

MICROBLOGGERS' MOTIVATIONS TO SPREAD WORD-OF-MOUTH:
A GROUNDED THEORY OF CHINESE MICROBLOGGING SITES

By

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To my parents, Xitian Zhang and Mingcai Han, for their moral and financial support throughout these years

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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Microblogging is a new media format emerging in China. This study focuses on word-of-mouth, a form of user activity in microblogging sites from three perspectives: regular microblog usages, microbloggers' roles in the online community, microbloggers' motivations to spread word-of-mouth. A qualitative study was conducted to explore Chinese microbloggers' use on Sina Weibo, a well-known Chinese microblogging site with over 65 million users.

This study found the transmission of WOM on Sina Weibo is efficient because information sources on microblogging sites are under control of users. Their communication may also prove exceptionally valuable to marketers, since microbloggers showed characteristics of opinion leadership and market mavenism in the process of disseminating WOM.

This research uncovered eight motivations which led to participants' WOM dissemination on Sina Weibo: self-esteem, self-promotion, sense of participation, achievement, creation of knowledge, coordination, providing favors, and building social relationships, which could be described as self-interest and selflessness.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Word of mouth (WOM) has received extensive attention among academics and practitioners (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2004). It has been defined as face-to-face verbal communication between two or more consumers, none of whom represents a marketing source (Bone, 1995). It is widely accepted that WOM plays an important role in affecting consumers' attitudes and their buying behaviors (Brown & Reingen, 1987). It has also been proven that, in certain instances, WOM has a greater influence on consumer behavior than traditional advertising (Engel, Blackwell, & Kegerreis, 1969; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). WOM is one of the most effective tools used to influence consumers' preferences and choices because it is typically independent of marketers' intentions. The verbal exchange of positive and negative information about a company's products and services has an immense impact on its success. Consumers consider WOM a very reliable information source, and the messages conveyed are enduring and considered to be more trustworthy than traditional advertising. Before the proliferation of social media, the power of WOM was limited to people who knew one another within geographic and communication boundaries.

Compared to offline WOM, the scope of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is global, and its pace is rapid. Consumers are capable of generating and sharing product information and services on the Internet at any time without geographic limitations. Consumers' ability to gather information from other consumers who share similar buying interests is extended. It also provides a convenient forum for consumers to offer their own consumption-related advice.

For years, researchers have consistently demonstrated the significance of interpersonal communication, especially its influence on consumers' choices in the marketplace (Katona & Mueller, 1955; Kiel & Layton, 1981; Price & Feick, 1984; Udell, 1966) and in diffusing

information about new products (Artdt, 1967; Engel et al., 1969; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Sheth 1968, 1971). Traditional marketing approaches to interpersonal influence have focused on two overlapping concepts—market mavens and opinion leaders. Eager to collect information and willing to share it with others, these types of consumers have a disproportionate influence on general consumers via WOM (Williams & Slama, 1995). General consumers turn to them for discussions and requests for professional advice. Marketers also see the importance of these influential individuals and consider them important target audiences because of their influence on the buying decisions of a significant number of people who seek and receive their advice.

With the increasing popularity of new media, marketers attempt to track consumers' insights and feedback through user-generated websites. For example, on microblogging sites, users can share opinions, daily experiences, and interesting links. Correspondingly, companies can build goodwill, improve customer relationships, promote new products, weather a crisis, discover new business areas, and gain customer support (Andersson, Blomkvist, & Holmberg, 2007). Microblogging has well-established features, such as instant status updating and real-time information. Brevity is one of the most appealing characteristics of microblogging over traditional forms of social media. It allows users to share small amounts of information, usually less than 140 characters, which are received by users who follow them on microblogging sites. Mobile and web-based applications provide multiple platforms for users to participate in the community. Similar to text messages, users broadcast personal or professional updates on their pages either through mobiles or the Internet.

Influential microbloggers gradually can become marketplace opinion leaders, and marketers have noticed their importance to target groups. Opinion leaders are consumers who help others make their purchase decisions by providing product information and leadership

(Childers, 1986). Opinion leadership may be reflected by the number of followers and number of comments left on a microblogger's post, and each microblogger can have thousands of followers. Through the microblog platforms, eWOM can instantly be transmitted by powerful users. Even though microbloggers are important market communicators, there is limited research on them.

In 1987, Feick and Price introduced the concept of market mavens. They are individuals who have expert knowledge about many kinds of products and services, are current with the latest market news, and would like to respond to consumers' requests of market information. Microbloggers can have the same function as market mavens because both are enthusiastic about gathering consumer information and sharing it with a wider audience. However, unlike opinion leaders, market mavens' influence is not limited to product categories. Instead, they wield influence in the general marketplace through their specialized knowledge and expertise. Feick and Price described market mavens as having more knowledge about the market, greater interest in and enjoyment of shopping, and higher levels of marketplace awareness and information than other consumers.

Internet mavens are a virtual version of market mavens, their counterparts in the online world. Internet mavens have more expertise on general web marketplace information, are adept in information searches, and enjoy responding and providing information to others. Followers count on Internet mavens to provide useful product information due to their in-depth and advanced Internet skills (Belch, Krentler, & Willis-Flurry, 2005).

Microblogs allow users to share brand thoughts and marketplace information while driving, getting coffee, waiting in a line—almost anywhere—even in the middle of a purchase. So microbloggers also act as “purchase pals” in influencing consumers' consumption decisions at the point of purchase.

Purchase pals are individuals who accompany consumers on shopping trips and act as a source of information and/or social support (Kiecher & Hartman, 1993, 1994, 1995; Hartman & Kiecker, 1991, 1994). While purchase pals may also perform as market mavens and opinion leaders, their unique influence is relevant to the role they play in the purchase procedure. For example, purchase pals are often engaged in the actual product selection and negotiation of final purchase prices (Kiecker & Hartman, 1993, 1994).

Because the microblog is a newly established platform that increasingly generates eWOM, it would be difficult to employ marketing strategies without a better understanding of microbloggers' motives and characteristics. The purpose of this study is to explore the motivations of Chinese microbloggers who play the role of market mavens, opinion leaders, and purchase pals in the virtual marketplace. The Chinese microblogging site, Sina Weibo, will be examined because it is the most powerful microblogging site in China and has the largest number of users in the world.

Sina.com, the largest Chinese-language infotainment web portal, is run by the SINA Corporation, which was founded in 1999 and is headquartered in Shanghai. SINA launched its Chinese-language microblogging service, Sina Weibo, on August 28, 2009. The word "weibo" means microblog in Chinese. By April 2009, Sina Weibo already had more than 10 million users (Yang, 2010). According to the China News Service, China has the world's largest population of Internet users, at about 400 million. At the same time, the number of microblog users was expected to reach 65 million by the end of 2010 (Liang, 2010). China Youth News reported in August 2010 that more than 45% of people under 40 claimed they were frequent users of microblog sites and more than 94% of them said that microblogs changed their lives (T2010). In addition, the mobile application of microblogs provides users with the ability to publish their

posts from anywhere in the world as long as they have a mobile cell connected to the Internet. China has 277 million mobile web surfers, which accounts for 33% of the total mobile phone users (Liang, 2010). This number represents a large pool of potential microblog users.

Allowing users to share comments, pictures, and videos within 140 Chinese characters, Sina Weibo is becoming an important instant news center for its users (Yang, 2010). Chinese microblogs started out as imitations of Twitter, the first American microblogging site, but Sina Weibo offers more functions, such as embedded pictures and videos. In China, microblogs are a relatively new form of blogging, but they have become very popular in just one year. The potential microbloggers among 400 million Chinese Internet users may have yet to decide which microblog service to use. Just 14 months after its beta launch Sina Weibo had registered 50 million users, with more than 25 million updates (similar to Tweets) published every day. Currently, there are 785 updates on Sina Weibo every second, with about 38% originating from mobile devices (Liang, 2010). The popularity of Sina Weibo attracts many celebrities, companies, and marketers to online networking. It is a promising platform for self-promotion and branding. For example, Adidas developed a simple engagement campaign on Sina Weibo in June 2010. It encouraged users to follow Adidas as a friend and then repost pieces published on the Adidas Sina Weibo account, disclosing the color of Adidas shoes the user was wearing that day. The reward was an Adidas bag. Within a few months, the Adidas official account gained more than 7,000 followers, and the event appeared on the front page of Sina Weibo as popular trend.

In this paper, efforts will be taken to explore microbloggers' motivations to spread product and service information on Sina Weibo to further understand the potential of WOM as a marketing tool. This study will enrich the existing literature and give marketers a better understanding of branding their products through WOM on microblogs. Findings will provide

suggestions on how to expand our current models of WOM to reflect the opportunities and challenges presented in the online environment.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Microblogs

The term “microblogging” emerged in approximately 2006 and describes the form of blogging that enables brief blog-like postings from mobile terminals and PCs to the Internet (Qulasvirta, Lehtonen, Kurvinen, & Raento, 2010). Microblogging is a means of broadcasting short (usually within 140 characters), real-time information about one’s daily activities, opinions, and latest status. It is a relatively new form of communication, which allows users to share information and express feelings they are less likely to show in everyday life or other media forms (Zhao & Rosson, 2009). On microblogging sites, the person who creates the messages is called the “author.” People who receive messages are referred to “followers” or “subscribers.” The posts are called “micro-posts,” while the act of using this service to update accounts is called “microblogging” (Case & King, 2010). When a user has hundreds of followers but only needs to attract the attention of a particular one, he or she can use the “@” sign, followed by the specific follower’s name to address the message to the right person. Twitter was established in 2006 and has been recognized as one of the top 20 technologies that changed the decade (Case & King, 2010). It is currently the dominant microblogging service in the United States. On Twitter, people share their daily life activities with friends, families, and coworkers through their posts; they share news, information, and opinions and seek others’ knowledge and expertise in public tweets (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007; McFedries, 2007). According to McFedries (2007), people who establish a “cyberspace presence” can experience an elevated feeling of connection with friends and the world.

