

Exploring the Cross-Cultural Online Shopping Experience: A Study of Foreign Residents in China

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Abstract

This study explores the online shopping experience of foreign residents in China, focusing on their advantages, challenges, factors influencing their decision-making, and potential improvements to enhance their e-commerce experience. The sample consists of 58 foreigners living in China, and data were collected through an online self-administered questionnaire. Data were analyzed through descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The findings reveal that foreign residents in China benefit from broader product variety, competitive pricing, convenience, and accessibility when shopping online. However, they also need help finding reliable products, have concerns about product quality and authenticity, and require a Chinese national identity card for certain purchases. Factors influencing their decision to use e-commerce platforms include convenience, last-mile delivery, accessibility, affordability, and refund policy. The study recommends introducing language options, international payment options, quality control measures, and removing the Chinese national identity card requirement. The insights gained from this study can inform strategies and offerings tailored to meet the unique needs of this consumer segment.



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1. Introduction

China's e-commerce sector is seeing tremendous growth and expansion, especially in the tourist and service industries (Liu et al., 2018; Jingqiao, 2017). Nevertheless, this expansion has given rise to numerous difficulties, such as inadequate security measures and a need for more customized services (Liu et al., 2018; Jingqiao, 2017; Hou, 2014). Notwithstanding these obstacles, the prospects for China's e-commerce sector are encouraging, emphasizing fostering the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises and enhancing logistical operations (Liu et al., 2018; Jingqiao, 2017; Hou, 2014). E-commerce has experienced significant growth in recent years, becoming a dominant global platform for exchanging products and services. Thanks to its large market and advanced technology, China has become a dominant force in the global e-commerce industry, which has attracted shoppers from both within and abroad. According to Dabrynin and Zhang (2019), China's e-commerce sector has experienced significant growth in the last five years and has substantial potential for further expansion. According to the authors, China's e-commerce is experiencing more rapid growth than other nations, especially in the food retailing industry (Zhu et al., 2014). Song (2022) identifies urbanization rate, local delivery systems, and internet connectivity as the primary factors influencing the adoption of e-shopping in China. China, the largest global consumer market, has substantial prospects for e-commerce platforms to serve both Chinese and international consumers.

China's economy has undergone significant expansion and integration into the global market in recent decades, resulting in the influx of many expatriates. Although e-commerce platforms in China are becoming increasingly popular, more study needs to examine foreign residents' experiences. Prior research predominantly focuses on the viewpoints of Chinese consumers, potentially neglecting the distinct requirements and obstacles encountered by foreign residents. Therefore, the study gap exists due to a limited comprehension of foreign residents' advantages and challenges when using e-commerce platforms in China.

There are differences in Internet purchasing behavior between foreign residents and native inhabitants. According to Jeon and Wang (2017), local consumers have a higher preference for discounts, whereas visitors place greater emphasis on product categories. Bajpai and Lee (2014) ascertain that time-saving and promotional offers are crucial determinants for Indian consumers, while trust and shopping convenience hold significant importance for Taiwanese consumers. Pratesi et al. (2021) and Smith et al. (2013) emphasize the substantial impact of cultural factors on online purchasing behavior. Pratesi et al. explicitly mention the effects on website usability, trust, and perceived risk. Ameen et al. (2021) discovered that male and female shoppers in the UK and UAE have distinct preferences regarding the omnichannel experience. Specifically, males tend to emphasize social connection and convenience. Mortimer et al. (2022) expand upon this research by examining "off-price" fashion buying and uncovering the favorable influence of consumer engagement on the shopping experience while noting certain cultural discrepancies.

As foreign residents settle in China, their purchasing behavior and preferences differ from those of the local population. Therefore, it is essential to examine the use of e-commerce platforms, specifically from the perspective of foreigners residing in China, to uncover their

unique challenges and experiences. The research question of this work is formulated as follows: What is the online shopping experience of foreign residents in China, and what factors stimulate their purchase behavior? Therefore, three main objectives are guiding this study. The first is to examine the advantages and challenges foreign residents in China experience when utilizing e-commerce platforms for purchasing products. The following objective is to understand the factors influencing their decision to use e-commerce platforms. The last objective is to explore potential improvements that could enhance the e-commerce experience for foreign buyers in China.

