



# The effects of the self and social identity on the intention to microblog: An extension of the theory of planned behavior



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## ABSTRACT

Microblogging has become one of the most popular social communication styles in the world. Much research has already addressed this hot issue; however, studies examining the intentions behind microblogging behaviors are limited. This study extended the theory of planned behavior (TPB) to predict intention to microblog and other behaviors. The results showed that social identity was the greatest predictor of intention, followed by attitude and perceived behavioral control. Social identity fully mediated the effects of subjective norms and self-identity on intention. Intention significantly predicted users' microblogging behaviors. These results have important implications for industry players and marketing managers.

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## 1. Introduction

Microblog is a blog-like system (Yan, Yi, & Wu, 2012) that allows users to write brief text updates (fewer than 140 characters) and send them to friends and interested observers via text messaging, instant messaging (IM), e-mail, or the web (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007). Microblog is a new type of Internet communication platform that has rapidly gained popularity. Both Sina and Tencent (the largest microblog service providers in China) claim that more than 500 million users are registered on their microblog platforms (ChinaLabs, Internet, and Society, 2013). However, the factors that determine whether individuals will adopt microblogging remain unknown. The theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991) is one of the most influential and well-validated social psychological theories for predicting human behavior in various contexts, and it can be used to explain Chinese users' microblogging behaviors.

## 2. Literature review

TPB is a major social-cognitive theory developed by Ajzen (1991). Ajzen suggested that individual behavior is primarily predicted by behavioral intentions, which are further determined by three salient motivational factors: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (PBC). Although the basic model explains most of the variation in intention, some researchers have suggested that the explanatory power of this model would significantly increase if self-identity (Smith, Terry, Manstead, Kotterman, & Wolfs, 2007; Terry, Hogg, & White, 1999) and social identity (Fielding, McDonald, & Louis, 2008; Terry et al., 1999) were included. However, few studies had explored the explanatory power of these variables in a social networking context. Consequently, the current study used an extended TPB model that included the basic TPB model as well as self-identity and social identity to explain microbloggers' intentions and behaviors.

### 2.1. Original TPB model

#### 2.1.1. Intention

Intention refers to a person's willingness to perform a behavior. Intention is considered as a proximal determinant of behavior. A meta-analysis reported that intention accounted for 28% of the

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variance of behavior (Sheeran, 2002). Previous studies of the association between intention and actual behaviors in a social network context have also conformed the predictive power of intention (Heirman, Walrave, & Ponnet, 2013; Pelling & White, 2009); that is, greater intention indicate more behaviors related to intention.

### 2.1.2. Attitude

Attitude is defined as the degree to which a person favorably evaluates or appraises behavior. People have positive attitudes toward certain behaviors when they strongly believe that they will obtain a positive outcome if they perform the behavior. Conversely, people have a negative attitude when they hold a strong belief that negatively valued outcomes will result from that behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Montano & Kasprzyk, 2008). Empirical work has consistently reported the positive effect of attitude on behavioral intentions in contexts related to Internet service acceptance or adoption (Baker & White, 2010; LaRose, Lai, Lange, Love, & Wu, 2005; Lin, 2006; Pelling & White, 2009). Therefore, favorable attitudes are expected to strongly increase the probability of microblog use.

### 2.1.3. Subjective norms

Subjective norms refer to the perceived social pressure that comes from certain important referents to perform a particular behavior (Ajzen, 1991). These referents are always their friends, family members and other people important to them. People are always motivated to comply with these referents. People are more likely to perform a behavior when they believe that certain referents think they should perform a behavior, and they are encouraged to satisfy the expectations of these referents. Otherwise, people will be less likely to perform a behavior (Montano & Kasprzyk, 2008). Subjective norms are significantly associated with users' behavioral intentions toward Internet service use and consistently reported (Darvell, Walsh, & White, 2011; Liao, Chen, & Yen, 2007). Therefore, Chinese people who consider microblog adoption as approved by their friends may be more likely to display a greater intention to microblog.