Since microblogging has received growing popularity as a communication format, many organizations have noticed its marketing value. In 2010, Case and King examined web pages of

the Fortune 200 firms, as listed on the CNN Money website. The results reveal that up to 64.5% of the companies used Twitter. Through observations of microblogging phenomena, Java et al. (2007) found that “microblogging has a high degree of correlation and reciprocity, indicating close mutual acquaintances among users as a community.” Heil and Piskorski (2009) claimed that the top 10% of prolific Twitter users account for over 90% of tweets. This study indicates the high degree of centrality of microblog users’ activities and influence (Wang & Jin, 2010). Wang (2009) pointed out that the influence of a microblog user is correlated with the number of multilevel followers and hot topics, and how the microblog account interacts with enterprises’ messages and other factors. The current marketing pattern on Sina Weibo is based on the existing brand influence. Enterprises publish tweets containing promotion or discount messages to attract microbloggers’ attention. Whoever is interested in the promotion information can stay up-to-date on the preferred enterprise’s microblog account as a follower (Wang & Jin, 2010). The main reason microblogs are a great place to spread marketing messages is that when a person retweets a message received from people a microblogger follows, the message is automatically broadcasted to his or her followers. When a piece of information is transmitted from one user to the followers, words are spread out among the microblogging community. It is quite likely that users disseminate posts containing brand or product information. Therefore, it is very meaningful to understand the factors involved in users’ behaviors to spread word of mouth in microblogs.

Word-of-mouth (WOM)

In this paper, word of mouth refers to the verbal exchange of both positive and negative information about a company’s product and service between private parties, including comments, thoughts, and ideas (Haywood, 1989). Although traditional marketing tools have their own way to generate public awareness, it is not as effective as it was years ago, especially in this new media-dominated age. As an effective marketing tool, WOM is used in the initial stage of

generating information to convey brand messages to potential customers, as well as in the postconsumption stage to generate a good reputation (Murray, 1991; Gilly, Graham, Wolfinbarger, & Yale, 1998).

Early in 1955, Katz and Lazarsfeld argued that WOM played an important role in the purchase of household and food products. Their research found that WOM communication was seven times as effective as newspapers and magazines, four times as effective as personal selling, and twice as effective as radio advertising. Mass media can overwhelm consumers with information about products and services. With the abundance of information available, consumers have a hard time evaluating the quality of products before making a decision. When consumers have no prior experience with a service, it is not surprising that they turn to people who have had experience for insight (Zeithaml, 1981).

Previous research has indicated that people who interact with a prior customer of a product or service are three to five times more likely to become a customer of the same product or service than people who do not know prior customers (Hill, Provost, & Volinsky, 2006). WOM is both a driver and an outcome of a product or service trial. Because people are more likely to trust those connected with them, WOM usually spreads quickly in the same communities and gradually across different ones (Putsis, Balasubramanian, & Kaplan, 1997; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Zhu & Chau, 2010). In the same community, people are more likely to have strong ties, which refer to intimate relationships like family and friends. Across communities, people are more likely to have weak ties, which means their relationships have fewer interactions and less intimacy. However, information that spreads across weak ties has the potential to reach more people than that spread among only strong ties (Zhu & Chau, 2010).

Therefore, the dispersion of WOM in different communities has a significant impact on product selection (Godes & Mayzline, 2004). What are the factors and motivations related to the dispersion of WOM in online communities? What are the attributions of the influential group that may contribute to the information flow?

Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)

The literature has indicated that electronic word of mouth (eWOM) can be more powerful than traditional WOM because it is less personal, instantly updated, and has incredible reach. At almost any time, an Internet user is capable of reaching one to an unlimited amount of other Internet users in a way that could be perceived as personal.

The role of eWOM differs from that of traditional WOM in several ways. First, eWOM reaches a considerable number of people, and it is not necessarily limited to those who know each other. Unlike one-to-one communication, eWOM in an online community works in a one-to-many format, just like mass media, but in a personalized way (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). Second, eWOM allows consumers to keep their identities anonymous when sharing information. This characteristic of eWOM gives consumers more room to share opinions without the concern of revealing real identities, so the volume of eWOM is relatively high (Chatterjee, 2001). So it is more likely that consumers can find someone with product expertise in an online community. Third, the Internet makes eWOM communication measurable. Surveys are the most common method used to measure traditional WOM. Due to the bias inherent in self-reporting, it is hard to be sure about the effectiveness of traditional WOM. But in the online environment, eWOM can be traced in many publicly available Internet forums, such as online product reviews, discussion boards, chat room posting, and web blogs (Dellarocas & Narayan, 2006). Prior research focused on the measurability of eWOM in three main areas: volume, valence, and dispersion ability. Volume refers to the number of online messages posted

about a specific brand, product, service, or topic. The larger the amount of related sources online, the more customers are going to be aware of it. Valence is the ratio of positive and negative messages about a product or service in the communication process. Research shows that a movie's whole revenue trend can be predicted through the valence of ratings in the opening weekend (Dellarocas, Zhang, & Awad, 2007). Dispersion means the range of community eWOM can reach. According to Granovetter (1973), WOM spreads quickly within communities, but slowly across them. Simple counts are not enough. Valuable information matters in the extent to which it happens across heterogeneous communities.

Impact of eWOM

The impact of eWOM has a potential impact on e-commerce sales. Using real-world data from a multiproduct retail firm, Davis and Khazanchi (2008) proposed a conceptual model of online WOM to show that the interaction among product category, volume of product postings, and eWOM postings was statistically significant in explaining changes in product sales. Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) analyzed online reviewing practices at Amazon and BN.com and concluded that eWOM on both websites had a causal impact on consumer-purchasing behavior. But consumers pay more attention to the content of other users' postings rather than rating points. They are not easily manipulated by extreme eWOM, such as strong recommendations and harsh criticism about a product or service, which may lead to the reduced valence of WOM (Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008). Cheung, Lee, and Rabjohn (2008) examined the extent to which consumers were likely to accept and adopt information within communities. Their research reported that comprehensiveness and relevance were the most important factors to influence usefulness.

Although related to prior research, there has been limited published work in the area of how microblogging sites are used as an eWOM communication medium. As shown in the literature, eWOM is indispensable to a company's communication strategy and an integral trend

in future communication strategies in the Web 2.0 era. Existing research focuses on the evaluations of blogs, customer view sites, and official websites, and little work had been done on social networking sites such as microblogs.

Interpersonal Communication and Personal Influence

Decades of research on traditional shopping and purchase behavior have indicated that consumers are influenced by the sources they interact with before and during purchase. Findings have consistently shown that personal sources have a strong impact on consumers' preferences and choices (Arndt, 1967; King & Summers, 1970; Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991). Price and Feick's (1984) study demonstrated a high probability that consumers would rely on personal sources of information when they make purchase decisions of both durable and nondurable products; up to 90% of respondents in the study said so. Consumers turn to personal sources for information in order to lower the social and financial risks involved in the purchases or services (Beatty & Smith, 1987; Formisano, Olashavsky, & Tapp, 1982; Murray, 1991). According to Hanna and Wozniak (2001), this phenomenon could be defined as personal influence, which refers to the changes in an individual's attitudes and/or behaviors that occur as a result of interpersonal communications.

WOM communication is one of the most influential personal sources in the marketplace. Information flows through person-to-person communication between a receiver and a source, and the information transmitted is not perceived as having a commercial purpose (Day, 1971). The impact of WOM in changing consumers' attitudes and behaviors is widely accepted in both academic and practitioner fields. In 1983 Richins's study revealed the power of negative WOM: about 60% of dissatisfied consumers would tell at least one friend or acquaintance about their negative experience. Researchers have found that WOM is a great channel for advice and information through daily conversations. In real life, WOM communication can be transmitted in

a variety of ways, such as in person, by phone, through mail, and more likely, via the Internet. The impact of WOM communication cannot be isolated from the communicator and the sources (Kiecker & Cowles, 2001). There is not much literature about different sources of personal influence through WOM communication. A comparatively large portion of influence is communication spread and received by “typical” individuals who often relay situational information. In this paper, the researcher will focus on three personal sources: opinion leaders, market mavens, and purchase pals.

Opinion Leaders

Rogers (2003) described opinion leadership as “the degree to which an individual is able to informally influence other individuals’ attitudes or overt behaviors in a desired way with relative frequency,” and opinion leaders are “individuals who lead in influencing other options” (p. 300). When opinion leadership is applied to cyberspace, it refers to the personal influence online, with its core connotation consistent with offline environment (Lyons & Henderson, 2005; Yu, 2008; Abby & Gao, 2008).

On one hand, computer-based communication in the microblogosphere provides people with a virtual space to practice opinion leadership. First, the microbloggers’ “ascribed” attributes and social status cannot be easily determined by other people, due to the absence of social cues (Sproll & Kiesler, 1986). Second, the anonymity in microblogs drives users to create alternative versions of one’s self (Baym, 2000). Third, users in microblogs have more control over their statements because writing gives them more time to think over and express their opinions in a more rational way (Abby & Gao, 2008).

On the other hand, online behaviors reflect people’s off-line experiences. Although prior studies have shown the discontinuity between individuals’ online and off-line experience, the dichotomy blurs as the Internet is increasingly integrated into one’s life. Existing literature has

found that online behavior patterns are related to demographic features (Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001; Katz & Rice, 2001), personalities (Joe, 1997), and socioeconomic status (Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001; Jung, Qiu, & Kim, 2001). So we have reason to believe that some preexisting factors influence online opinion leadership.