This study's findings will contribute to the existing literature by shedding light on the advantages and disadvantages foreign buyers face in China's e-commerce landscape. Understanding these factors is crucial for e-commerce platforms, policymakers, and businesses operating in China to tailor their strategies and offerings to meet the unique needs of this consumer segment. Additionally, it will provide insights into potential improvements that could enhance the e-commerce experience for foreign buyers, thereby promoting cross-border trade and economic growth.

The paper is structured as follows: The following section provides an overview of the relevant literature on e-commerce buyers' purchase behavior and shopping experience, emphasizing the gaps in existing research. The third section presents the research methodology employed to gather primary data from foreign buyers in China and displays the data. The fourth section discusses foreign buyers' experience when using e-commerce platforms and the factors influencing their decision-making process. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations for potential improvements that can enhance the e-commerce experience for foreign buyers in China.

2. Literature Search

2.1. E-commerce consumers' purchase behavior

E-commerce consumers' purchase behavior is influenced by various aspects such as education, age, income, economic conditions, media, and technology (Burman & Aggrawal, 2015). According to Saleh et al. (2023), consumer purchasing behavior is closely linked to pricing, customer happiness with the buying process, and the quality of information. Furthermore, Azizah et al. (2022) contend that a convenient user experience significantly influences the purchasing behavior of e-commerce consumers. Furthermore, according to Wohllebe (2022), the merchant's ratings and delivery time are crucial elements that significantly impact the purchase choice. Additionally, consumers are motivated to purchase Muslim fashion products in e-commerce due to the superior quality of the products and the influence of brand ambassadors (Juju et al., 2023). According to Mazurova (2017), the brand, color, and product location on the screen are essential elements, with the brand having the most impact. Consumer behavior is influenced by cultural characteristics, language, trust, and social impact (Zimu, 2023). Angelina et al. (2022) found that factors such as performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and behavioral intention to purchase online all had a favorable and substantial impact on the intention to make online purchases.

Furthermore, the engagement of consumers in e-commerce necessitates a sense of trust and assurance in online retailers (Banay et al., 2021). Kocot and Kwasek (2022) ascertain that the key factors influencing consumer purchasing decisions in the online realm are product/service quality, price, and access to product information. Ronaldo et al. (2022) found that e-commerce browsing and the big five personality traits influence the desire to make purchases and engage in impulsive buying. Furthermore, the purchase intention of e-commerce consumers is influenced by trust, perceived utility, and affect (Dachyar & Banjarnahor, 2017). DANG et al. (2023) propose that attitude, satisfaction, trust, and website design quality are the key characteristics that impact e-commerce consumers. In a similar vein, Sudirjo et al. (2023) discovered that the characteristics of a website and the enjoyment of shopping influence impulsive buying behavior in online settings. The authors assert that site characteristics, privacy security, and online buying services impact the shopping experience. Moreover, internet purchasing is influenced by product diversity, payment options, and psychological aspects. The source cited is Al Hamli and Sobaih, published in 2023. Moreover, website components such as context, content, community, connection, and commerce favorably impact consumer purchasing choices (Zhang & Tarndamrong, 2023). Nevertheless, specific experts argue that the user's experience does influence the consumer's perception of the particular e-commerce platform (Davidavičienė et al., 2020). Furthermore, Nisar and Prabhakar (2017) propose that customer satisfaction influences consumer expenditure in American-based e-commerce retailers.