### 2.1.4. PBC

PBC refers to the perceived ease of performing a behavior, and it is a significant predictor of intention (Ajzen, 1991; Armitage & Conner, 2001). Two major factors likely affect PBC: access to necessary resources and opportunities to perform the behavior. People have a high degree of PBC when they perceive that they have access to the resources and opportunities needed to successfully perform a behavior (Conner & Armitage, 1998), which in turn leads to a greater intention to perform the behavior. Previous studies have found that PBC significantly predicts intention to obtain information about and purchase a product from an Internet vendor (Pavlou & Fygenon, 2006). The significant predictive effect of PBC on intention was confirmed in virtual communities (Lin, 2006) and with regard to the adoption instant messaging (Lu, Zhou, & Wang, 2009). Because of the ease of obtaining access to microblogging and the simplicity of its user interface (Hauptmann & Gerlach, 2010), we expected that PBC would positively predict users' intentions to microblog.

## 2.2. Additional variables: Self-identity and social identity

### 2.2.1. Self-identity

Self-identity is the extent to which performing a behavior is an important component of a person's self-concept (Conner & Armitage, 1998). One is more likely to perform a behavior with a high degree of role identity because people always establish

expectations in accordance with role-appropriate behavior and then perform appropriate behaviors to meet these expectations. This process can confirm one's self concept (Callero, 1985). Previous studies have confirmed that self-identity explains a unique amount of variance in intention (Fielding et al., 2008; Rise, Sheeran, & Hukkelberg, 2010; Sheeran, 2002). Microblogs provide a public platform for people, especially youth, to express themselves; hence, people with a high degree of self-identity are expected to show greater intention.

In addition, self-identity primarily focuses on individualistic characteristics (Terry & Hogg, 1996) that may be related to attitude and PBC. According to the definition, both attitude appraisal and sense of control originate from one's internal feelings. When these internal feeling are salient to one's self concept, they can influence one's self-identity. Consequently, the mediation effect of self-identity was also examined in this study.

### 2.2.2. Social identity

According to social identity theory, social identity derives from the individual's knowledge of his or her membership in a social group (or groups), together with the emotional significance attached to that membership (Fielding et al., 2008; Tajfel, 1974). The process of categorizing oneself with a particular social identity leads to similarity. People in the same group are more likely to behave in accordance with their in-group members and to differ from out-group members. Consistent with this reasoning, Baker and White found that people with a high level of social identity (as indicated by group norms) showed greater intention to use social networking sites frequently (Baker & White, 2010). In addition, users are more likely to stay longer and to be more active in a network when they are invited by people with a similar social identity (Lento, Welser, Gu, & Smith, 2006). Thus, people who perceived microblog adoption is supported by the group member he/she belongs to may show greater intention.

Furthermore, social identity addresses social influence, and subjective norms primarily focus on interpersonal influence (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2006). Social identity theory assumes that if a particular social identity is salient, then individuals tend to be in accordance with the values and beliefs of the group; furthermore, they show the motivation to reinforce group membership (Fielding et al., 2008). Moreover, subjective norms are determined by normative beliefs and the motivation to comply with certain beliefs (Ajzen, 1991). Hence, subjective norms can be assumed to relate to social identity, and empirical evidence supports this assumption. For example, scholars have found that subjective norms are positively related to intentions, but only for people who identify strongly with the group (Fielding et al., 2008). Another study found that social identity fully mediated the effect of subjective norms on intention (Thorbjørnsen, Pedersen, & Nysveen, 2007).

In addition, a continuum exists between self-identity and social identity according to social identity theory. Individuals' feelings and actions, which are influenced by personal or group-related characteristics, are determined by where they are placed on the continuum (Fielding et al., 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Microblogging is an open-source communication platform, and user behavior might be more likely to be influenced by their interactions with group members. Researchers have suggested that people who identify strongly with a group, and consequently develop a social identity by embedding their personal identity within a particular group, tend to accept the intentions and behaviors of other group members (Chatzisarantis, Hagger, Wang, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2009; Turner, 1985). Thus, self-identity might be positively related to social identity.

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