Unknown, surprising, and economically significant: The realities of electronic word of mouth in Chinese social networking sites

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The increasing significance of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WoM) has followed the rapid growth of Internet usage. Consumers seek information provided by other online users on various online platforms, including social networking sites (SNSs) which are considered ideal platforms for e-WoM. We report research with Chinese consumers on the motivation and use of e-WoM in SNSs, drivers and dynamics of e-WoM, and e-WoM influences on consumer behavior. A number of normative expectations and conclusions in extant research are disconfirmed through empirical research, including the non-significance of non-information-related, social and hedonic motives for seeking e-WoM, and the secondary role of social capital. Findings are incorporated in a novel framework to inform theory development. By providing insights about e-WoM motivations and behaviors in SNSs and by focusing on such dynamics in the Chinese market, a topic is highlighted that is economically significant but is less frequently documented in marketing.

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1. Introduction

Word of mouth (WoM hereafter) is a powerful driver in the marketplace, influencing consumers' decisions and affecting company fortunes (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). It has been shown to be more effective than traditional marketing media (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008). Commonly defined as a "positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, 40), electronic WoM (e-WoM hereafter) is "pervasive" and "widespread" (Yeh & Choi, 2011; Jensen, Averbeck, Zhang, & Wright, 2013), increases the power of peer-to-peer communication among consumers (Dellarocas, Zhang, & Awad, 2007) and flourishes in online platforms such as social networking sites (SNSs hereafter) (Vollmer & Precourt, 2008).

This discussion documents research with Chinese consumers on their motivation and use of e-WoM in a Chinese SNS, drivers and dynamics of e-WoM, and e-WoM influences on their behaviors. By providing insights about e-WoM motivations and behaviors in SNSs and by focusing on such dynamics in the growing and significant Chinese market, we engage with a topic that is managerially significant (Miller, Parsons, & Lifer, 2010; Alhabash, Park, & Kononova, 2012; Jensen et al., 2013) and should be analyzed more systematically by academics (Ansari, Koenigsberg, & Stahl, 2011). Less is known for instance about e-WoM activity in SNSs (Jensen et al., 2013) and consumers'

motives to engage in e-WoM in SNSs (Yeh & Choi, 2011), prompting for instance a *Journal of Marketing Communications* special issue around such matters in 2014. Furthermore, though some theorists anticipate cultural influences on SNS behaviors (Zhang & Shavitt, 2003), the understanding of the role and place of cultural forces in such communications is still evolving (Zhang & Lee, 2012). The studied SNS, Weibo, is one of the largest SNSs globally and is integral to a national market experiencing "exponential growth" (Chan, Wu, Hao, Xi, & Jin, 2012); however, academic research on it is insufficient. A couple of studies have analyzed content generation (Leung, 2009) and political participation (Chan et al., 2012) in Weibo, and not the topics of interest to this discussion: users' motivation to seek e-WoM, users' evaluation of SNS e-WoM, and e-WoM effect on consumption outcomes. This discussion is therefore guided by two research questions: (1) How are Chinese consumers' motivated to seek e-WoM in SNSs (Weibo)? (2). What e-WoM traits affect consumers' evaluation of e-WoM in SNSs (Weibo) and influence consumption outcomes encompassing perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors?

Two stages of empirical research were organized in 2013–2014 over a period of eight months, focusing on SNS e-WoM motivations, e-WoM traits, behaviors, and impacts on Generation Y — an economically significant, particularly heavy user of such sites (Miller et al., 2010) and the most successful generational cohort in terms of its participation in online media (Strutton, Taylor, & Thompson, 2011), making it a conceptually appropriate target of analysis. "E-WoM motivations" refer to constructs explaining the propensity of users to seek opinions; whereas "e-WoM traits" denotes aspects of peer-generated information influencing users' behaviors.

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Contributions to knowledge encompass the empirical study and disconfirmation of normative expectations and conclusions in extant research, invalidating some precepts in a growing area of marketing science. Contrary to expectations, SNS users are shown to fulfill information-related, economic and utilitarian – not social or entertainment – motivations when seeking e-WoM. Nor are message volume and valence viewed as key e-WoM traits — disconfirming recent conclusions. These and other unanticipated, counterintuitive results are incorporated in a novel conceptual framework of e-WoM and SNS user behaviors which deviates from current marketing theory and provides a revised understanding of e-WoM search, evaluations and SNS behaviors, and which could be tested quantitatively in future research.

The discussion opens by summarily presenting current literatures on e-WoM and SNSs, and by generating propositions which are empirically explored. Separate sections documenting the empirical research follow, including an overview of data collection and analysis, an assessment of key narrative themes, and their conceptualization. The discussion of practical lessons complements the coverage of conceptual implications.

2. The research terrain

2.1. Theory of uses and gratifications

The theory of uses and gratifications (UGT hereafter) anticipates that humans communicate in order to fulfill "core motivations" (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004). Early UGT theorists define "gratifications" as outcomes sought when using a medium, including specific benefits. They are subjective goal-oriented evaluations, while motivations are the causes of particular actions during the search for fulfilling needs (Burton & Khammash, 2010). UGT underlies an emerging stream in SNS scholarship, with motives identified so far encompassing informational and hedonic (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006); rational and emotional; personal and social (Burton & Khammash, 2010); and social, entertainment and informational (Heinonen, 2011; see also Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Chan et al., 2012).