Traditional Opinion Leadership

The term “opinion leader” was first coined by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) in their study of the 1940 presidential election. They discovered that people’s voting decisions were greatly influenced by relatives, friends, and coworkers (Goldsmith & Desborde, 1991). Prior studies have shown that opinion leadership has “dual roots” (Roch, 2005): (a) the presence of certain personal attributes, and (b) the position that those individuals occupy in society. In the past 50 years, a large number of researchers isolated various traits of opinion leaders. Several factors, such as an individual’s involvement with a product, innovativeness, social activities, and media habits have been helpful in identifying opinion leaders.

Based on existing literature, Chan and Misra (1990) summarized the characteristics of opinion leaders in four major categories: product-related characteristics, demographics, media habits, and personality. Opinion leaders have been found to be more knowledgeable about, and enduringly involved with, relevant product information (Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988; Riecken & Yavas, 1986; Venkatraman, 1988). Individuals who are highly involved with a product or a brand are more likely to collect information about that product or specific brand. Enduring product involvement influences the amount of information that individuals collect from different sources. Moreover, this kind of high involvement in a product is relatively stable (Bloch & Richins, 1983) and could be helpful for leaders in imparting knowledge and opinions.

Previous findings have indicated that opinion leaders tend to be younger, better educated (Saunders, Davis, & Monsees, 1974), earn a higher income (Marshall & Gitosudarmo, 1995),

and show greater social mobility (Gatignon & Robertson, 1985; Midgley & Dowling, 1978; Robertson, Zielinski, & Ward, 1984). However, the relations elaborated in existing literature tend to be product specific. For example, in a study conducted in 1987, Goldsmith, Stith, and White pointed out that both black and white women were likely to become fashion opinion leaders. Robertson and Myers (1969) found that education was positively correlated with opinion leadership in politics and home entertainment choices, while negatively correlated with leadership in medical care. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) found that food shopping opinion leaders were more likely to be married, with large families, but individuals who have a high impact on movie choices tended to be young and single. These results show that opinion leaders do not form a demographic segment by themselves (Berkman & Gilson, 1986). Their influence is greatest when they are demographically similar to recipients (Riecken & Yavas, 1986).

Most prior findings tended to support the view that opinion leaders pay greater attention to media sources, such as newspapers and journals (Corey, 1971; Levy, 1978; Polegato & Wall, 1980), and less to radio and television. Evidence shows that opinion leaders also have a higher consumption of such print media as magazines (Baumgarten, 1975; Summer, 1970) and newspapers, which are more information-oriented. This view could also be explained by the fact that opinion leaders are better educated and focus on intellectual challenges, leaving little time for entertainment media (Danko & MacLachlan, 1983). In 1969 Robertson and Myers analyzed various personality traits of opinion leaders and found that “it is not that there are no relationships at all, but only that the relationships that have emerged have questionable statistical significance, much less major practical value” (p. 167). However, researchers did find opinion leaders shared some personality traits. Recognized opinion leaders are less dogmatic (Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 1980; Jacoby, 1971), more innovative (Myers & Robertson, 1972; Summers,

1970), more venturesome (Taylor, 1977), confident in descriptions of products, and more socially active (Summers, 1970).

The relation between opinion leadership and one's position in a social network was first proposed by Katz (1957). The study revealed the importance of "whom one knows" and found opinion leaders tend to have more contacts in a social context (Abby & Gao, 2008). Through analyzing social networks among people, researchers conclude that opinion leaders are individuals who are more centrally located in those networks than non-leaders (Katz, 1957; Rogers, 2003). Burt (1999) claims that opinion leaders are in a core position to bridge disconnected contacts and to transmit information.

The concept of opinion leadership has gotten researchers' attention in the communication field. In his two-step information flow hypothesis, Katz (1957) indicated that opinion leaders are more influential than the mass media because personal relationships have "certain psychological advantages" over mass media. Research studies have shown that opinion leaders have the ability to influence the attitude of non-leaders (Rogers, 2003) or to alter public opinion (Sigleman & Thomas, 1984). Many studies in political communication, health communication, and marketing emphasize the identification of opinion leaders in a community to achieve behavior change (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007). However, it should be noted that the concept of "opinion leader" does not deny the power of mass media. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) stated that personal influence served as a bridge over which mass media extend their influence, indicating that public is still under some sort of manipulation.

Opinion Leadership in the Online World

Opinion leadership is developed in social environments (Roch, 2005). Thus, when opinion leadership shifts from the physical world to the online world, researchers are interested in how opinion leadership changes in the new environment. Little empirical research has investigated

virtual community and virtual identity. By observing a fandom online group in USENET, Baym (2000) found that the number of posts is positively correlated with users' ability to influence. Those who publish the most posts may also play important roles in creating the group's social milieu. In addition, Reid (1999) claimed that the ability to use online sources is crucial to one's influence and control in the virtual world. A recent study by Lyons and Henderson (2005) also supported these findings. They found that Internet opinion leaders possess higher levels of computer skills and demonstrate greater involvement with the Internet than non-leaders. Their study also showed that Internet opinion leaders are more curious and, willing to explore their options, and they have more confidence in using the Internet than non-leaders. Gao, Zhang, Jiang, and Wang's (2005) study showed that participants establish their personal authority by use of their broad sources of information. Matsumoto and Ohsawa (2002) created the Influence Diffusion Model (IDM) to determine one's influence in threaded online discussions. In that model, influence is measured by repetition of the key words. Yu (2008) found some of the most influential people in the Qiangguo Forum in Mainland China not only have a lot of followers, but also many who disagree with them.

The online environment provides a convenient platform for information seeking and exchange. It also makes it possible for users to hide identities and alter their personality, age, and even gender. Therefore, when it comes to online opinion leadership, matters become rather complicated. For one thing, opinion leadership is a social attribute attached to virtual identity, which can be manipulated. In addition, opinion leadership is correlated with expertise, information sources, and self-perceived knowledge, which accumulate in the physical world.

The unique features of online computer-mediated communication (CMC) platforms, such as microblogs, empower marginalized groups, such as lesbians (Burke, 2000), HIV patients, and

hepatitis B carriers (Yang, 2009). Turkle claimed that many young people are more active in the online world because they feel they have no political voice in the real world. Yu (2008) found that most opinion leaders in the Qiangguo Forum have only low to moderate incomes, unlike opinion leaders in the real world, who usually have higher incomes.

Meanwhile, offline experience in the real world has shown to influence online personalities (Byam, 2000; Rheingold, 2000). Kalcik (1985) distinguished two strategies used by a virtual group: trying on an alternative personality or just being themselves. Byam (2000) found that, ultimately, “participants often reveal clues of real identities through their post and create congruence between online and offline identities” (p.152). Later, she proposed that participants’ communication styles might be directed by social practices, which are not easily changed by computer mediation. Lyons and Henderson (2005) pointed out that online opinion leadership is affected by a number of factors. Some of them arise from one’s intrinsic characteristics, such as innovativeness and willingness to explore. Others may be developed from virtual space, such as involvement with the Internet. Online opinion leader may have more expertise on online shopping and information searches.

Market Mavens

Feick and Price (1987) described market mavens as “individuals who have information about many kinds of products, places to shop, and other facets of markets, and initiate discussions with consumers and respond to requests from consumers for market information” (p. 85). Research on mavens has found them to be early adopters of new products and brands. They also have a higher tendency than non-mavens to become opinion leaders in some product categories (Feick & Price, 1987; Slama & Williams, 1991). Prior research has shown that consumers turn to market mavens for product information and that mavens like to provide market information across a range of topics (Feick & Price, 1987; Higie, Feick, & Price, 1987;

Slama & Williams, 1990). Market mavens are a group of consumers who enjoy sharing their knowledge about a variety of products and marketplace issues such as prices, sales, and new products (Slama & Williams, 1991).

An important characteristic of market mavens is their desire to provide assistance to other consumers in the marketplace (Christiansen & Snepenger, 2005). Numerous studies have demonstrated that market mavens are engaged in WOM activities that help other consumers by providing marketplace information (Abratt, Nel, & Nezer, 1995; Higie, Feick, & Price, 1987). Walsh, Gwinner, and Swanson (2004) found that individuals who were classified as market mavens were more likely to have a desire to help others, to have a sense of obligation to share information, and to receive pleasure from providing this information. Clark and Goldsmith's study in 2005 identified the tendency to conform, global self-esteem, consumer susceptibility to normative interpersonal influence, and the consumer need for uniqueness as antecedents to market mavenism. In a study conducted later, Goldsmith, Clark, and Goldsmith (2006) found that market mavens are innovative, status-driven and value individuality.

Researchers claimed that mavens may use marketplace information in social exchanges either for altruistic purposes or for some reciprocity, such as obtaining other information or favors (Feick & Price, 1987). The notion that market mavens are motivated by a desire for smart buys is consistent with prior findings that mavens tend to use shopping lists, plan grocery shopping with advertisements, budget for groceries, and use coupons (Price, Feick, & Guskey-Federouch, 1988).

Mavens seem to have a great influence in the retail market. Feick and Price (1987) found that 46% of their participants felt they knew someone who fit the description of a market maven, and among them, 57% rated the maven to be either "very important" or "extremely important" in

influencing their evaluations of a product or brand. Mavens are also valuable sources to retail institutions because the marketplace information they provide for other consumers contains general store information and such special events as promotions and sales. The fact that they collect retail stores' information makes them an attractive promotional target, especially because mavens read more direct mail advertisements and women's magazines than regular consumers (Higie, Feick, & Price, 1987). Research by Price, Feick, and Guskey (1995) found that consumer's mavenism is related to a range of market-helping behaviors. However, market mavens not only are providers of market information but also work as sources of discounts, even going out shopping with other consumers to help them with right product selections.

