Branding with social media: User gratifications, usage patterns, and brand message content strategies

Qin Gao[*], Chenyue Feng

Department of Industrial Engineering, Tsinghua University, Beijing 100084, China

A B S T R A C T

The emergence of social media provides a new platform for developing brand–consumer relationships. The aim of the current study is to examine the differences in Chinese users' gratifications of different social media and the impact of brand content strategies on the quality of brand–consumer communication via social media. In the first study, 209 SNS and 161 microblog users were surveyed. Five dimensions of social media gratifications emerged from the factor analysis. Significant differences in the strengths of gratifications were found between SNS and microblog users. Usage patterns of SNS and microblog are analyzed and compared. In the second study, we examined the impact of users' gratification and the type of social media on the effectiveness of different brand content strategies through a two-week experiment involving 60 SNS users and 61 microblog users. Implications for developing branding strategies on different social media platforms are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Social media have gained much popularity among Internet users and have provided a new paradigm for branding activities. A survey of participants from 35 countries showed that 50% of social media users are connected to brands, 42% had a conversation with a brand on social media, and 36% posted content about a brand or a company on social media (InSite Consulting, 2011). According to a report published by the Data Center of China Internet (2013), more than 160,000 companies in China had registered official accounts on Sina Weibo, the largest microblog platform in China and more than 80% of microblog users in China follow company microblog users.

These statistics show a great opportunity for leveraging social media for brand management, as discussed by a number of researchers (Dholakia & Durham, 2010; Kabadayi & Price, 2014; Kim & Ko, 2012a,b; Rauschnabel, Praxmarer, & Ivens, 2012; de Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012). Building a brand page on social media provides a source of continuously updated information for consumers while at the same time gaining exposure for brands. The ability to hold conversations directly with consumers on social media makes consumer–brand relationships more intimate and

fosters more rapport with consumers, especially young people. The interactive dialogues also provide an opportunity to reduce misunderstanding toward brands. Ample research has provide empirical evidence for the beneficial influence of social media branding. Early research found that participation in fan communities has a positive impact on consumer loyalty and commitment (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Kim, Lee, & Hiemstra, 2004). Dholakia and Durham (2010) found that becoming fans of the Facebook page of a restaurant changed its consumers' behavior dramatically: they visited the store more often and generated more positive word of mouth. Through two survey studies, Kim and Ko (2012a,b) found that social media marketing behaviors have a positive impact on consumer relationships, purchase intention, and equity drivers.

More recently, there has been research on factors that influence the success of social media branding. Some researchers (Rauschnabel et al., 2012; de Vries et al., 2012) investigated design features—such as the position, size, vividness, variety of media used, and interactivity—that influence the popularity of posts on Facebook brand fan pages. In addition to these design issues, perhaps a more important decision to make in social media branding is what kind of content to post. Related research reveals inadequate yet conflicting findings. De Vries et al.'s (2012) results show that whether posts are informative or entertaining has no significant influence. This contrasts with the study by Kim and Ko (2012b), which found that the entertainment properties of social media marketing are the strongest predictor of perceived intimacy,

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: gaoqin@tsinghua.edu.cn (Q. Gao).

trust, and purchase intention, but the effect of the informative properties was insignificant.

A limitation that may lead to these conflicts is the failure to consider the motivations that drive consumers to use social media. People use media to gratify their social and psychological needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). Their gratifications strongly influence how they use and behave toward the media. Understanding these gratification is critical to providing the right content and to getting consumers actively engaged with brands on social media. Furthermore, people often use more than one type of social media simultaneously and they seek different gratifications from the different types (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Social networking services (SNS, such as Facebook) and microblog sites (e.g., Twitter) are most popular for branding and marketing use. These two systems share similarities but are different. How these differences influence people's gratifications, their usage behaviors, and their responses to different content strategies remain unstudied. In addition, the majority of the current research in this field focuses exclusively on Westerners. Given an internet user base of 688 million and over 90% of it being active social media users, we found an investigation how Chinese social media users' gratification sought and its influence on user behaviors in social media is needed to shed light on developing proper social media branding strategies for this particular population.