Behavior such as e-WoM, which is goal-directed, is suitable for UGT analysis. However, though UGT is frequently applied to theorizations of the use of the Internet more generally (Loonam & O'Loughlin, 2008; Courtois, Mechant, De Marez, & Verleye, 2009) and e-WoM (Pentina, Gammoh, Zhang, & Mallin, 2013) including authoring e-WoM (Chan et al., 2012), its application to user-generated media such as SNSs remains limited (Sepp, Liljander, & Gummerus, 2011). Only a handful of recent studies attend to research questions similar to ours (e.g. Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Dunne, Lawler, & Rowley, 2010), including two studies on Weibo. However, none analyze users' motivations to seek e-WoM in SNSs, even though Alhabash et al. (2012) anticipate distinct motivations marking SNS usage, suggesting that standard motivations and conclusions in UGT may not be applicable. Applying UGT to the context empirically studied here should help modify and extend theory.

2.2. Research on e-WoM; SNSs

Although being a relatively new subject in marketing communications research, WoM or "peer-to-peer influence" has existed for hundreds of years (Burton & Khammash, 2010). It exerts considerable influence on consumers' choice (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010; Katona, Zubcsek, & Sarvary, 2011). However, it was the advent of the Internet that heralded the explosion in online, peer-to-peer communication (Vilpponen, Winter, & Sundqvist, 2006; Allsop, Bryce, Bassett, & Hoskins, 2007) across consumption contexts (Korgaonkar & Karson, 2007). Compared with traditional WoM, e-WoM is transferred more quickly and effectively across a range of online media including blogs and online communities (Thorson & Rodgers, 2006; Dwyer, 2007). It is not restricted in terms of location, participants and time, simultaneously reaching multiple constituencies

(Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). E-WoM referrals have long carryover effects and do not experience "post-promotional dips" (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009, Trusov, Bodapati, & Bucklin, 2010). E-WoM is therefore both effective (Doh & Hwang, 2009) and more cost-effective (Bailey, 2005) than other marketing communications.

Research on consumers' motives to engage in e-WoM in contexts other than SNSs highlights "information" (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000) especially in situations marked by high uncertainty, risks and costs when consumer demand for e-WoM increases (Senecal & Nantel, 2004). The literature on SNSs also emphasizes users' need to obtain information (Pentina et al., 2013). Information seeking motivations remain prominent in extant research, even though analysts list additional, equally prominent motivations for SNS participation explored in further detail later in this discussion. Therefore, we anticipate the following in SNS contexts:

Proposition 1. : *Information may be a key motivation to seek SNS e-WoM.*

Quality of the information contained in e-WoM – its accuracy, completeness, timeliness, consistency and relevance – in SNSs facilitates e-WoM sharing and participation (Heinrichs, Lim, & Lim, 2013). We define participation differently than Heinrichs et al. (2013), as e-WoM search, in line with the focus on search motivations as expressed in research question 1. One expression of information quality, message relevance, is at times operationalized as "message usefulness", as in Baek, Ahn, and Choi's (2012) analysis, or is equated with message (in)consistency, reviewer credibility and proportion of negative words. However, relevance in online environments may be distinct from the above message traits (see Yeh & Choi, 2011; Pentina et al., 2013); it should therefore be empirically examined alone, in terms of its unique, separate role in motivating e-WoM search. Though significant, such issues have only recently been explored (Baek et al., 2012), and research on information usefulness of e-WoM in SNSs is in its infancy. The significance of the above matters to information search is confirmed when consulting the larger literature on information seeking. It suffices to mention the importance of information usefulness to health information seeking (Huh, DeLorme, Reid, & Kim, 2010), information search in the context of digital safety (Davis, 2012), or when analyzing students' confidence in evaluating information usefulness (Warwick, Rimmer, Blandford, Gow, & Buchanan, 2009). Therefore:

Proposition 2. : *Information relevance and usefulness are expected to motivate SNS users to solicit e-WoM.*

With technology separating users in online environments, assessments of the credibility of information sources are rendered difficult (Jensen et al., 2013). Although source credibility has been occasionally described as being higher in SNSs (Chu & Kim, 2011) than in other online media, credibility in SNS remains problematic (Chu & Choi, 2011) considering the general riskiness (Harridge-March, 2006; Greenberg, Greenberg, & Antonucci, 2007) of online environments and the difficulties in establishing online trust (Jensen et al., 2013; Kelly, Kerr, & Drennan, 2010). Consumers' engagement in e-WoM has been shown to rely upon trust in others in the context of eBay (Dellarocas, 2003) and online brand communities (Yeh & Choi, 2011). A recent study of e-WoM in the specific context of brand communities confirms that encouraging search and use of e-WoM should involve enhancing one's credibility, with trustworthiness viewed as the most important among three credibility dimensions (see Reichelt, Sievert, & Jacob, 2014). The study in question suggests that trustworthiness affects both utilitarian and social functions of e-WoM. In this research, credibility (trustworthiness) is studied with respect to its cognitive and affective components only (McAllister, 1995): namely, confidence in the care, concern, reliability and responsibility of one's communication partners. It is anticipated that source credibility plays a significant role in e-WoM (Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002; Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007) and especially in a Chinese cultural context (Chu & Choi, 2011) due to specificities of SNSs