Purchase Pals

Purchase pals are defined as "individuals who accompany buyers on their shopping trips in order to assist them with their on-site purchase decisions" (Hartman & Kiecker, 1991, p. 12). Generally, the existing literature about purchase pals is exploratory or descriptive in nature, and the main focus is on identifying the characteristics and motivations of shoppers who use purchase pals as information sources when they buy. Research has shown that inexperienced consumers or those who lack confidence in their ability to evaluate products and brands are more likely to take a pal along during shopping (Bell, 1967; Furse, Punj, & Stewart, 1984; Midgley, 1983; Solomon, 1987). Findings indicate that shopping with a pal reduces the perceptions of risk and uncertainty that buyers associate in decision-making (Keicker & Hartman, 1993) and increases the buyer's confidence that he or she will make a wise purchase (Kiecker & Hartman, 1994). Research also has shown that buyers' selection of a purchase pal depends on the type of risk involved in the decision process (Kiecker & Hartman, 1993). These results are consistent with the research on information searches which has shown that information collection is an effective strategy to reduce perceived risk and uncertainty.

The research on buyers' motivation showed that purchase pals provide information that helps the buyer reduce risk and uncertainty and increases confidence in decisions (Mangleburg, Doney, & Bristol, 2004). Hartman and Kiecker (1991) identified two major categories of shoppers' motivations for purchase pals: social (e.g., for fun, enjoyment, or company) and assistance (e.g., to provide moral support for decisions and product expertise/information). In addition, Kiecker and Hartman (1993) found that more than 75% of consumers using purchase pals for assistance reported some type of risk (e.g., social/psychological, financial, functional, time, or physical) reduction as a reason for shopping along with a pal.

Purchase pals possess a greater knowledge of products, brands, stores, or other relevant marketing information, that helps s them to reduce risk and uncertainty in making purchase decisions. The social impact of a group of friends is likely to be even greater than that of the regular shopper-pal relationship examined in previous literature (Latan é & Nida, 1980). Kiecker and Hartman (1994) concluded that strong personal ties are more likely to be used when buyers are seeking moral support for their decisions, determining the appropriateness or suitability of the product for the buyer, and making the actual purchase. In contrast, weaker ties are more likely to be used by buyers requiring negotiation skills and information on product features, prices, and store locations since they are less personal connection to the source of information.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The uses and gratifications (U&G) theory was first developed in research on the effectiveness of radio in the 1940s. In general, it focuses on the explanations for audience members' psychological needs and associated behaviors that motivate the use of a particular medium to gratify those needs (Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005). Psychologist Herta Herzog (1944) coined the term "gratifications" to depict the specific dimensions of satisfaction among radio audiences. Since then, mass communication theorists applied the U&G perspective in the context

of various mass media, such as television. For example, Rubin (1994) identified some television programs that exhibited a connection with various human needs, including information acquisition, escape, emotional release, companionship, reality exploration, and value reinforcement. The U&G research has made advances in understanding consumers' motivations and concerns for using various media, such as radio, TV, and electronic bulletins (Eighmey & McCord, 1998). Studies in advertising and marketing later applied U&G to "novel media," such as cable television, video recording, and TV/VCR remote control devices; further, recent studies have explored U&G applications in nontraditional media such as e-mail (Dimmick, Kline, & Stafford, 2000). The U&G theory has been considered an axiomatic theory in that its principles are generally accepted and applicable to various situations concerning mediated communications (Lin, 1999a). Actually, whenever a new technology enters the stages of mass communication, audiences' motivations and decisions to use a certain type of mediated communication tool will be investigated with this theory (Elliott & Rosenberg, 1987).

The rapid growth of the Internet has increased the potency of the U&G theory because it requires a higher level of interactivity from users compared to traditional media (Ruggiero, 2000). Rayburn's (1996) study revealed that the Internet is "intentionally" used, which means users have to make purposeful decisions about which site to visit. For this reason, numerous researchers have examined the psychological and behavioral aspects of Internet users to identify the underlying dimensions for Internet use. (LaRose, Mastro, & Eastin, 2001; Lin, 1999b). Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) demonstrated five primary motivations for using the Internet: interpersonal interaction, passing the time, information seeking, convenience, and entertainment. However, Lin (2007) pointed out that surveillance is the most significant motivation for visiting information websites, and entertainment and surveillance are the most crucial types of

motivations for visiting shopping sites. Luo (2002) examined how informativeness and entertainment affect online consumer behaviors.

The basic assumption of this theory is that users are actively involved in various media use and interact extensively. Due to the interactive nature and user-directed feature of microblogging sites, U&G is particularly appropriate for investigating users' motivation to spread WOM on Sina Weibo.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

This study was aimed at examining users' motivations to expand WOM on the Internet, especially in the microblogging environment. A grounded theory research approach is appropriate for this study because it examines processes that have not been explained by existing theory (Creswell, 2007). Grounded theory is defined by its original proponents as both a product and a method of research. It refers to theories "grounded" directly by data from the field, especially in the actions, interactions, or processes of people (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, grounded theory provides for the generation of a theory based on data collected from individuals, such as the process under study here. Charmaz (2006) stated that grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories derived directly from the data themselves. The specific approach to grounded theory taken in this study follows the procedures of Strauss and Corbin (1990). Rather than beginning with developing a hypothesis, data collection is the first step. With the collected data, key points are marked with a series of codes, which are extracted from the original text. Categories are developed when codes fall into similar concepts which make the data more workable. The basis of the approach is to create a theory or reverse a presumed hypothesis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory also refers to the procedures that the investigator seeks to develop a theory to explain the process, action, or interaction of a topic. The researcher typically conducts 20 to 30 interviews in the research field to collect enough data to saturate all the categories.

Sina Weibo

In this study, research participants were Chinese microblog users recruited from Sina Weibo, the most influential microblogging site in China. Based on features Sina Weibo shares

with Twitter, users can post pictures, videos, audios, and webpage links on their Weibo, in addition to text. Each post has up to 140 characters, as with Twitter, but users can say far more in 140 Chinese characters than in 140 English alphabet letters. Embedded pictures, videos, emoticons, and song lyrics, either from Sina's own services or a third party, can easily be viewed by a simple click without leaving the page. The clear exhibition of microblog posts provides a convenient platform for online marketing, as brands can be associated with visual elements. Since all comments are listed under the original pieces, it is easy to follow and participate in conversations. Users can either create or join groups around their personal interests, which can be viewed by the public or private lists of users. Popular trends and hot topics across dozens of categories are displayed by hour, day, and week.

Based on these features, brand messages such as commercials and product or event pictures are published easily through a microblog. Followers of the brand have easy access to product information through a simple click. Readers can repost, collect, and leave comments on a Weibo post. Under each post, viewers can see the number of people who repost and leave comments. When people are looking for a review or comments relevant to a brand, they also see comments from other users who probably have similar concerns. Public discussions may be conducted under the original post.

Sample Selection---Post-80s Generation

Male and female microbloggers who were born between 1980 and 1989 (Post-80s generation) were selected as interviewees on Sina Weibo. The literature has shown that in today's market, youth have become one of the most lucrative segments to marketers. Wolburg and Pokrywczynski (2001) have said that marketers are most interested in this segment because: the sheer size of the youth market demands public attention; young people are most likely to chase trends and fashion; the pre-adulthood years are a crucial period for the young to establish

brand loyalty that may last an entire lifetime; the young are more open to new products and become early adopters; and today's youth have significant buying power. The Post-80s are a unique generation in Chinese society, with more than 200 million people. They are also called "China's Me Generation" and "China's Y Generation" (Elegant, 2007; Moore, 2005). The Post-80s generation grew up in a relatively stable and affluent society, characterized by economic prosperity and cultural diversity. This is a hybrid generation, mixing tradition and modernity, converging conventional Eastern thought and Western culture (Chen, 2008). Growing up in a comparatively rich and open world, Post-80s young people are well educated and open-minded. They like new technologies, follow the latest fashion trends, and spend a large amount of time on the Internet. Unlike their parents, the Post-80s generation considers shopping an important way to enjoy life (Moore, 2005). Their consumption decisions are easily influenced by others, especially opinion leaders in their group. Because they are such an attractive audience to marketers, discovering their motives to generate and spread WOM on microblogs is an important topic for scholarly exploration. There is no known existing research on this topic.

In this study, users whose Sina Weibo posts concerning specific brands are retweeted the most were identified as "opinion leaders" with higher influence than regular users. This is consistent with Yu's (2008) study, which found that opinion leaders in Bulletin Board Systems have more followers and their posts receive more attention and comments. Compared with market mavens and purchase pals, opinion leaders are more easily identified and reached. Thus, the Post-80s opinion leaders of 16 international brands in different industries on Sina Weibo were selected. The researcher searched for the brand name on main page of Sina Weibo and chose the first three users who had the largest numbers of retweets and followers. Fifty invitations with informed consent forms were sent through private letters and messages through

Sina Weibo. All microbloggers invited were active users who blogged at least every other day, and had a large numbers of followers, ranging from 4,280 to 25,050. Eight microbloggers declined to participate after being told the interview would be recorded. Twenty-three invitations received no responses. Finally, nineteen microbloggers agreed to participate and be recorded. When interviewing these selected opinion leaders, questions related to roles and characteristics of market mavens and purchase pals were addressed.

Brand List Development

To ensure a good cross segment sample, Interbrand's 2010 top 100 global brands list was used to make sure the selected brands were spread across major industries.

The researcher chose to use well-known global brands for her study because there are no Chinese global brands which are familiar to the public. Fortunately, microblog users are familiar with these selected brands. When researcher typed these brand names on Sina Weibo, she got thousands of posts containing these brand messages.

Interbrand is a division of Omnicom, specializing in vast brand services. It has nearly forty offices around the world and is the world's largest brand consultancy, providing services for a lot influential global brands. Best Global Brands is its annual study of the world's most valuable brands, voted as the third most influential industry benchmark by business leaders (Interbrand, 2010). The top brands in 16 different industries were selected. The researcher kept the categories closely related to items from daily life, under the assumption that these would be the items most likely mentioned in microblogging.

