Grumpy Consumers, Good Citizens?
Exploring the Relationship Among Internet Use, Online Consumer Behavior, and Civic Participation in China

FEI SHEN
City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

TIANJIAO WANG
Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, China

Existing empirical research has rarely examined the influence of Internet use on civic participation through the lens of consumer behavior. In this study, we propose a consumer empowerment model to explore the relationship between Internet use and civic participation mediated by consumer behavior variables including online shopping and consumer complaints. Using survey data ($N = 1,000$) of Internet users in China, we found a positive association among Internet use, civic participation, and consumer behavior to play a crucial role in this process: Internet use catalyzes online shopping, which leads to more consumer complaints, creating a spillover effect for civic engagement. The Internet will not turn China into a liberal democracy, but our findings suggest it may energize elements of civic culture.

Keywords: Internet use, consumer behavior, civic participation, China

Since the advent of the Internet, myriad studies have connected Internet use to civic participation through various mechanisms: encouraging discussion (N. J. Lee, Shah, & McLeod, 2013), promoting knowledge (Reichert & Print, 2017), and distilling civic duty awareness (Moeller, Kühne, & de Vreese, 2018), among others. However, existing empirical research has rarely examined the unintended influence of Internet use through the lens of consumer behavior, in particular, ordinary consumer behavior such as online shopping and buyer–seller communication, leaving some interesting voids to be filled. Taking the roles of consumers into consideration when assessing Internet use, civic participation relationship is particularly relevant to the context of authoritarian societies where information technologies are mostly leveraged to boost economic growth but also to restrain civic and political actions that threaten the state power.

The roles of consumers and citizens are traditionally regarded as in opposition to each other. Since Tocqueville (1835/1969), many scholars have discussed the conflict between civic responsibility and materialistic pursuit (see Rahn, 1998; Taylor, 2000). In Weber, Simmel, and Marx, consumers are

Fei Shen: feishen@cityu.edu.hk
Tianjiao Wang: tj.w.009@gmail.com (corresponding author)

portrayed as self-interested, whereas citizens are expected to care about the common good of the community (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 2007; Schor, 2000). Such a conceptualization of citizen–consumer duality is often challenged and some scholars assert that consumers can practice citizenship through consumption (e.g., Schudson, 2007).

The majority of existing empirical studies on citizenship and consumerism relate socially conscious consumption to political and civic participation (e.g., Copeland & Boulianne, 2020; Gil de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2014). The rationale behind this line of research is if people care about social responsibility, they will practice citizenship through ethical purchasing, which cultivates a civic mindset and civic engagement (Cho & Keum, 2016; Keum, Devanathan, Deshpande, Nelson, & Shah, 2004). But a more interesting and perhaps ambitious question to ask is, in addition to socially conscious consumption, which is not so much widely carried out by ordinary consumers who are sensitive to price and values for money, can ordinary consumption behaviors facilitate civic culture?

One possible direction to look at when relating consumption to citizenship is the profound changes information technologies have brought to societies all over the world in the past two decades. The convenience and low cost of online shopping have changed the way purchasing is done. The Internet provides a novel platform for facilitating consumer public expression, creating social bonds among consumers, and fostering consumer collective action (Bieber & Lamla, 2005; Lamla, 2008).

This study aims to advance our understanding of the complex relationships among Internet use, consumer behavior, and civic participation. We start with a brief review of literature on how the Internet transforms consumers through empowering expression, and how existing research characterizes the relationship between Internet use and civic engagement. Then we argue for the importance of introducing consumer behavior into the existing theoretical framework and propose a consumer empowerment model to elaborate the possibilities that Internet use can lead to civic engagement through consumer behavior. *Consumer behavior* is defined as "the purchase and consumption related activities of consumers engaging in the exchange process" (Sternthal & Zaltman, 1974, para. 21), and *online shopping* as a subcategory of consumer behavior is defined as using the Internet as a means to purchase (Shang, Chen, & Shen, 2005). We tested our hypotheses using survey data from a national sample of Internet users in China, where the Internet is expected by many to transform the society toward higher levels of civil liberty despite the existence of censorship. The findings regarding the connection between Internet use and civic participation in China and the relevance of the consumer empowerment model to both nondemocratic and democratic societies are discussed.

The Internet and Consumer Empowerment

The low cost of information access brings geographically dispersed sellers to individual consumers, making it easier to negotiate with sellers for better prices (Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006). More than 50% of consumers use online reviews or company websites before making purchase decisions (KPMG, 2017). Informed consumers compare information from different sources and obtain the most competitive price, delivery options, or various other benefits. In this sense, isolated individuals gain strength to shift market power from suppliers to consumers (Pires et al., 2006).

More important, the Internet also empowers consumers by providing new channels of expression. Oftentimes, consumers are not satisfied with the products or services they bought for a wide range of reasons. Now they can use their reviews to vote down a product. A study from the United Kingdom suggests that one in four social media users has used Internet platforms to complain about bad purchasing experiences (Causon, 2015). The KPMG Global Online Consumer Report (KPMG, 2017) reveals that approximately 31% of online customers share their experiences on Facebook, and 11% of them do so in online forums. For most businesses, consumer voice has never been so important (O'Brien, 2011).

