



The effects of food safety issues released by we media on consumers' awareness and purchasing behavior: A case study in China



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ABSTRACT

In recent years, we media, i.e., micro-blogs, have drawn increasing attention to their roles by exposing food safety scandals in China. In this paper, a typical case of a scandal concerning “set-style yogurt and jelly event” reported by a micro-blog was studied and analyzed in terms of its dissemination mode and the mechanism of how a micro-blog from “opinion leaders” affected public attention. Related sales data of set-style yogurt and jelly products were obtained after the event from a supermarket corporation in Beijing and used to analyze trends affected by the scandal. The results indicate that in the new media age, we media has greatly increased dissemination of the voices of “opinion leaders” and triggered large-scale communication of food safety messages to the public. In this serious information asymmetry situation between public and food manufacturer, food-safety scandals revealed by we media could easily be noticed by consumers and further affect their judgments of expected utility and their purchasing behavior. Sales volume decreases and negative influence on brand reputation might contribute to correcting food manufacturers' behavior. We media could be an effective tool to improve the food-safety status of the market.

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Introduction

During the past 10 years, China has made great strides in economic development; however, in this transition period, many problems have appeared due to the immature social credit environment. Food-safety scandals involving adulteration, fraud and misleading advertising have frequently been reported during the past 5 years. The food safety problem has become an issue of high concern to Chinese people. According to a survey in 2012 conducted by the magazine “*Xiaokang*”, food safety ranked as the top issue about which the public was most concerned; 65.8% of the respondents indicated a high degree of focus on the food-safety situation in China (E, 2012). Food-safety regulations and administrative intervention actions executed by the Chinese government have played an essential role in solving public food-safety problems. However, there are millions of small-scale food enterprises and workshops with scattered distribution areas in China. In this serious situation, it is difficult to rely only on the supervision power, which has limited resources to administrate such a large number of food-distributing entities.

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Recently, one phenomenon has drawn attention: many food scandals were initially revealed by the media rather than by supervision officials, and then were noticed by the public. Media, especially new media based on the Internet, seems to be playing an increasingly essential role in exposing food-safety problems. Compared with the traditional media, new media has several advantages including rapid dissemination, a relatively free flow of information, online interaction and no limits on time or location. In particular, micro-blogs, the Chinese version of Twitter, have grown to be very powerful in China during the past 5 years and have become an important platform and channel for the public to obtain information. By the end of 2012, micro-blog users had increased to 0.309 billion and included over 50% of all Internet users in China (CNNIC, 2013). Micro-blogs embody the core idea of “Public DIY”, enabling everyone to be a news reporter and spread information publicly from his/her micro-blog as the media do; therefore, a new type of media based on the micro-blog channel, called we media, formed. We media changes the traditional news dissemination pattern and forms a brand new mode of information production through social, interactive means.

We media has shown its dissemination power to the public. Taking food-safety issues as an example, over 30 million and 2.8 million micro-blogs delivered results from searches on the keywords “food safety” and “food exposure”, respectively. However,

apparently not just anyone's micro-blog can influence power; only some of them play an important role in spreading information to the public. We call them the "opinion leaders". Their micro-blogs are rapidly noticed, transmitted and disseminated. At this point, we are interested in how influential the micro-blogs of the "opinion leaders" can be.

In this study, we analyzed a case study of a food scandal event—the 2012 "set-style yogurt and jelly event"—reported by a popular TV host on his micro-blog. The event study method was used to analyze how this micro-blog affected consumers' awareness and how news passing through this channel affected consumers' purchasing behavior. We media's potential function of improving food-safety status was also explored.

Background

Literature review of we media and their influence on consumers

Postman (1982) considers that any social change brought about by a new type of information dissemination comes not only from changes in information content but also from changes in information symbols, spread speed, information resources, dissemination numbers and from the environment of the information. There have been various studies on information diffusion on the Internet through not only we media but also social media. Cha et al. (2009) analyzed information dissemination in the Flickr social network. Kim et al. (2009) investigated information diffusion among blog entries by detecting content reuse.