Research Approach

Qualitative research methods, rather than quantitative ones, are a better fit for this study because they allow exploration and discovery of new issues (Morgan, 1998). Considering that there was little prior knowledge about eWOM on microblogging sites, this study used in-depth

and semi-structured interviews to explore microbloggers' attitudes, behaviors, and value systems in the process of transmitting WOM. After reviewing the literature, a semi-structured interview guide was constructed. The researcher went through all required procedures of Institution Review Board (IRB) office in her university, which is a committee that has been formally designated to approve, monitor, and review biomedical and behavioral research involving humans with the aim to protect the rights and welfare of the research projects. Selected microblog users who agreed to participate in this study signed the informed consent document through emails before the actual interviews.

Skype™ or equivalent online chatting software tools was used to collect data because the participants were located in different areas in or outside China, and thus it was hard to collect their insights through face-to-face interviews. Second, most microbloggers can maintain their desired level of anonymity because Skype™ or equivalent online chatting software do not require them to reveal personal information.

The participants who accepted the researcher's interview request were asked to add the researcher as a friend through Skype™ or other equivalent chatting software for their convenience. They answered questions in Mandarin Chinese, which is their native language, in order to clearly and fluently express their thoughts. The researcher translated the interviews from Chinese into English after the interviews were completed. An interview guide was designed to ensure the interviewer covered all the topics pertinent to the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with Sina Weibo users born between 1980 and 1989—the generation called the “Post-80s” in China. The data analysis employed traditional grounded theory methods, such as constant comparison and theoretical sampling. Constant comparison refers to the process of taking information from the data collected and comparing it

to prior data at each stage of the analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theoretical sampling indicates that the development of the study sample is guided by the research, which means that the analysis of data will lead the researcher to the data she needs to collect next (Goulding, 1998).

Inductive analysis was used to analyze data collected in this study. This method of data analysis in qualitative research refers to “approaches that primarily use detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data by an evaluator or researcher” (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). The researcher read collected data thoroughly to identify meaningful themes and categories related to the attitudes, values, and motivations of microbloggers when spreading WOM. Findings are reported with supported quotes from participants’ direct responses.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter a new theory is developed to explain why microbloggers are motivated to spread WOM. After a brief description of Sina Weibo use, the key categories and motivations used to develop and define the theory are introduced. Additionally, the contribution of interviews in terms of developing and refining the theory is discussed. Finally, the section ends with a statement of the specific theory.

Sina Weibo Usage

After 17 online interviews through Skype™, the data reached saturation. The participants were asked about their regular microblog habits, the way they spread WOM on Sina Weibo, and the motivations that drive them to act as interpersonal influencers. All data were collected between May 15 and May 31, 2011. Among the 17 participants, seven of them are male and ten are female. A total of five are still college students, and 12 are office workers. Fifteen participants defined themselves as heavy microblogging users, and the other two participants use the Sina Weibo regularly, almost every day.

Many of the microbloggers in this research were among the earliest adopters of Sina Weibo in China. Most participants initially entered Sina Weibo because of a friend's invitation, a celebrity's example, or the influence of other social media, without a clear picture of the effects and changes that the microblogging site would bring to their lives. Although microbloggers brought different expectations and needs to Sina Weibo, their use of the site follows similar patterns, along a continuum between interpersonal and mass communications (see the chart on next page). On the mass uses side, microbloggers take Sina Weibo as an invaluable tool for carrying a lot of information. They receive a variety of information from different sources they choose to follow. On the interpersonal side, Sina Weibo provides a platform for reference and

self-disclosure in a variety of interactions, such as broadcasting their own posts and involving a conversation with other users. WOM occurs and spreads in both procedures, driven by various psychological, and even material, needs. Besides using Sina Weibo as an information source, microbloggers also retweet or comment on other users' posts or publish their own original posts. WOM communication is achieved through publishing an original post or retweeting. Comments alone could not reach the goal of disseminating information. Under these circumstances, the number and value of comments and retweets are a sign of the breadth and influence of WOM. Microbloggers kept evaluating their actions during the access of using Sina Weibo from their own experiences and feedbacks and interactions with other users. The evaluation and effectiveness of interaction has an impact on microbloggers' future uses.

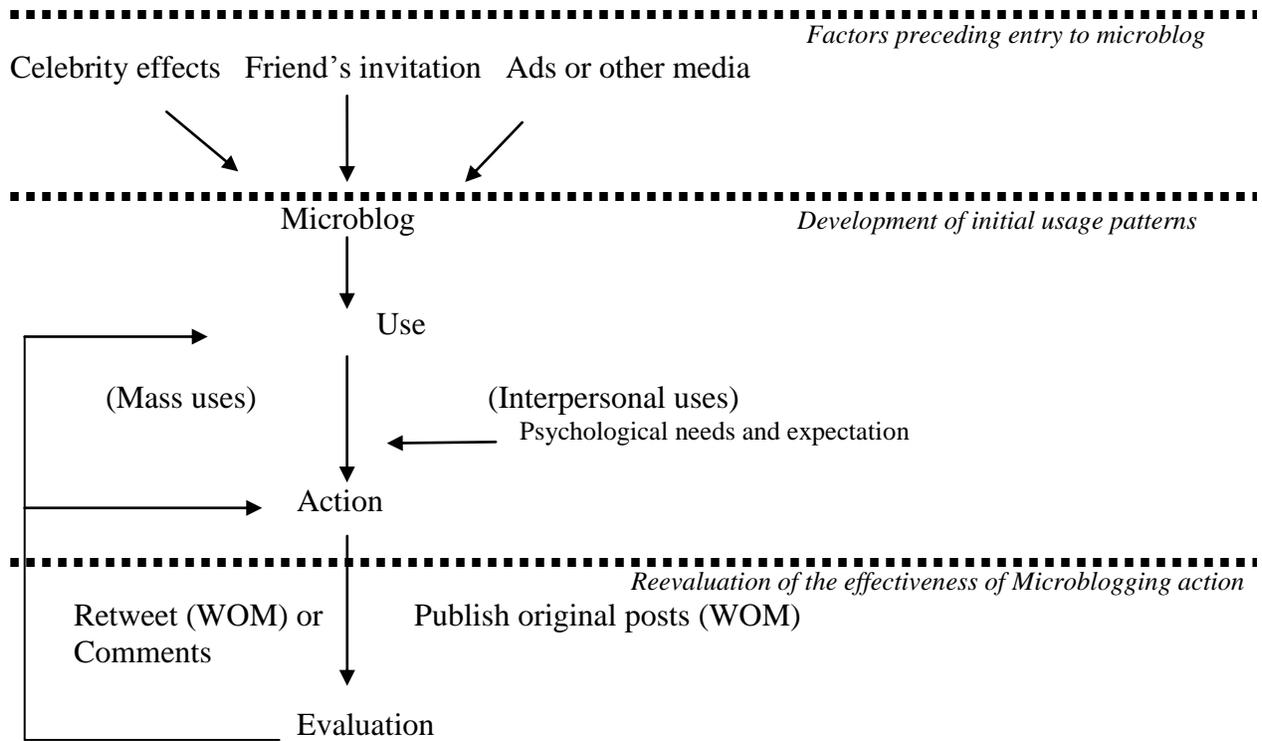


Figure 4-1. Microblog usage chart

Unlike Facebook, which is built on relationships developed in real world, the interactions on microblogging sites are more flexible and easier to achieve. On Facebook, information flows only between people who are reciprocal “friends,” those who are usually familiar with one another in social circles in the real world. But on Sina Weibo, users can follow whoever they are interested in; it does not matter if the other person is involved in the communication or not. This form of communication on microblogging sites increases information flow and provides users with convenient channels to reach information. Besides, users have the ability to select information they really need or care about rather than simply following those in the same social circle. But this feature does not prevent strong relationships from being developed on Sina Weibo. Most participants said that they still use Sina Weibo to keep in touch with their friends in the real world. Many of them also interact frequently with some users they never knew before, and they become very close in the cyber world. The results indicated that microbloggers trust WOM from other users in the cyber world the same as from their friends in real life, as long as they are confident that those user accounts are not manipulated for commercial uses. Microblog’s instant updating and disseminating features make it possible for users to supervise the authenticity of published information. The data showed that users are likely to interact through the strong relationships they build up in cyber world or real life.

Microbloggers’ Role in Sina Weibo

The participants in this research are opinion leaders of 16 global brands. Their posts concerning a specific brand received the highest number of retweets, which made them influential in that field. Online opinion leaders operated somewhat differently from opinion leaders in the offline world. First, because their real identities are hidden in the virtual world, users could express their thoughts and opinions with more freedom than in offline life. In this case, they may discuss some products or brands, such as Durex condoms, that they may not feel

comfortable talking about in public or with people they know offline. Second, microbloggers can be identified as opinion leaders only on Sina Weibo or in the cyber world, but not offline. When asked about the reason for publishing or retweeting information about specific brands, one participant revealed that he paid close attention to a brand because it was directly related to his business partners. He gathered and shared information for business but barely provided purchase or product information in real life. His personal authority was established through broad information sources he had both in the online and offline environment. Another user followed some official brands on Sina Weibo in order to know about their brand culture, but he said he could never afford the brand unless he won the lottery. Both participants received a high number of retweets and comments on their posts concerning those brands, but their friends and family may never have considered them to be influential in that field.

Several microbloggers shared characteristics with market mavens, but not all market mavens are easy to identify. On Sina Weibo, market mavens usually show their expertise or knowledge in specific fields, either through their account name, such as Travel and Eat in Beijing, or their personal tag. One disadvantage of market mavenism in the virtual community is that information is spread without the limitation of geographic boundaries. Microbloggers may share valuable local marketplace information on their posts, but it is not useful for users in different locations. One participant indicated that she pays attention only to market information in her own city.