Postpurchase reactions of an unhappy consumer can be roughly divided into two categories: private response and public response (Day & Landon, 1977). Private responses include word-of-mouth communication to friends about the experience and avoidance of purchasing in the future. In contrast, consumer complaints, expression toward unsatisfying purchasing experiences, could reach a larger group of people (Day & Landon, 1977). Before the Internet era, most unsatisfied consumers failed to voice their complaints (Huppertz, 2003; Singh & Pandya, 1991), largely because of time and monetary costs of making complaints, the perceived likelihood of success, and the availability of communication channels (Hirschman, 1970; Huppertz, 2003). The Internet has changed the landscape by offering communication channels and platforms to facilitate commenting or complaining (Castronova, 2001).

Many online shopping platforms solicit comments from consumers, and more important, consumers are willing to comment. Worldwide, about 30% of online consumers comment on purchased products on the Internet, and consumers in Asia are 50% more likely than average to post a review (KPMG, 2017). Consumers' willingness to express their thoughts online exerts pressure on companies to pay extra attention to consumer complaints.

Internet Use and Civic Engagement: Taking Consumer Behavior Into Consideration

Information technologies are perceived as tools for revitalizing democracy (e.g., Bimber, 1999). Therefore, many empirical studies have examined whether Internet use facilitates civic engagement. In general, most studies have found a positive correlation between the two concepts (see Boulianne, 2009, for a meta-analysis). Echoing studies from Western democracies, research also has found positive relationships between various types of Internet use and participatory behaviors in nondemocratic societies. For instance, Pearce, Freelon, and Kendzior (2014) found that Internet use is positively associated with civic participation in Azerbaijan. Hao, Wen, and George (2014) found that Internet use is positively associated with young adults' civic participation in Singapore. In China, Shen, Lu, Guo, and Zhou (2011) found a positive relationship between Internet news use and media participation; M. Chan, Wu, Hao, Xi, and Jin, (2012) found that Weibo use increases people's willingness to express opinions about government and politics; and Cheng, Liang, and Leung (2015) found that frequency of social network use is positively associated with online and offline civic engagement. Therefore, we proposed our first hypothesis.

H1:   Internet use is positively related to civic participation.

Previous research also has identified a wide variety of intermediate outcomes that explain the connection between Internet use and civic participation. In democracies, the mediating variables include political knowledge (Moeller, de Vreese, Esser, & Kunz, 2014; Reichert & Print, 2017), political discussion frequency (N. J. Lee et al., 2013), discussion network heterogeneity (Kim & Chen, 2015), and civic duty awareness (Moeller et al., 2018). In China, Shen, Wang, Guo, and Guo (2009) argue that Internet use leads to online expression through expanding people's online network size. Li and Chan (2017) discovered that interpersonal discussion mediates the positive relationship between social media information seeking and online political participation. Y. Liu, Zhou, and Zhang (2020) showed that the relationship between second screening and online participation could be mediated by social media political efficacy.

However, previous research has not examined the roles of consumer behavior as a potential mediator connecting Internet use and participatory behavior. Does consumer behavior matter? We argue that consumer behavior has the potential to connect Internet use with civic participation. First, Schudson (2007) argues that it is wrong to identify civic and political behavior as public-spirited and consumer behavior as self-interested. Consumer behavior can be public-spirited and can enshrine values consistent with democratic ideals. Plenty of studies suggest that motivations for online complaining are highly relevant to the common good and public interest. Second, the Internet provides a new venue for consumers to openly and publicly communicate with sellers (J. Lee, Park, & Han, 2008). People voice complaints on the Internet to help other people make better decisions (Jang & Jeong, 2011; Yap, Soetarto, & Sweeney, 2013). Those who express their opinions are aware of the potential influence of their voices, and they make intentional efforts to achieve a common good (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). In this sense, online shopping expands the options for expression in the marketplace, which makes consumers more comparable to citizens (Lamla, 2008). The Internet also enables individual consumers to communicate, coordinate, and act collectively through online social networks (Bieber & Lamla, 2005) and facilitates social bonds and trust through online platforms that bring sellers, buyers, and manufacturers closer (K. W. Chan & Li, 2010).

Consumer Empowerment Model: Connecting Internet Use to Civic Engagement

For the reasons outlined above, this study proposes a "consumer empowerment model" that connects Internet use to civic engagement through consumer behavior. We use the term *consumer empowerment* to refer to the phenomenon that consumers use information technologies for expressive and participatory behavior. In the following sections, we draw on literature from Internet user studies, consumer behavior research, and political communication research to build a theoretical framework that can expand our existing understanding of the intricate relationships among Internet use, online shopping, consumer complaints, and civic engagement.