2.2. Benefits and obstacles of e-commerce consumers

E-commerce platforms provide buyers with several benefits, such as convenience, time efficiency, and a broader selection of products (Mote & Choudhury, 2022). These platforms offer customized marketing and product suggestions based on customer preferences and purchase patterns (Wang, 2021). Trust, happiness, return policy, and after-sale support are other factors that impact consumers' purchasing decisions on these platforms (Kidane & Sharma, 2016). According to Sabou et al. (2017) and Taher (2021), e-commerce platforms provide clients with various benefits, including convenience, time efficiency, price comparison, accessibility, and a wide range of products. Consumers who utilize Chinese e-commerce platforms like Taobao see advantages in terms of improved trust and communication with vendors (Ou & Davison, 2009). Amidst the COVID-19 epidemic, it is especially vital to focus on tactics that can boost profitability, such as improving the relationship between sellers and buyers (JueJuan, 2020). Atoeva and Fuzaylova (2023) emphasize various benefits of e-commerce for consumers, including the ability to compare products and prices and the absence of geographical and temporal restrictions when placing an order.

Nevertheless, e-commerce purchasers encounter numerous impediments. The challenges associated with online shopping include the need for product testing before purchase, delays in delivery, instances of damaged goods upon delivery, subpar customer service, security vulnerabilities, and the requirement for internet access (Taher, 2021). Additional challenges encountered by e-commerce purchasers include receiving products that are either damaged or do not meet regulatory standards, encountering fraudulent activities, experiencing technical glitches, and encountering difficulties obtaining information on warranties (Sabou et al., 2017).

Furthermore, e-commerce buyers encounter drawbacks such as the absence of personal interaction, physical interaction with the goods, and the risk of credit card fraud (Atoeva & Fuzaylova, 2023). To summarize, the literature study emphasizes several advantages and challenges that e-commerce purchasers face, both in general and particularly in the Chinese context. The primary advantages of utilizing e-commerce platforms encompass ease of use, time efficiency, a broader assortment of products, personalized suggestions, improved trust and connection with vendors, and the capability to compare pricing. However, customers also need help with impediments such as the inability to do product testing before purchase, delays and damages in delivery, subpar customer service, security concerns, and dependence on internet connectivity. Nevertheless, the literature analysis has certain constraints, mainly the predominant focus on generic e-commerce platforms, with a need for a more detailed examination of the experiences encountered by foreign residents in China. Hence, it is imperative to carry out the proposed study to address these deficiencies in the existing body of knowledge by concentrating on foreign residents' encounters in China. This study offers significant insights into individuals' advantages and challenges when utilizing e-commerce platforms.

2.3. Online shopping experience of foreign residents: The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), developed by Davis in 1986, focuses on users' acceptance and adoption of technology. It identifies two key factors influencing user behavior toward technology: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Davis, 1989). The Technology Acceptance Model is highly relevant for this study as it provides a theoretical framework to understand the factors influencing individuals' acceptance and use of technology, such as e-commerce platforms. TAM posits that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are two critical determinants of users' intention to use technology. Various similar studies relied on the TAM as a theoretical framework. Mastana (2023) relied on the TAM to explore the factors influencing consumer intentions to purchase online groceries. Ofori and Appiah-Nimo (2019) used the same model to assess online shopping determinants among Ghana's tertiary students. In addition, Oyman et al. (2022) explain how perceived augmented reality affects consumers' perceptions using the TAM.

In the context of this study, TAM helps understand the factors influencing foreign buyers' decision to use e-commerce platforms in China. Perceived usefulness refers to how individuals believe using e-commerce platforms will enhance their purchasing experience and meet their needs. Foreign buyers may perceive e-commerce platforms as valuable because of the convenience, wider variety of products, tailored recommendations, and enhanced trust and communication with sellers that these platforms offer, as identified in the literature review. Investigating the perceived usefulness of e-commerce platforms for foreign buyers can provide insights into the advantages they experience. Perceived ease of use refers to the individuals' perception of how easy it is to use a particular technology. This aspect is relevant for this study as foreign buyers may encounter obstacles to using e-commerce platforms in China, such as delivery delays, low customer service, and security issues. Understanding the perceived ease of use and the challenges encountered by foreign buyers in utilizing e-commerce platforms can help identify areas for improvement in terms of user experience and interface design.