Microbloggers did not show obvious signs of being purchase pals on Sina Weibo. When asked about purchase pals, almost all participants said they preferred friends and family in real life for advice or company, rather than strangers on Sina Weibo. Participants expressed the concern that it was hard to depend on a cyber friend for instant responses at the time of purchase.

Without knowing one another in real life, cyber friends may have difficulty giving advice on the suitability of a product or in providing negotiation skills. Most participants also thought it was more efficient to bring or call a friend or family member in the real world for purchase advice.

Motivations

Because microbloggers voluntarily spread WOM on Sina Weibo, the motivations behind their involvement merited exploration. Based on the interviews, participants' motivations for spreading WOM could be classified into the following categories.

Theme 1: Self-esteem

Microbloggers said that spreading WOM made them feel better about themselves. On Sina Weibo, microbloggers' personalities are reflected in what they publish in their accounts. Almost all participants indicated that they would more likely publish or retweet posts that they believe to be valuable or helpful for their followers, such as philosophical sentiments or thoughts, fashionable styles, and popular restaurants. It does not matter if the microbloggers are actual fashion leaders or not; spreading specific information convinced them that they are closer to their ideal selves, even if just in the cyber world. A total of five participants mentioned that they would transmit information about missing children or dogs and about needs for donating rare blood types. By doing so, they feel themselves to be better people.

Whenever I see a post about a missing child or someone seeking help for emergencies, I will definitely retweet and help spread that information, and I am proud of myself. (Maple, an editor of a fashion magazine)

Theme 2: Self-promotion

Like brands and companies that promote their products through official accounts, microbloggers also use Sina Weibo as a place to promote their personal image. Microbloggers are eager to be seen as charming and capable, and try to present their talents, strengths, and abilities. Some participants avoid disagreeing with each other. Spreading WOM provides

microbloggers with the opportunity to exhibit their strengths and talents in specific fields or marketplaces. One participant named Lei revealed that he even received a job offer because of some pieces he published about Nike on Sina Weibo. Lei is a sports agent, representing several famous basketball players in China. His Sina Weibo account distinctively shows his accomplishments and expertise in the sports field. Because he and his players are heavy users of sports products, he published many posts about related brands, including Nike. Earlier this year, he received an invitation from Nike for some events and endorsement.

I never expected Sina Weibo would bring these great job opportunities for me. But I do enjoy the moments when I share what I am good at with my followers on Sina Weibo. It is a social platform, and I feel great to share my accomplishments and achievements with others, especially with those in my field.

Another participant, April, stated that she caught the attention of many counterparts in her professional field and attracted a large number of followers for her frequent posts concerning fashion brands. She was offered opportunities to change jobs by rival companies. In addition, the increasing number of her followers inspired her to publish posts with useful information and to update her account more frequently.

Theme 3: Sense of Participation

Microbloggers indicated that being involved in the information-transmission process gave them a sense of participation. The goal of social media such as Sina Weibo is all about sharing and interaction. If microbloggers are not involved in interactions with other users, the value of social media will be diminished. When receiving messages about brands and products they are interested in, microbloggers are driven to participate in the discussion, either retweeting the original post or publishing their own posts.

Being involved in the discussion of specific brands or products makes me feel like being a part of the virtual group. This is the sense of belonging. I need to know I am connected with the community and let other users feel my presence. (Amy, college student)

Besides that, high participation in group interaction increases users' feelings of achievement. It is like a virtuous circle. Microbloggers are inspired to update their posts more frequently, providing useful information, with the intention of becoming more central in the online community.

Theme 4: Achievement

Microbloggers get a sense of achievement from spreading WOM on Sina Weibo. Some participants mentioned that they felt proud when seeing other users retweet or comment on their posts. One participant said he even went to check the number of comments he got, every time he logged on. Some participants stated that they enjoyed the moment when other users came to them for advice or help.

I published a lot of posts concerning great foods and dining places. Many of my followers became my fans for this sort of information. They asked me questions about the restaurants, foods, and service. I feel that all my time spent sharing this information is worth it. The increasing number of my followers also proves that. ... I know it might sound silly, but I do think it is a sign of my authority for that field. I like reading their posts about feedback on the restaurants I recommended, and I value every compliment and criticism from followers. Their comments make me feel that my hard work has paid off. (Song, senior editor)

This sense of achievement brings courage to participants who have low self-confidence. Nallan, a junior planner in a PR firm, who started to use Sina Weibo after his campaign was criticized by his boss, was one of them. His popularity on Sina Weibo helped him get over the hard time he had in work.

I joined Sina Weibo last year when I had a hard time with my career. At that time, my whole plan for a big event was killed by my boss. I spent a lot of time on it and...you know, my boss just did not buy it. I felt so depressed and lost faith in myself. Then, I started to transfer some of my attention to Sina Weibo. It turned out that I developed pretty good relationships with PR colleagues. We discussed a lot of things in our professional field. When my posts were retweeted or commented, especially those about my expertise and knowledge in PR, I could feel the achievement...you know...even in a cyber world...from people you never know.

Theme 5: Creation of Knowledge

The participatory and argumentative nature of Sina Weibo leads to closer approximations of fact. One of the advantages of Sina Weibo is the high speed of information transmission. Sometimes, microbloggers publish posts to seek knowledge. In the process of transmitting information through retweets, microbloggers participate in discussions with other users for solutions and advice. In some circumstances, microbloggers publish news on their accounts, without knowing the authenticity, except that other users confirm or complement the sources. Even if some microbloggers cannot provide credible sources or answers for questions, the process accelerates the transmission of information and discussions.

For business reasons, I always pay close attention to the media sources of my professional field, both national and international. When I see instant data or new cases, I post it under my account and discuss it with my colleagues. We always came out sparking ideas during the discussion. Sometimes, I even use Sina Weibo for the purpose of research. (Li, data analyst)

Theme 6: Coordination

Microbloggers tend to spread WOM by making information available online and adjusting their actions based on information provided by other users. Sometimes microbloggers act independently— they may not gather together for some events or incidents, but they do share one another's recent developments. What matters is how the incident finally develops, and the contributions people make during the process.

In early May 2011, a truck full of puppies was on the way to a restaurant. In the restaurant, puppies were going to be killed for dishes. Some right-minded microbloggers found the truck and posted the news on Sina Weibo. It created much of a stir online. A lot of users retweeted the news with comments, volunteering that they bought some of puppies from the owner and adopted them. In this process, almost no microbloggers planned actions with other users, but the news spread rapidly, and many people made their contributions. I was retweeting that news with tears and read other users' posts. Finally, I adopted three cute puppies. But I did not plan or talk about my actions with others before I did that. Knowing there were a lot of people who cared about those puppies as I did is enough to me. (Le, high school teacher)

Theme 7: Providing Favors

Microbloggers are found to have the desire to help others and receive pleasure by providing information. Twelve participants mentioned that they would definitely share with others if they had a negative experience with a product or service. Ten participants said that they would like to recommend the products and brands they like to others users, especially after they have had a positive experience.

I really want to share my experience with other users, and I did that very often. In a lot of cases, I posted pictures of products I bought. If I had a bad experience with some products, I would want to inform other people so they can avoid the trouble in their later purchase. (Lily, secretary)

Some microbloggers feel obligated to share brand and product information to show reciprocity or “pay back” the favor. On Sina Weibo, microbloggers not only receive a large variety of information but also provide sources and information for others.

I used to receive useful information from other users. It helped me save a lot of time and energy to get the product suitable for me from a great variety of brands. I feel flattered if my information is helpful for others. It’s fair enough. You know, you get something and give something back. Everyone is happy. (Lu, a librarian)

Theme 8: Building Social Relationships

As a social networking site, Sina Weibo provides microbloggers with a place to develop a social network, from purely Internet-based relationships all the way to face-to-face relationships not related to the Internet. Microbloggers make use of the basic social networking features of Sina Weibo to create relationships within the community. To meet their social needs, microbloggers make an effort to maintain various relationships. Spreading valuable WOM is an effective way to socialize in a virtual way, because it is personal and could be emotional, to some extent. “Sometimes, I just want to reduce the sense of distance between me and my followers by sharing my personal experience with some brands,” said Yu, a graduate student. Some participants published posts that they believed could resonate with or please their followers:

It is the same like in the real world. As long as we are in the community, we need the connections and communication with others. There is no way we can live by ourselves. I am not saying that I spread information for the purpose of adulation. I would never publish anything I did not like or go against my will. It's just...sometimes, I do it for socialization. I know some of my friends on Sina Weibo may think the post is funny or useful. I want them to see it. (Yu, graduate student)