Internet Use and Online Shopping

The adoption of the Internet as a way of communication facilitates shopping on the Internet (Soopramanien & Robertson, 2007). Studies suggest that computer skills and online searching experience are positively related to people's intention to use the Internet for shopping (Shim, Eastlick, Lotz, & Warrington, 2001). Compared with shopping in a store, online shopping provides benefits such as

extended hours and wider selection of retailers (Burke, 2002; Chiang & Dholakia, 2003; Rohm & Swaminathan, 2004). These features can boost perceived benefits of online shopping and motivate netizens to purchase online (Soopramanien & Robertson, 2007). In addition, online retailers often provide sales promotions, which allow online consumers to achieve greater economic control. Citrin, Sprott, Silverman, and Stem (2000) found that individuals who are heavier users of the Internet make purchases from the Internet more frequently. Similarly, a survey study by Naseri and Elliott (2011) suggests that prior experience with nonshopping Internet applications (e.g., e-mail, chat rooms, e-banking, and e-government) are positively related to online shopping. Therefore, we expected that those who use the Internet more frequently are more likely to shop online.

H2:   Internet use is positively related to online shopping.

Online Shopping and Consumer Complaint

A *consumer complaint* is defined as communicating something negative regarding a product or service (Jacoby & Jaccard, 1981). Frequent online shopping and consumer complaints are related for at least three possible reasons. First, the Internet provides consumers a new way to communicate their experiences and thoughts to others in a time-efficient and cost-saving manner. Internet users are more likely to complain because they can easily voice complaints online (Rezabakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen, & Schrader, 2006). Second, compared with offline shopping, online shopping incurs more uncertainties, which often lead to disconfirmation of expectations and product performances (Celik, 2011). Third and relatedly, the very nature of online shopping creates another layer of complexity that could easily lead to dissatisfaction. Online shoppers are not only buyers of products, but also users of Web-based systems (Wu & Huang, 2015). Consumers can complain about a wide range of issues such as website aesthetic, easiness of use, information quality, and website personalization (Rita, Oliveira, & Farisa, 2019).

S. Lee and Cude (2012) designed a 2 × 2 experiment (offline purchase vs. online purchase, weak dissatisfaction vs. strong dissatisfaction) to compare complaint channel choice in online and offline purchases. They found that participants from the online purchase group were more likely to complain online than participants from the offline purchase group, and the levels of online complaining were positively correlated with the degree of dissatisfaction. Using 2011 Eurobarometer data from 27 European countries, Jasper and Waldhart (2013) explored the antecedents to consumer complaint behavior. Results from a logistic regression model suggest that those who had purchased over the Internet, those who had purchased over the telephone, and those who had purchased over post/catalog were more likely to make consumer complaints. Among the three types of purchasing behaviors, purchasing over the Internet had the biggest odds ratio predicting consumer complaints. With these pieces of empirical evidence, we expected that frequent online shopping could lead to consumer complaints.

H3:   Online shopping is positively related to consumer complaints.
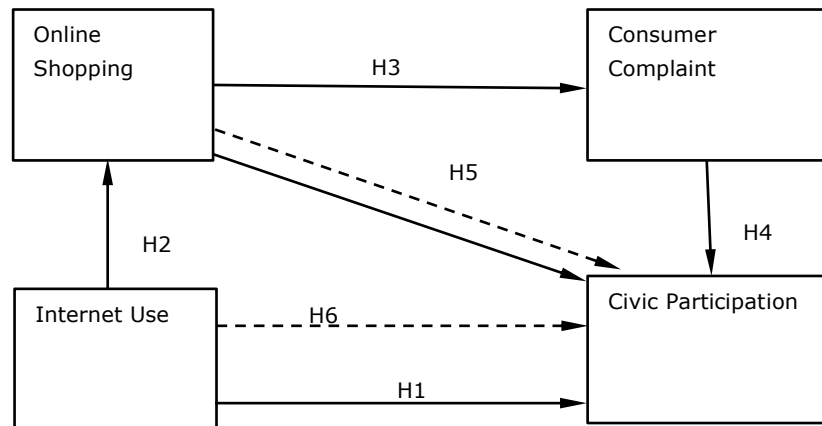
Consumer Complaints and Civic Engagement

A very limited amount of scholarly work has actually looked at the connection between consumer complaints and civic engagement. As early as the 1980s, Warland, Herrmann, and Moore (1984) found that consumer complaints are positively correlated with community involvement in the United States. The correlations among active social, economic, and political life could be the consequence of a complex socialization process. To some extent, complaining consumers are similar to citizens expressing their dissatisfaction toward social institutions for better outcomes. But it does not exclude the possibility that the experience, knowledge, and confidence people acquire from one domain of social life can be translated into another.