It will provide a deeper understanding of the factors driving foreign buyers' adoption and usage of e-commerce platforms. It can inform strategies to enhance the e-commerce experience for this specific user group.

3. Methodology and Data

The research philosophy of this study is interpretivism. Interpretivism emphasizes understanding subjective experiences, perspectives, and meanings assigned by individuals to their social reality. This study aims to explore the online shopping experience of foreign residents in China, including their advantages, disadvantages, factors influencing their decision-making, and challenges encountered. By adopting an interpretivism approach, the author focuses on understanding these individuals' unique perspectives and experiences within the cultural and social context of China. This paper uses the studies of Smith et al. (2013), Ameen et al. (2021), and Song (2022) as references for exploring the online shopping experience of foreign residents in China, as well as the factors stimulating their purchase behavior. The population is every foreigner living in China. The study used convenience sampling, targeting foreigners with experience with e-commerce platforms. The sample size is 58 foreigners, including 29 men and 29 women from various provinces in China. Data were gathered through an online self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire includes both closed-ended questions and open-ended questions. Descriptive statistics analyze the data from closed-ended questions, and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) is used for analyzing open-ended questions via the software NVivo14. Table 1 and Table 2 provide the descriptive statistics of the sample.

Table 1. Ethnicity of the participants

Ethnicity	Number of votes	Percentage
African	42	72.41%
European	6	10.34%
American	1	1.72%
Asian	7	12.07%
Other	2	3.45%
Total	58	100%

Table 2. Duration in China (years)

Duration	Number of votes	Percentage
Less than five years	31	53.45%
5-9 years	25	43.1%
10-14 years	1	1.72%
15-19 years	1	1.72%
20 years or above	0	0%
Total	58	100%

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Foreign residents' online shopping experience

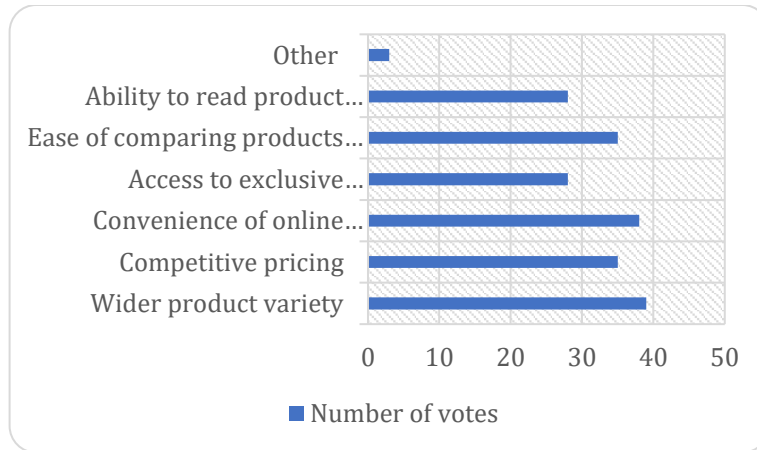


Figure 1. Foreign residents' advantages when shopping online

Findings show that foreign residents in China enjoy various advantages when shopping online. The main benefits are wider product variety, competitive pricing, convenience and accessibility, and the possibility to compare products and read product reviews. These results are consistent with previous research (Taher, 2021; Mote & Choudhury, 2022; Atoeva & Fuzaylova, 2023).