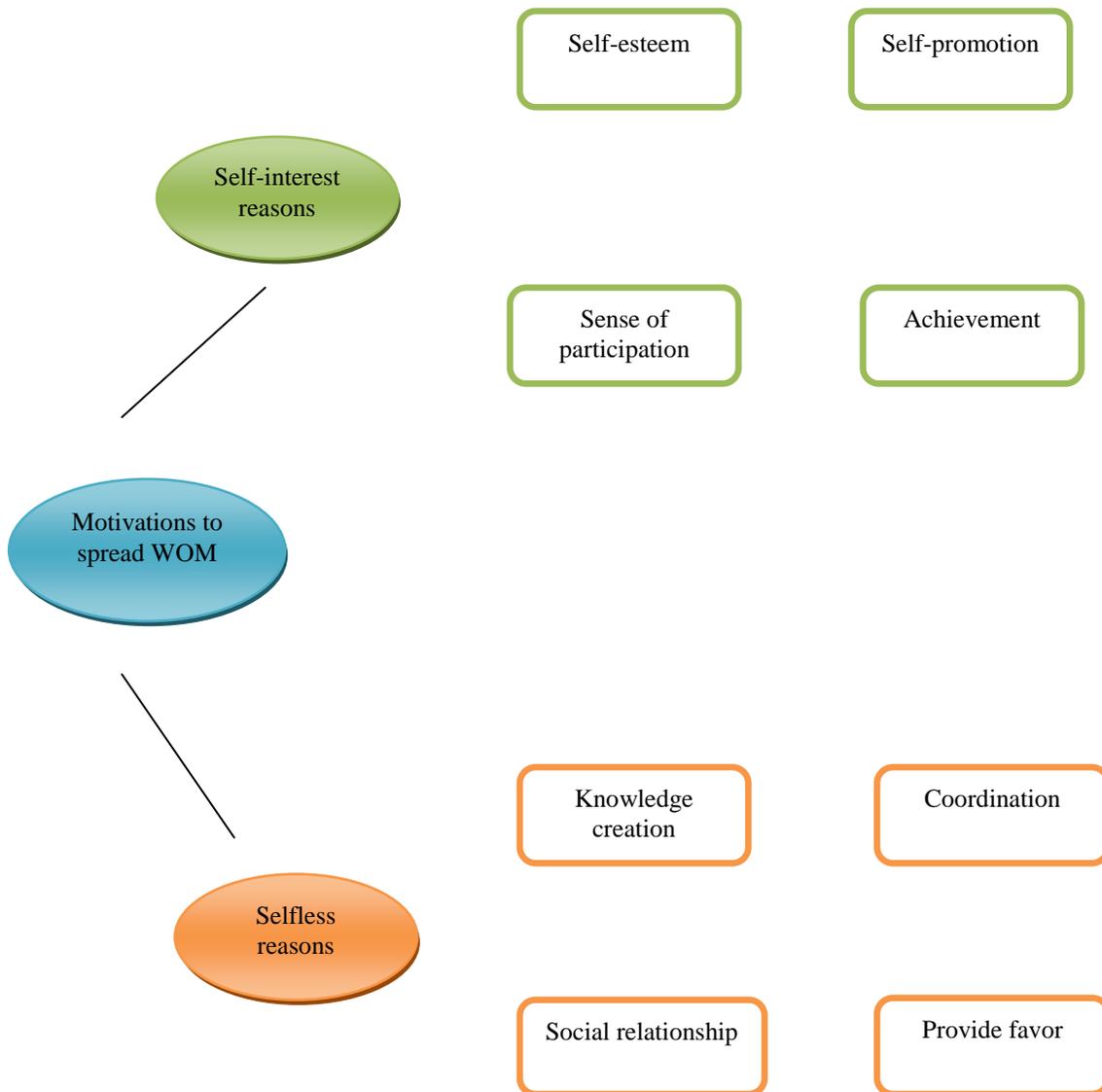


Figure 4-2. Microbloggers' motivations chart

From the core categories analyzed, microbloggers' motivations to spread WOM fall into two major groups: self-interest and selflessness. Microbloggers are motivated by personal needs and expectations such as self-esteem, self-promotion, sense of participation, and achievement. However, the use of a social media is not all about individual needs. Microbloggers are also inspired by some selfless reasons to transmit information, such as spreading knowledge, coordinating events, building social relationships, and providing favors.

The WOM Spreading Theory

Grounded theory is a method of analysis that allows the researcher to examine the interactive nature of events when they are integrated. These events have been identified in the motivation section as (1) self-esteem, (2) self-promotion, (3) sense of participation, (4) achievement, (5) creation of knowledge, (6) coordination, (7) building social relationships, and (8) providing favors. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), grounded theory is a "transactional system," because these events interact with one another across a matrix to form an explicit explanatory framework. The theory starts to emerge when the various categories reflecting the motivation for microbloggers to spread WOM on Sina Weibo are collected, coded, and analyzed as part of the transaction process. The grounded theory that finally emerges is the outcome of the transaction. In this study, the theory of WOM spreading is the grounded theory to come out of this process of transactional analysis.

Statement of the Theory

WOM that is produced and transmitted via microblogging, differs from WOM in the offline world. What is transmitted online cannot be directly connected to users' personal identities. Microbloggers can hide their identities and not necessarily show their real personalities on microblogs. The words spread on microblogs can be linked to a unique microblogging account regarded as a microblogger's online identity. However, by manipulating

their accounts, microbloggers develop some sort of style through their posts, which can be influenced by their offline experiences. Otherwise, what microbloggers do on their sites conforms to their basic social needs.

While spreading WOM on their sites, microbloggers' actions are also greatly impacted by various personal characteristics accumulated day by day in society. Driven by a variety of psychological needs and expectations, microbloggers spread WOM either to serve their personal interests or for selfless reasons.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Findings and Implications

Today the Internet allows a large number of social media around the world to satisfy people's social and entertainment needs. A variety of activities takes place in the realm of cyberspace every day, and microblogging is just one of them. There has been limited research focusing on this relatively new online activity, let alone how WOM is transmitted through online communities. Issues such as the uses of microblogging communities and the motivations of their participants to spread WOM have rarely been discussed. The purpose of this research is to fill the knowledge gap by using in-depth interviews to analyze uses of Sina Weibo, a well-known Chinese microblogging site, and its users. Three primary focuses have been explored in this study: (1) the regular use of Sina Weibo and the characteristics of WOM on it, (2) the roles microbloggers play when they transmit message in the community, and (3) the motivations that lead microbloggers to engage in spreading WOM.

The study presents regular use of Sina Weibo and the structure of WOM transmission within the community. There are roughly three major types of accounts on Sina Weibo: media sources accounts, which are the online form of professional, traditional media; accounts for commercial use, such as official brand accounts; and personal accounts. According to a report from the Chinese Internet Network Information Center (CINIC), by the end of August 2010, there were 466 mainstream news media accounts on Sina Weibo, including 118 newspapers, 243 magazines, 36 TV stations, and 69 radio stations. Although the credibility of information sources has traditionally been carefully protected by news institutions, the web shifts the location of "authority" in the journalistic world. Nowadays, knowledge and authority are embedded in the web of information made possible by the Internet. Mainstream news reports can be challenged

by the wired audience through online communities such as microblogs. Commercial brand accounts make use of microblogs as platforms for updating brand information and interacting with their audience. Unlike brand messages which are accepted passively by consumers in traditional media, users choose to follow only brand or company accounts they like. This form of communication accelerates the effectiveness of brand messages and increases the interaction between brands and audiences. However, personal use is the dominant use on microblogs. Users can achieve diverse goals in microblogging communities, such as information exchange, socialization, and self-promotion. Individual accounts are also a primary channel to spread WOM on microblogs.

WOM gained speed and a broader audience when it moved to the online stage. Instead of revealing their true identities, users can create alternative ones on microblogs. But the personalities they display on microblogs are still influenced by their experiences in offline life.

Basically, microbloggers choose the information sources by themselves, and information flows only from microbloggers to their followers. Sometimes, two users follow each other on the microblog, which makes them “friends.” The relationships microbloggers build in their communities fall into two types: weak and strong. Strong relationships are more stable, personal, and intimate, including relationships created offline and intimate cyber relationships. Weak relationships refer to the tenuous or even random relationships created in cyberspace.

The study showed no differences in the WOM transmission process between strong and weak relationships. The importance is the value of information contained in WOM. Although weak relationships on microblogging sites may have less impact on the individual level, communication on microblogs does not necessarily happen among users who know each other offline or have close cyber relationships. Consistent with the theory of “the strength of weak ties”

(Granovetter, 1973), the significance of weak relationships lies in their potential to expose interpersonal networks to external influences and pave the way for spreading WOM throughout the community. Microbloggers expressed the same attention to brand and product information they received from users they followed, no matter how close their cyber relationship. However, strong relationships on microblogs strongly influenced people's purchase decisions. It confirmed Brown and Reingen's (1987) statement that strong ties were more likely to be activated and perceived as influential in consumers' decisions, and weak ties were more likely to facilitate WOM referral flows.

This study also gauged the diverse roles microbloggers play during the WOM transmission process. Participants were known opinion leaders in this study, and they showed distinct characteristics of opinion leadership during the interviews, such as a high involvement in using or the desire of using the relevant product, profound self-perceived knowledge, and a high number of followers. Their posts concerning relevant products received a lot of comments and were retweeted by many people. Besides that, some participants also displayed characteristics of market mavens, including abundant sources and expertise in market information. However, the research did not find the role of purchase pals worked as expected. Participants tended to seek advice and company from family and close friends, which could not necessarily take place on microblogs. Even though microblogs have the feature of instant updating, it is never known for sure that people will reply at a specific moment. In addition, a purchase pal's functions include providing support, determining the appropriateness or suitability of a product, or helping with negotiation. These functions can be better achieved when purchase pals are someone known by the customer in offline life.

A major finding of this study was the identification of eight motivations of microbloggers to voluntarily spread WOM. The first is microbloggers' need to feel better about themselves. By transmitting information they believe to be helpful or cool, participants consider themselves better persons or feel closer to their ideal selves.

Participants' desire to promote themselves is the second motivation. By displaying strengths and talents, microbloggers want to attract more attention, either for popularity among the community or in their professional field.

A sense of participation is the third motivation that drives microbloggers to spread WOM. The need for participation is part of human nature. In the community, participants expect to get a sense of participation by getting involved in transmitting information to interact with other users rather than living in their own world.

Gaining a sense of achievement is another incentive for microbloggers to spread WOM. Participants enjoy disseminating helpful information, especially when others are looking for important information. There are four selfless motivations driving microbloggers to share WOM, including the creation of knowledge, coordination with others, building social relationships, and providing favors.

The findings in this study have several implications for understanding microbloggers' activities on the Internet. First, this study illustrates the structure and features of WOM on microblogs. Prior research demonstrated the likely possibility that consumers would rely on personal sources of information when they make purchase decisions (Price & Feick, 1984). That is one of the reasons why WOM is more effective than advertisements. On microblogs, users voluntarily choose the information they need or have an interest in. When users have control of information sources rather than receiving information passively, the effectiveness of WOM

greatly increases. Microbloggers have used their initiatives to follow a variety of information sources and to launch new types of activities in microblogging communities, including the dispersion of WOM.