First, the experience of making complaints leads to skills and knowledge needed for civic participation. Singh and Wilkes (1996) found that individual consumers can obtain knowledge related to cost–benefit analysis through complaining. Consumers attain skills to negotiate with sellers and develop better strategies to communicate with third-party organizations such as the media and institutions for consumer rights protection (Hooper, 2005). These civic skills and knowledge may inform and encourage participation in other domains (Hooper, 2005). Second, the process of making a consumer complaint can facilitate a civic mindset. Pei (2000) argues that in China, where civic culture is underdeveloped, as people increasingly realize that they can receive compensation by complaining, the awareness of general rights has increased. In addition, the social media platforms on which consumers make comments or complaints about their experience enable individuals to obtain a sense of belonging, as well as social integration, which can further motivate them to share experiences to benefit the whole group (Cheung & Lee, 2012; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Third, successful complaint experiences distill efficacy beliefs (Susskind, 2000). Studies have found that prior relevant experience is often positively related to the propensity of future complaint behaviors (Singh & Wilkes, 1996). Individual customers achieve an imaginary membership in discursive participation (Shotter, 1993), which is crucial for participatory citizenship (Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). Last but not least, most consumer complaints are made on the Internet today, and empirical studies have shown that communication skills and competence can be acquired through the use of the Internet (e.g., Cho & Keum, 2016). In addition, researchers have found that Internet use for consumption is positively related to connection gratification (Cho, Gil de Zúñiga, Rojas, & Shah, 2003), whereas making connections online could be considered an important source of social capital that facilitates civic engagement (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). We posed the following hypothesis:

H4:   Consumer complaints are positively related to civic participation.

Mediating Mechanisms

If the piecemeal empirical assessment of the hypotheses we outlined above turn out to be supported by our data, we further explore the possible mediating mechanisms that connect Internet use to civic engagement. Schematically, a theoretical model with all hypotheses is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Theoretical framework: Consumer empowerment model. Dotted lines indicate mediating relationship and solid lines indicate direct relationships.

Foremost, regarding the connection between online shopping and civic engagement, consumer complaints could be one possible explanatory mechanism. Individuals who frequently purchase products or services from the Internet are more likely to encounter problems with purchases, leading to higher chances of making complaints. Meanwhile, consumer complaints provide knowledge, rights consciousness, and confidence needed for various types of civic engagement. Taken together, consumer complaints are expected to be a mediating variable that can at least partially explain the relationship between online shopping and civic engagement. More broadly, because frequent Internet use is positively related to a higher chance of online shopping, the connection between Internet use and civic engagement could possibly be explained by two mediating variables: online shopping and consumer complaints. Therefore, two hypotheses highlighting the mediating mechanisms in the consumer empowerment model were proposed:

H5:   Consumer complaints mediate the relationship between online shopping and civic participation.

H6:   Online shopping and consumer complaints mediate the relationship between Internet use and civic participation.

Research Context

We situate our study in China. The relationships among information technology use, consumer behavior, and civic participation are particularly intriguing in an authoritarian context. China has one of the largest retail e-commerce markets in the world. As of 2019, about 75% of Chinese Internet users perform online purchasing (China Internet Network Information Center, [CNNIC], 2019). Meanwhile, with the rising awareness of consumer rights, the number of complaints and disputes from online shoppers has sharply increased (Lockett, 2016). Pei (2000) observed a parallel increase in consumers' awareness of legal resources. Du and Wang (2016) found that 79% of consumers said that they want a law to protect their negative review rights, a form of free speech right in the context of commerce. The Chinese

government has been promoting the notion of consumer rights through careful measures, with a fear that such rights consciousness will overflow into other domains.

We chose to empirically test the consumer empowerment model in China not only for its huge number of consumers and large volume of consumer complaints, but also for asking a theoretically relevant question unique to this context: To what extent can new technologies empower Chinese consumers to foster a more vibrant civic society within an authoritarian regime? The commonly accepted view is that the Internet has fostered an economically booming but politically stagnated society in China. The fast-growing economy is often contrasted with the slow political reforms in contemporary China (Perry, 2007; Zhu, 2011). Widespread and multilayered Internet censorship has limited the growth of a vibrant civic society in the country, but it is not impossible that the effects of consumer empowerment achieved through new technologies can spill over into the civic realm.

Method

Data

The data of the study came from a survey of Internet users in China between July 29, 2015, and August 10, 2015. The fielding of the survey was contracted out to one of the leading market research companies in China. The company maintains a large national panel of survey participants. Participation invitation e-mails were sent to recruit adult Internet users across the country. For their participation in the study, respondents received bonus points that could be used to redeem cash or gifts. In total, 1,000 Internet users were recruited. The response rate of the survey was 19%. The current study focused on Internet users and their online behaviors. It is important to note that the sample was not intended to represent the general population of China; instead, the sample was designed to match the profile of typical Internet users in China. The survey used a nonprobability and quota-based sampling method to obtain a sample whose demographic distribution largely followed that of the Chinese Internet users in 2015. The Internet user population profile was obtained from the 36th CNNIC report released in June 2015 for the purpose of matching the time of the survey.

Table 1 shows the demographic features of the respondents. The distributions of gender, education (median = 3, senior secondary school), income (median = 2,001–3,000 RMB), and geographical location closely followed the CNNIC (2015) statistics in the year when the survey was conducted. The only exception is age because the age distribution statistics reported by CNNIC included children and teenage groups, which were excluded from the current study.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 1,000).