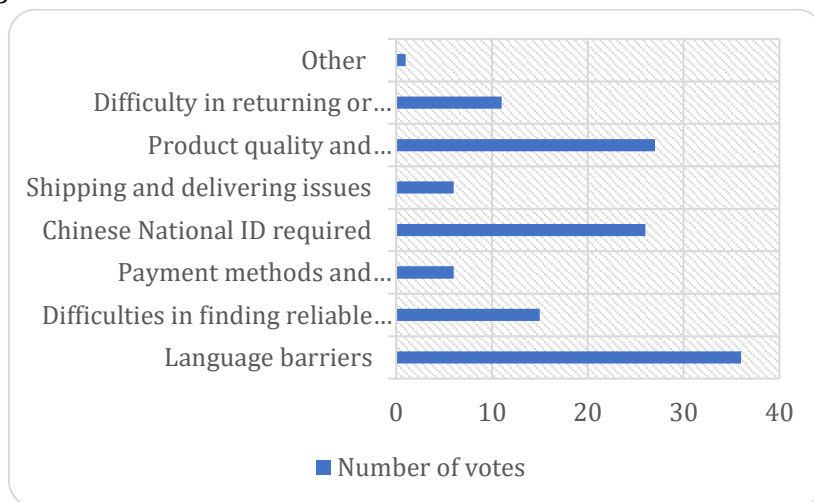


Figure 2: Challenges foreign residents encounter when shopping online

The results reveal that foreign residents encounter several challenges in their online shopping, notably language barriers. Almost all e-commerce platforms in China are in Chinese. Foreign residents who need help to read the language can only guess most information on the e-commerce platform. Therefore, it mitigates the convenience and satisfaction of using e-commerce platforms. Other challenges are product quality and authenticity concerns, difficulties finding reliable sellers or products, shipping and delivery issues, and difficulty returning or exchanging products. These are consistent with the findings of previous works (Sabou et al., 2017; Taher, 2021). Moreover, another crucial challenge foreign residents face in Chinese e-commerce shopping is the need for a Chinese national identity card to purchase some products, especially foreign brands. It is a massive obstacle, given that foreigners in China only have a passport.

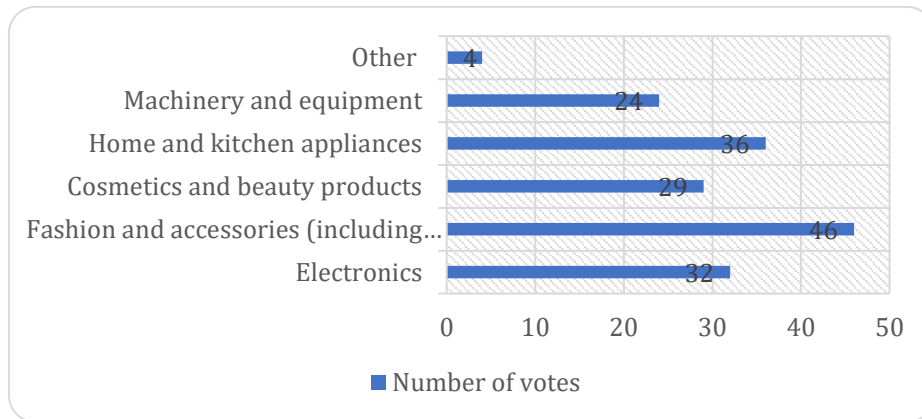


Figure 3. Types of products foreign residents buy online

According to the findings, foreign residents in China mostly buy fashion and accessories items. Their online shopping also includes home and kitchen appliances, cosmetics and beauty products, electronics, machinery, and equipment.

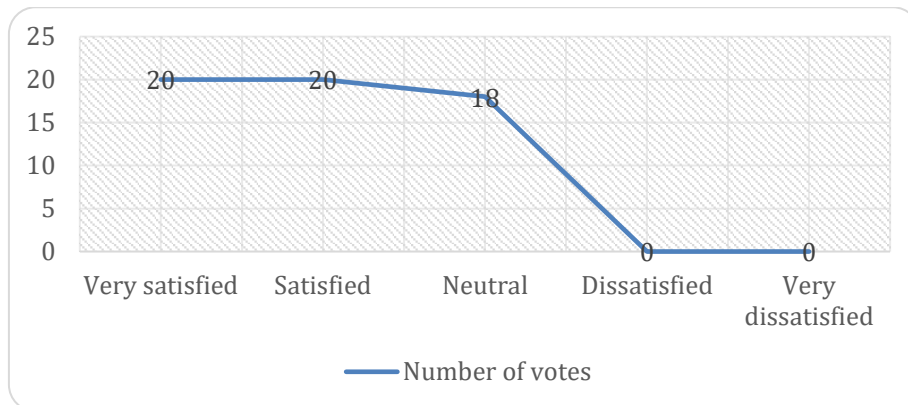


Figure 4. Satisfaction of foreign residents with the online pricing

The results reveal that foreign residents in China are primarily satisfied with their online pricing. Some respondents find online products cheap and good quality. Even though 31% of the respondents are neutral about the online pricing, 34% are delighted with the online pricing.