Second, according to participants' descriptions of their activities in the Sina Weibo community, microbloggers' online activities are a reflection of their offline experiences. Self-perceived knowledge, expertise, and involvement with products and brands have a great impact on microbloggers' online personalities (Byam, 2000; Rheingold, 2000). They claimed that the style and focus of their microblog posts are consistent with their real-life experiences. Influential people are more likely to be powerful in cyberspace as well.

Participants were driven by both selfish and selfless reasons to spread WOM; they decided to disseminate information because of their personal needs and desires, as well as altruism. This finding supports the theory that uses and gratifications are an appropriate perspective to understanding microbloggers' motivations and engagement in microblogging communities. It also backs up previous studies that have concluded that altruism is an important motivation for individuals' participation in creating user-generated content (Bergquist & Ljungberg, 2001; Hiilton III, 2009; Rossi, 2004). However, the participants did not think much about the benefits they might bring to the community as a whole when spreading information and messages.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study has some limitations. First, all participants were designated as opinion leaders in certain brand fields because their posts received the highest number of retweets concerning specific brands. Microbloggers who play other roles (e.g., market mavens, purchase pals) were hard to identify. Opinion leaders were active in the community and easy to identify because of the wide dispersion of their posts. Second, the number of retweets and comments seems to be an obvious sign of great influence on microblogs but this is not true all of the time. It could be that

microbloggers retweet a specific post for the chance to win a prize. Third, this research focuses on members of the Post-80s generation because of their market value. However, microbloggers who belong to a different generation might show different motivations and use patterns in microblogging communities.

To develop a more comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of eWOM and users who are devoted to these activities, future research should focus on other kinds of online media such as Facebook and MySpace. Different uses and media content may result in different characteristics of WOM.

The Uses and Gratifications theory can continue to be used to understand individuals' interactions with new media. Future researchers should take a close look at new types of online activities happening in cyberspace where audiences could be both consumers and producers of information, and not just investigate why people use the Internet or new media in general.

In conclusion, this study can be used as a basis for further research on WOM on microblogging sites. It provides detailed information on the structure of WOM in the Sina Weibo community and participants' motivations to spread WOM. It is hoped that this study could inspire scholars to focus on WOM in specific types of new media to generate more nuanced theories related to WOM in cyberspace.

APPENDIX A INFORMED CONSENT

You are being invited to participate in a research study about Sina Weibo. The research is conducted by Xuerui Zhang, a graduate student in the College of Journalism and Communications at University of Florida.

It is important for you to carefully read this consent document before you decide to participate in this study.

Protocol Title:
Microbloggers' Motivations to Spread Word-of-Mouth: Grounded Theory of Chinese Microblogging site

Purpose of the research study:

This study will explore the general background of Sina Weibo usage, and to investigate microbloggers' motivations and involvement in the microblogging site, *Sina Weibo*, in order to better understand a microblog's potential of becoming a powerful tool for electronic word-of-mouth.

What you will be asked to do in the study:

Following a brief 5 minute warm-up on Sina Weibo, you will be asked to answer questions about regular Weibo usage. First, demographic questions like age and income will be collected. Then, questions are briefly divided into four sections, regular microblog activities as a follower and user to be followed, attention to official brand accounts, interpersonal influence and posting frequency.

Time required:

60-90 minutes

Risks and Benefits:

There are no perceived risk is involved. We do not anticipate that you will benefit directly by participating in this research.

Compensation:

Shopping discount cards of 20 Yuan will be used as a reward.

Confidentiality:

The interview will be audio taped. The audiotapes will be kept in a locked cabinet in my office until they have been transcribed, and then they will be destroyed. You will be identified in the

transcriptions by a code name or number; no identifying information will be used in the transcripts (other than your age and gender). Only the principal investigator and her supervisors will have access to the transcripts or to information linking the code names or number to participants' identities.

Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating.

Right to withdraw from the study:

If you decided to stop participating in the study, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Your data which has been collected, if any, will be destroyed immediately.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

Xuerui Zhang, graduate student, Department of Advertising, University of Florida,
Gainesville, FL 32611, U.S.A.
Email: x8895436@ufl.edu
Phone: 86-13581517704; 01-352-215-2186

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:

IRB02 Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; phone 01-352-392-0433.

Agreement:

I am 18 years old or older, and have read the procedure described above. I have understood the nature of this study, and voluntarily agree to participate. Provision of my pseudonym or username on the Sina Weibo community below indicates my consent.

Participant: _____ Date: _____

Principal Investigator: _____ Date: _____

(The Chinese version of the Informed Consent form below is translated by Xuerui Zhang, the researcher of this study, whose native language is Chinese.)

同意书

您被邀请参与一个关于新浪微博的调查。此次调查由美国佛罗里达大学新闻传播学院学生张雪蕊设计并负责。

在您决定参加调查之前，请仔细阅读以下条款。

调查题目： 微博用于口碑传播的动力：对中国微博的深度调查

研究目的：

本调查将探索新浪微博的使用背景，微博用户口碑传播的目的，以求更好的理解微博作为网络口碑传播工具的价值。

在调查中您将被要求做的：

前五分钟，调查者会问您一些新浪微博的暖身问题。进入正题后，首先，一些关于您基本背景资料的问题将被提出，包括年纪和月收入等。接着，关于微博的日常使用活动，品牌账号的关注度，用户间影响，和更新频率等四个部分的问题将会被提问。

所需时间：

大约 60 到 90 分钟

风险与获利：

您的参与将不会对您的身心有直接影响。

报酬：

您将获得人民币价值 20 元的超市购物卡。

保密协议：

此次采访将会被录音。录音资料被抄写后将会被保存在我办公室带锁的柜子中，调查结束后一并销毁。您的名字讲用一个数字或代号来代替。不会有任何信息能与您的真实身份联系在一起。只有调查者和其导师有权查看录音资料 and 任何联系到您身份的信息。

自愿参与：

您的参与是自愿的。即便在调查中，您也可以随时拒绝回答不想回答的问题。

退出的权利：

如果您不想继续本次调查，可以在任何时候选择退出，并且无需承担任何后果。您的数据将会被立即销毁。

如果对本次调查有疑问，请联系：

Xuerui Zhang, graduate student, Department of Advertising, University of Florida,
Gainesville, FL 32611, U.S.A.

(张雪蕊：佛罗里达大学新闻传播学院研究生，盖恩斯维尔，佛罗里达，美国)

电子邮件：x8895436@ufl.edu

电话：86-13581517704; 01-352-215-2186

如果您对在本次调查中您的权利有疑问，请联系：

IRB02 Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250;

电话：01-352- 392-0433.

同意书：

我已经年满 18 周岁，并且仔细阅读过以上内容介绍。我了解本次调查的性质，自愿加入本次调查。以下提供我的家明或者微博名字代表我愿意参与此次调查。

参与者名字： _____ 日期： _____

调查者： _____ 日期： _____

APPENDIX B
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Demographic information

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Number of followers as of date of interview:
4. Income range:
 - Below 3,000 Yuan per month
 - 3,000 Yuan to 4,999Yuan per month
 - 5,000 Yuan to10, 000 Yuan per month
 - Above 10,000 Yuan per month

As a microblogger

5. Could you briefly describe your microblog usage?
 - How long have you had a microblog account?
 - How often do you log in?
 - How do you describe your user activity on microblog on an average day?
6. What kinds of microblog posts inspire you to become a fan of others? Is there something specific about content that inspires you to repost?
7. What are the reasons you retweet microblog content?
 - When do you think it is important to repost a microblog? Why?
8. What types of microblog posts do you think are more likely to be retweeted by the public?
 - What types of microblog posts are more likely to be commented on?
9. Could you give me an example of a recent repost or comment on your microblog?
(Discuss)

Have you been involved in interactions with people who leave comments? What drives you to leave comments?
10. Please tell me about a time when a lot of people repost or leave comments on your microblog?
11. As a microblogger, how do you attract fans? Is that important to you?
12. What did you do to differentiate yourself from other microbloggers?

- Do you think this is important?
- Why?

13. How do you want your followers to feel or think about you and your posts? Any impressions you would like to leave with them?

Brand accounts

14. How do you describe users and organizations you follow? What are the reasons that you do or do not follow them?

15. Please give me an example of official brand accounts you followed.

- Have you ever reposted any brand account content? Why?
- How do you feel when you repost brand information on your microblog?
- Do you think the information originating with brands is trustworthy?
- What about other users' posts concerning brand or product information?

16. What types of brand account posts would you most likely to react to? Positive or negative? Why?

Interpersonal Influence

17. What drives to you publish posts containing brand information?

- Have you ever engaged in conversations with other users to talk about specific brand or product?
- What influence do you want your posts to have on your fans?

18. Have you ever offered marketing or brand knowledge to other users?

19. Did any other users ever come to you for marketing information or help? What did you do?

- Why did you help?
- Let us talk about this specific post of yours. How do you feel about the comments? Is there one that stands out for some reason? (specify)

20. Did any other user ever come to you or reach you in the middle of their purchase for advice? Tell me about that.

- Have you ever shopped with others via a mobile device in order to provide purchase advice? Tell me about that experience.
- Why did you help? What did you feel after that?

Posting frequency

21. How often did you update your microblog yesterday? Is this typical?

- What kind of mood you are in when you tend to update your posts more frequently?
- On what occasions do you update your posts more frequently?

22. How do you want your microblog to be regarded within the microblogging community (Sina Weibo)?

-Style, information, specific orientation

23. How does it make you feel when sharing offline brand experience on the microblog?

Thank you for talking with me today. I would like to follow up with you in a week or so to check with you on how I've interpreted your interview. Would that be okay?

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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