Demographic	%
Gender	
Female	44.9
Male	55.1
Age (years)	
16–19	10.0
20–29	30.0
30–39	30.0
40–49	20.0
≥50	10.0
Education	
Primary school or below	12.4
Junior secondary school	36.5
Senior secondary school	30.5
Some college	8.8
University or above	11.8
Monthly income (RMB)	
No income	6.2
<500	11.2
500–1,000	9.8
1,001–1,500	7.3
1,501–2,000	8.9
2,001–3,000	21
3,001–5,000	22.4
5,001–8,000	8.2
≥8,001	5.0
Location	
Urban	72.1
Rural	27.9

Measures

Internet Use

The respondents were asked to report the frequency of the following activities on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *never* to *always*: social media use, news browsing, entertainment use (e.g., gaming, music, video services, etc.), e-government service use, search engine use. The average of the five items formulated an index of Internet use (M = 3.71, SD = 0.67, Cronbach's α = .70).

Online Shopping

Online shopping was operationalized by frequency of purchasing products using the Internet. The respondents were asked to report their frequency of purchasing for five categories of goods on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *never* to *always*: sports gear, home appliances, household items, food/grocery, and auto accessories. In general, people tend to buy household items ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.91$) more frequently than home appliances ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 0.95$) and auto accessories ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.08$). These items measuring different types of shopping behavior were mostly moderately correlated, with Pearson's correlation coefficients ranging from .31 to .59. The mean of the five items constituted an online shopping index ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.73$, Cronbach's α = .81).

Consumer Complaints

Consumer complaint behavior was operationalized by behavioral frequency of defending one's rights after receiving bad services or shoddy products purchased from the Internet. Five items were included in this measure: to down-vote the vendor on the platform, to file a complaint formally through the purchasing platform, to request a return and refund, to post negative reviews on social media, and to discourage friends and relatives from buying the service/product. The average of the five items formulated an index of consumer complaint behaviors ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 0.80$, Cronbach's α = .86).

Civic Participation

Following Inglehart's (1997) World Value Survey, we used six dichotomous items to measure civic participation. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had participated in the following activities in the past 12 months (1 = yes, 0 = no): signing a petition online ($M = 0.47$, $SD = 0.50$), contacting a government official online ($M = 0.24$, $SD = 0.42$), donating money online ($M = 0.46$, $SD = 0.50$), contacting the media online ($M = 0.33$, $SD = 0.47$), encouraging others to express their opinion on social issues ($M = 0.46$, $SD = 0.50$), and boycotting products for social causes ($M = 0.61$, $SD = 0.49$). The sum of the six dichotomies was used as the indicator of civic participation ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.93$, Cronbach's α = .75).

Control Variables

Five demographic variables were included as controls: gender, age, education, income, and geographical location (rural/urban). In addition to the demographic controls, two traditional media use variables were included. Respondents were asked to report number of days they read newspapers ($M = 2.72$ days, $SD = 2.50$) and number of days they watch television news on a weekly basis ($M = 4.45$ days, $SD = 2.44$).

Data Analysis

The data analysis took two steps. First, we used a series of ordinary least squares regression models to explore the demographic and control variables' relationships with the endogenous variables.

Because this part of the analysis did not involve any hypothesis testing, for ease of exposition, indices computed from observed variables were used directly. Second, we used structural equation modeling to test our hypotheses and explore the mediating relationships among the variables included in the model. Following best practices in structural equation modeling recommended in existing literature (e.g., Mueller & Hancock, 2008; Rosenthal, 2017), we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to ensure measurement quality and the dimensional structure of all measures prior to performing path analysis with latent variables. Then, based on the confirmatory factor analysis model, a structural model was constructed with latent endogenous variables to formally test the hypotheses. Both direct and indirect effects were estimated.

Findings

Demographic and Control Variables

Analysis shows that demographic variables explained a very small portion (about 1% to 5%) of the variance in the endogenous variables. Males, young people, users with lower education level, and users with higher income tended to use the Internet more frequently than others. For online shopping, there were no significant gender, education, and income differences, but young and urban residents seemed to be more passionate about online shopping. Interestingly, the demographic predictors of raising consumer complaints and civic participation were by and large similar: younger individuals, males, and people from urban areas. In terms of traditional news media use, newspaper reading was a significant positive predictor of all endogenous variables, but watching only television news predicted Internet use. Traditional media use explained roughly 10% of the variances in all models. Results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Predicting Endogenous Variables With Control Variables.