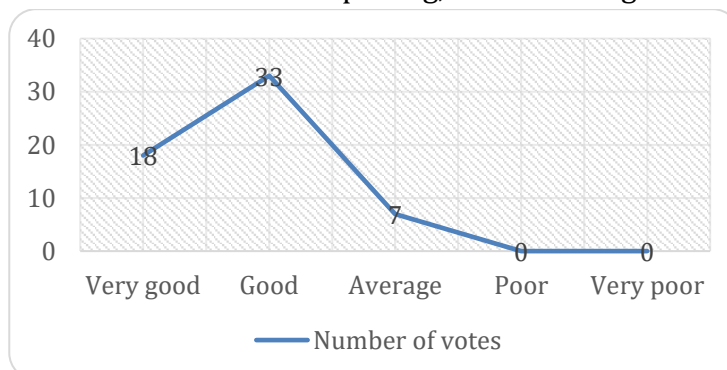


Figure 5: The overall shopping experience of foreign residents

The findings highlight that the overall experience of foreign residents in China is good. Although 12% of the respondents have an average overall shopping experience, 31% have an outstanding overall shopping experience.

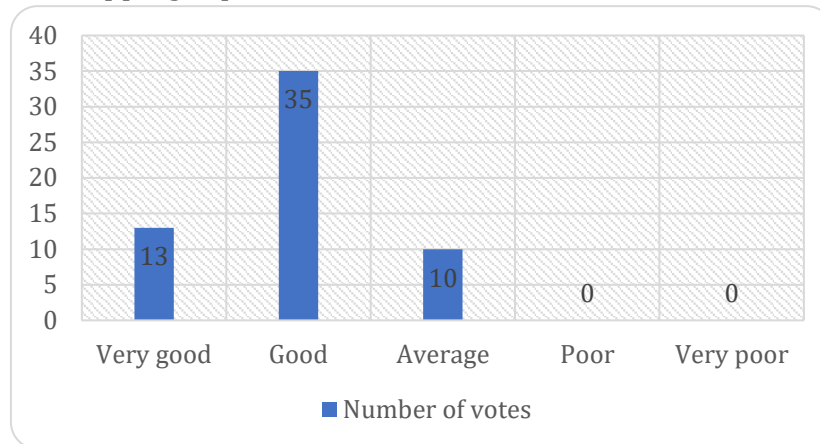


Figure 6: Foreign residents' rating of the customer service

The results reveal that most foreign residents in China experience good customer service. Even though 17% of the respondents find the customer service average outstanding, 22% find it very good.

4.2. Fraudulent activities foreign residents encounter when shopping online

Two main themes emerged from the thematic analysis: fake products and scam activities. Some respondents received fake products, consistent with the results of (Sabou et al., 2017), or completely different products from their online purchases. As some respondents stated:

"It was not a scam, but they sent me a very low-quality product at the given price."

"I bought three products, and they sent just one and refused to return the money."

"We bought a rice cooker but got just a spoon, and also, we bought a set of cups but got one spoon."

"My supposed wedding dress was entirely different from what I ordered online, and the seller refused to refund it."

"I have been fooled by 代购 (dàigòu in Chinese; in English: act as a purchasing agent) products that never arrived. However, I think the language barrier caused this problem."

The respondents also highlighted being victims of scam activities. As a respondent said:

"A store on Taobao scammed me when I tried purchasing male wear."

4.3. Factors influencing foreign residents' decision to use e-commerce platforms

Five main themes have emerged from the thematic analysis: Convenience, which matches the findings of Azizah et al. (2022), last-mile delivery, accessibility, affordability, and refund policy. Some respondents stated that:

"The best thing is receiving your product at the door."