Recently, it was found that domain-independent social media with large opportunities for self-disclosure, such as Twitter and Facebook, are used with equal frequency for both search-determined sub-decisions and experience-determined sub-decisions (Fred and Robert, 2014). Consumers are turning more frequently to various types of social media to conduct their information searches and to make their purchasing decisions. Many studies have reported and confirmed that social media is motivating deep changes in consumer behavior (Williams and Cothrell, 2000; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Kozinets et al., 2010; Cásalo et al., 2011). Information from social media, such as review sites, individual weblogs, Facebook accounts and twitter messages, significantly influences consumer decisions (Park and Kim, 2008). Social media provide a public forum that provides individual consumers their own voice as well access to product information that facilitates their purchase decisions. A study revealed that 62% of US consumers read consumer-generated online reviews and 98% of them find these reviews sufficiently reliable; 80% of these consumers said that reading these reviews has affected their buying intentions (Pookulangaran and Koesler, 2011). On the other hand, even a small amount of negative information from a few postings can have substantial effects on consumer attitudes (Schlosser, 2005). Hayta (2013) divided the effects of social media on consumer behaviors into three groups: behaviors affecting consumption (positive verbal communication, negative verbal communication, opinion leadership), behaviors affected by others regarding consumption (searching for information on products, searching for others' opinions), and consumer behaviors toward using social media as a communication tool to report satisfaction or dissatisfaction following product purchase.

Many studies also have studied the factors affecting the influence power of social media. Kaplan and Haenlein (2011) identified three factors that have contributed to the success of micro-blogs: the concept of ambient awareness, the unique type of push–push–pull communication such as Twitter provides, and the ability to serve as a platform for virtual exhibitionism. It appears that the larger the number of social media users, the higher the probability

that information is disseminated widely. However, although the number of users might influence the scope of the spread, it was the VIP users, or "opinion leaders," who actually determined the depth and effects of this dissemination. Corey (1971) defines opinion leaders as "trusted and informed people who exist in virtually all primary groups." They could be either academic authorities or supervision authorities in a certain area, or just celebrity such as a movie star or singer followed by millions of fans. Whereas the public does not generally accept information from the mass media uncritically, they do tend to easily accept information from "opinion leaders" (Choi and Han, 2013). Because "opinion leaders" are models for opinion, they can be major influencers of marketing efforts and consumer decision making through word-of-mouth communication to their circles (Sarathy and Patro, 2013). From this point of view, the "opinion leaders" in we media are becoming the guides of public opinion, and the more fans they have, the greater their influence (Wang and Li, 2013).

The 2012 "set-style yogurt and jelly event" in China

Near noon on April 9th, 2012, a popular host of CCTV (China Central Television) posted a tweet on his micro-blog: "Do not eat set-style yogurt and jelly any more, especially for the kids. The inside is terrible. I can't say any more". In the following 5 h, this micro-blog was forwarded 120 thousand times with 22,155 comments and drew great attention to set-style yogurt and jelly products' safety issues. At the same time, another celebrity also published a micro-blog and said, "I have asked him (the host) why, his answer was the leather shoes you discarded might be eaten by you some day." On the night of April 9th, both of the micro-blogs were deleted. On April 12th, the China Dairy Industry Association announced that the yogurt products made by the major dairy manufacturers in China strictly comply with national standards and would never use industrial gelatin as materials. However, these two micro-blogs triggered an unexpectedly large amount of attention for quite some time.

Questions development

There were two reasons that we chose this event as the case study target. First, the message was only released initially by the micro-blogs and was followed by other types of media and the official press. Second, the official institution neither confirmed nor denied the truth of the information throughout the entire event. From a communication point of view, it could not be regarded as a food-safety incident but instead as a message related to food-safety. Therefore, this event was a good example to test the influence of we media on the public.

In this paper, we discuss the following two questions:

Q1: Could a food-safety message reported by we media arouse the public awareness? What is the influence power of we media?

Q2: Could a food-safety message reported by we media influence consumers' purchasing behavior?

Data and methodology

Data

To explore the influence power of a food-safety message reported by we media to the public, we used three groups of data to indicate the degree of public attention. First, we used numbers of releasing- and forwarding-related micro-blogs during the entire month of April 2012 as well as the following months in 2012.

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