Variable	Internet use		Online shopping		Consumer complaints		Civic participation	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Constant	3.791	0.123***	2.622	0.134***	2.862	0.146***	2.818	0.348***
Demographics								
Gender	−072	.041#	−.021	.044	−.214	.048***	−.659	.115***
Age	−.089	.021***	−.047	.023*	−.106	.025***	−.240	.059***
Education	−.079	.017***	−.008	.019	−.016	.021	.046	.049
Income	.027	.010**	−.008	.011	−.007	.012	.008	.029
Urban	.020	.046	.106	.051*	.108	.055#	.239	.132#
ΔR^2 (%)	3.1***		1.0#		3.9***		4.6***	
Traditional media								
TV news	.042	.009***	.012	.010	−.002	.011	.050	.027#
Newspaper	.061	.009***	.096	.010***	.090	.011***	.219	.026***
Total ΔR^2 (%)	13.2***		12.7***		11.6***		14.4***	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. #$p < .10$.
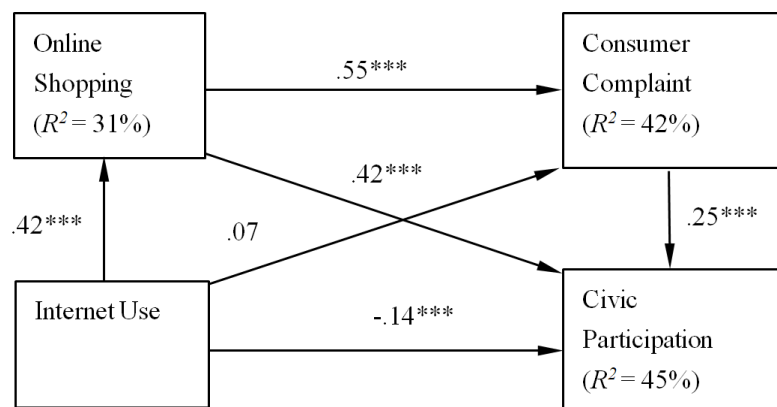
Measurement Model

A measurement model of four latent endogenous variables was constructed to test the measurement validity of the data (see Figure 2). All measurement items were nested under the four latent constructs, respectively: Internet use, online shopping, consumer complaints, and civic participation. All latent constructs were allowed to be related to one another. None of the residuals of the observed variables were allowed to be correlated with one another. Confirmatory factor analysis showed that the measurement model fit the data fairly well: $\chi^2(263) = 762.30$, $p < .001$; standardized root mean residual = .04; goodness of fit index = .93; comparative fit index = .92; root mean square error of approximation = .06. Meanwhile, the latent constructs were all moderately correlated with one another (coefficients ranged from .26 to .62).
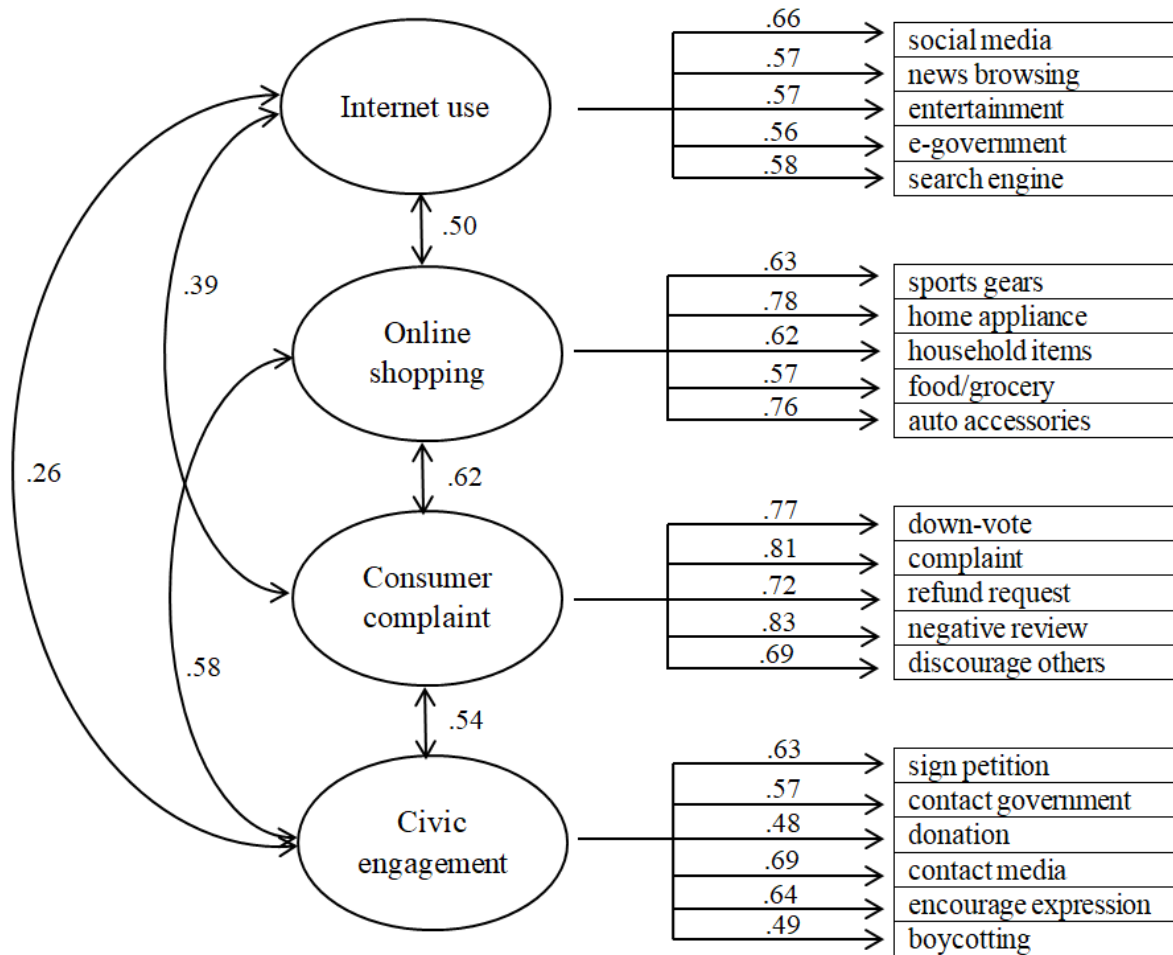
Figure 2. Confirmatory factor analysis.

