaful scheme People whose opinions I value think I should purchase this product People who are close to me think that I should purchase this product People who influence my behavior think that I should purchase this product	Shimp and Kavas (1984), Gunawan and Huarng (2015), Jin and Kang (2011)

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Successful  
clickbait  
promotion in  
WeChat

**1973**

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