"From our room, we can buy everything."

"The delivery system is the best!"

"Accessibility at any time and any place"

"Cheap and good products"

"It is convenient to shop online."

"I like to shop online because of the refund policy."

4.4. Foreign residents' suggestions to improve their online shopping experience

From the thematic analysis, five main themes have emerged: language options, integrated translators, quality control, removal of the Chinese identity card barrier, and the integration of international payment options. Foreign residents in China believe that the above improvements should be considered to ameliorate their online shopping experience. As some respondents highlighted:

"It would be better to have an English translation in e-commerce platforms."

"Provide a translation service for messages as done on WeChat."

"There must be more language options."

"Improve the quality control of items sold online."

"Offer customer service in English."

"Add some international payment options."

"Ability of foreigners to buy imported products without needing Chinese ID"

"Access to items irrespective of not having a Chinese ID"

"Provide an English service, offer language options, allow foreigners to buy foreign products using their passport info."

5. Recommendations and Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aimed to explore the online shopping experience of foreign residents in China, including their advantages, disadvantages, factors influencing their decision-making, and challenges encountered. The findings revealed that foreign residents in China experience various benefits when shopping online, such as broader product variety, competitive pricing, convenience, and accessibility. However, they also need help finding reliable sellers or products, product quality and authenticity concerns, shipping and delivery issues, and the need for a Chinese national identity card to purchase some products. The study also identified five factors influencing foreign residents' decision to use e-commerce platforms: convenience, last-mile delivery, accessibility, affordability, and refund policy. The respondents suggested several improvements to ameliorate their online shopping experience, such as adding language and international payment options, improving quality control, and removing the Chinese identity card barrier.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions to the existing literature on consumer behavior and its purchase behavior in the context of online shopping. Firstly, it extends the Technology Acceptance Model by applying it to the specific context of foreign residents in China. The study reveals that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are essential factors influencing foreign residents' decision-making when using e-commerce platforms in China. Secondly, the study identifies the challenges and advantages foreign residents encounter when shopping online, contributing to a better understanding of this unique consumer group's experience. Thirdly, the study provides insights into the factors influencing foreign residents' adoption and use of e-commerce platforms, contributing to a deeper understanding of the factors driving this consumer group's acceptance and usage of e-commerce platforms. Fourthly, the study contributes to the literature on cross-cultural marketing by highlighting the importance of cultural differences in online shopping behavior. The study shows that foreign

residents in China have different needs and preferences compared to residents, and their online shopping behavior is influenced by cultural dimensions such as language.

5.2. Managerial implications

The managerial implications emerging from this research are listed as follows:

Firstly, e-commerce platforms should recognize the importance of addressing the language barrier for foreign residents. Providing translated options or language assistance can enhance the user experience and make the platform more accessible to non-Chinese speakers. Secondly, improving the quality control of products is crucial. Foreign residents may have higher expectations regarding product quality. Maintaining product quality can help build trust and satisfaction among foreign buyers. Thirdly, e-commerce platforms should consider implementing international payment options. Offering alternative payment methods can attract foreign residents and expand the target market. Fourthly, building personalized customer service that caters to the needs of foreign residents can make a significant difference. Providing multilingual customer support, responding promptly to queries, and offering personalized recommendations based on individual preferences can enhance the overall shopping experience and increase customer satisfaction.

5.3. Limitations of the studies and further research dimensions

While the study provides valuable insights into the online shopping experiences of foreign residents in China, some limitations should be considered. First, the study's sample size is relatively small, consisting of 58 foreign residents. This limited sample size may restrict the statistical power and generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the study does not investigate the impact of cultural, socioeconomic, or demographic factors on foreign residents' online shopping experiences. Considering these variables could provide a more nuanced understanding of the differences and similarities among foreign residents based on their backgrounds. Lastly, extended research can explore the repurchase intention of foreign residents based on their previous online shopping experience.

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