Structural Model

The structural model was constructed by appending the demographic and control variables to the measurement model. Figure 3 presents the results of the analysis. For ease of exposition, five demographic variables and two traditional media use variables are not shown in the figure, but they were controlled in all structural equations when conducting the analysis. Overall, the structural model achieved a good fit: $\chi^2(302) = 1076.07$, $p < .001$; standardized root mean residual = .05; goodness of fit index = .93; comparative fit index = .90; root mean square error of approximation = .05. Judging by the proportion of variance explained, the model performed fairly well (R^2s ranged from 31% to 45%).

Figure 3. Empirical model: Consumer empowerment hypothesis. All exogenous variables and observed measurement variables were included but are not shown in the graph for the sake of simplicity. Standardized coefficients are shown in the figure. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 3 shows the coefficients of direct and indirect effects from structural equation modeling. Hypothesis 1 proposed a positive relationship between Internet use and civic participation. According to Table 3, there was a statistically significant relationship between Internet use and civic participation ($b = .053$, $SE = .025$, $p < .01$). Hypothesis 2 proposed a positive relationship between Internet use and online shopping. The data showed supportive evidence ($b = .340$, $SE = .045$, $p < .001$). Hypothesis 3 expected online shopping to be correlated with consumer complaints. Findings from the path analysis showed a strong positive relationship between these two variables ($b = .764$, $SE = .087$, $p < .001$). Hypothesis 4 proposed consumer complaints to be correlated with civic participation. The finding corroborated the hypothesis ($b = .102$, $SE = .021$, $p < .001$).

Table 3. Structural Equation Model: Direct and Indirect Effects.

	Internet use		Online shopping		Consumer complaints	
Variable	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*
Online shopping	.340***	.045	–	–	–	–
Complaints						
Direct effects	.081	.061	.764***	.087	–	–
Indirect effects	.260***	.041	–	–	–	–
Total effects	.341***	.060	.764***	.087	–	–
Civic participation						
Direct effects	−.065***	.024	.244***	.034	.102***	.021
Indirect effects	.118***	.018	.078***	.017	–	–
Total effects	.053**	.025	.322***	.033	.102***	.021

Note. Indirect effects standard errors were based on bootstrap analysis. Number of bootstrap samples = 200.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Hypothesis 5 explored the role of consumer complaints in mediating the relationship between online shopping and civic participation. Overall, online shopping was positively related to civic participation (*b* = .322, *SE* = .033, *p* < .001). The total effects could be parsed into two parts: direct and indirect effects. The indirect effect via consumer complaints was positive and significant (*b* = .078, *SE* = .017, *p* < .001). Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was supported. However, it is important to note that consumer complaints only partially mediated the relationship and the size of the direct effect (*b* = .244, *SE* = .034, *p* < .001) was larger than the size of indirect effect.

Hypothesis 6 explored the roles of online shopping and consumer complaints in mediating the relationship between Internet use and civic participation. According to Table 3, a complex pattern of inconsistent mediation emerged. Inconsistent mediation happens when at least one mediated effect has a different sign than other mediated or direct effects (MacKinnon, Krull, & Lockwood, 2000). In our case, we found that the direct effect between Internet use and civic participation was negatively signed (*b* = −.065, *SE* = .024, *p* < .001), whereas the indirect mediating effect was positive and significant (*b* = .118, *SE* = .018, *p* < .001). The indirect effect can be further broken down into two different parts: the part mediated by online shopping and the part mediated by online shopping and then consumer complaints. Both routes showed statistically significant effects; therefore, Hypothesis 6 was supported by our data.

Discussion and Conclusions

There are several key conclusions from this research. First, the current study investigated the relationship between Internet use and civic engagement through the lens of consumer behavior, and we found evidence supporting our hypotheses. In broad terms, we found that Internet use is positively related to civic engagement. This positive relationship can be accounted for by online shopping and consumer complaint behaviors. Previous studies have shown that socially conscious consumption or cause-related consumption fosters civic engagement (Cho & Keum, 2016; Keum et al., 2004). We extended this line of research and found that ordinary consumption is associated with civic engagement as well. This demonstrates the idea that

despite the fact that consumer behavior is usually considered a pursuit of personal interests through exercising private purchasing power (Garnham, 1990), individual economic behavior is inextricably intertwined with civic activities.

In the past, political communication effects research exploring the link between Internet use and civic participation has been primarily focused on new media exposure on political or civic intermediate outcomes, such as knowledge and duty awareness, but very few studies have ventured to examine consumer-related indicators and their theoretical roles. In this sense, our findings highlight an important avenue for future research, that is, to pay more attention to consumer behavior-related variables in political communication research.

The second conclusion to be drawn from our findings is that the effects of Internet use on civic participation are caused by a mixture of mechanisms. A noteworthy point to mention is that we found that, at the individual level, the overall correlation between Internet use and civic participation is weak. This correlation is due to the existence of inconsistent mediation. The overall weak positive relationship between Internet use and civic participation comprises a negative direct relationship and a positive indirect relationship mediated by online shopping and consumer complaints. Scholars often focus on the differential effects based on preferences for information versus entertainment when addressing the impact of Internet use on political participation in the West (Prior, 2005; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). It is possible that the direct effect of Internet use on civic participation exemplified in our study was caused by the entertainment use of the Internet (e.g., Putnam, 1995, 2000). A more plausible explanation lies in the context of our research. Existing meta-analyses on the effects of Internet use on civic participation have found that the effects are weaker in Asia compared with those in Europe and America (Chae, Lee, & Kim, 2019), and the positive influence of social media use on civic participation is weaker in authoritarian countries than in democracies among Asian countries (Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2016).

The third important conclusion to be drawn from our findings relates to the substantive meaning that can be derived from our study within the context of China. China has often been depicted as a fast-growing economy with slow political reforms (Perry, 2007; Zhu, 2011). But, does it necessarily mean that new technologies cannot foster a more vibrant civic society in an authoritarian regime? Our data and analysis results suggest otherwise. We found a positive association between Internet use and civic participation at the individual level, and found that consumer behavior plays a crucial role in this process: Internet use catalyzes online shopping, which leads to more consumer complaints, creating a spillover effect for civic engagement. Put simply, grumpy consumers empowered by information technologies could lead to good citizenship at the individual level and vibrant civic culture at the society level.

Admittedly, given the cross-sectional nature of our data, it would be reasonable to argue that the causal link among online shopping, consumer complaints, and civic engagement could be the other way around. We do not dismiss such a possibility, and very likely, the causal directions could be bidirectional. But in China, given the control of Internet for civic and political uses, it seems difficult to argue that the Internet empowers people's role of being a citizen first and then contributes to consumer rights consciousness with an increase in consumer complaints. Therefore, the causal direction between civic engagement and consumer behavior in China is more likely to be the following: The increasing consumer rights consciousness enabled by

the increase of Internet use contributes to a mindset of individual rights and leads to higher levels of civic engagement.

To what extent can the consumer empowerment model be applied to societies with different political and cultural settings? Admittedly, people do have different complaint behavioral patterns, which could be explained by differences in culture orientations, retail policies, and laws to protect consumer rights (Blodgett et al., 2018; R. R. Liu & McClure, 2001). But we do not believe the findings from this study are peculiar to China. The broad conclusion that ordinary consumer behavior is related to civic activities should be generalizable to other societies, but we do not expect that the identical patterns can be replicated elsewhere in the world. First, the relationship between Internet use and civic participation in a democracy could be stronger than what has been found in this study, as suggested by existing meta-analyses (Chae et al., 2019; Skoric et al., 2016). Second, in more developed economies, the correlation between online shopping and consumer complaints could be weaker than that in China because Chinese consumers face a serious problem of shoddy and fake products (Lockett, 2016). Third, the causal flow of the variables in the model could be different because of political system differences. In a liberal democracy, the use of the Internet can lead to higher levels of political knowledge, efficacy, and civic duty awareness, which are conducive to civic and political participation. And, in turn, the skills and efficacy that people acquire from civic and political engagement can be transferred to the consumer realm, with a higher frequency of consumer complaints for consumer rights protection.

Like other empirical studies, our findings should be interpreted within the contexts of the limitations of our study. First, as mentioned earlier, the data came from a cross-sectional survey and, therefore, reverse causality cannot be completely ruled out despite our theoretical argument. Second, when measuring consumer postpurchase reactions, we included only consumer complaints, but not positive reactions in the model, because we consider that negative consumer response plays a more significant role in facilitating civic and political engagement. Botero, Ponce, and Shleifer (2013) identify citizen complaints as a crucial operative mechanism in explaining the association between education and quality of government. However, it is possible that positive consumer reactions can provide communication competence and civic skills to catalyze civic engagement as well. Future studies can explore the functions of consumer compliments and positive recommendations. Third, this study focused on how consumer behavior variables mediate the connection between Internet use and civic participation, and therefore did not include other forms of mediators such as efficacy, rights consciousness, or knowledge. That said, we really cannot pin down the mechanisms explaining the negative direct effect between Internet use and civic participation. Last but not least, the data were collected in China, a society with special political and cultural settings. As alluded to earlier, the theoretical framework does have the potential to be generalized to other parts of the world, but expecting the exact same patterns would not be realistic. Despite these limitations, the current study highlights a new direction for political communication research by bringing consumption into consideration, and provides a new perspective for understanding the influences of Internet use in China.

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