The aim of the current study is to examine the difference in Chinese users' gratifications of different social media and the implications for designing brand content strategies on social media. Two studies were conducted. Based on the literature review, we identified five major dimensions of gratifications of social media use and collected possible items for each gratification. Then a survey involving 209 SNS users and 161 microblog users was conducted. Chinese users' gratifications for using SNS and microblog sites were identified and compared, and the influence of these gratifications on their usage behaviors was examined. We also classified social media users into groups based on their usage patterns. In the second study, we examined the impact of users' gratifications and the type of social media used on the effectiveness of different brand content strategies through a two-week experiment involving 60 SNS users and 61 microblog users.

2. Literature review

2.1. Gratifications of social media usage

As one of the most successful theoretical frameworks to examine media-use motivations and behaviors, uses and gratifications theory differs from previous mass media theories in that it assumes the audience actively selects media to satisfy specific needs rather than passively receives media (Katz et al., 1973). A number of recent studies have applied this theory to social media to understand motivations underpinning consumers' media choice and usage, as shown in Table 1. By synthesizing these studies as well as the gratifications typologies of traditional mass media (Katz et al., 1973; McQuail, 1984) we classified gratifications of social media uses into five categories: information seeking, entertainment, social interaction, self-expression, and impression management.

- **Information seeking**: Social media have more than ever lowered the barriers to sharing information. The networking features allow users to receive information from sources they trust and find interesting. People increasingly use social media to learn about news and events (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010; Pew Research Center's Journalism Project, 2012; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008), to obtain recommendations about products and content (Bondad-Brown, Rice, & Pearce, 2011; Kim, 2014), and to seek health advice and even online diagnoses (Fox & Duggan, 2013; Scanfeld, Scanfeld, & Larson, 2010). As suggested by Shao (2009), people use social media to learn how to make sense of things for just about any subject.

- **Entertainment**: Another major use of social media is for entertaining oneself. By browsing interesting content shared by others, sharing others' life experiences, and spreading gossip, people can vent negative feelings, escape from problems, and fill time (Dunne et al., 2010; Johnson & Yang, 2009a; Park et al., 2009; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010; Whiting & Williams, 2013; Zhao & Rosson, 2009).

- **Social interaction**: Social media constitute a primary venue for young people to exchange social support, to maintain existing relationships, and to meet new friends. Users can interact with each other by sharing content, commenting on or reposting others' content, marking others' content with "favorite" or "like it," and messaging others directly. Within existing social groups, people use social media to enhance connectedness and develop common ground (Pai & Arnott, 2013; Zhao & Rosson, 2009)

- **Self-expression**: People use social media to share information about themselves and to show who they are and what they like. Such self-expressive behaviors are associated with a self-verification motive to present one's true self to the outside world, to confirm an established self-concept, and to maintain consistency in self-knowledge (Aaker, 1999; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Sedikides & Strube, 1995). In addition, self-expression is a necessary step for people to create an identity, which is critical for obtaining peer acceptance and exchanging social support (Shao, 2009).

- **Impression management**: A number of studies found that social media users present their personal information deliberately to give others a positive impression of them (Dunne et al., 2010; Pai & Arnott, 2013; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Some users intentionally employ social media to develop social relationships and promote self-status (Birnie & Horvath, 2002; Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Green & Pearson, 2005; Park et al., 2009). Such self-enhancement behaviors are associated with the need to maintain and enhance self-esteem (Greenwald, Bellezza, & Banaji, 1988).

2.2. The influence of gratifications on social media usage

Previous research has indicated that the differences in the gratifications of social media may lead to different use behaviors. Whereas Johnson and Yang (2009) found that only information motives, not social motives, are positively related to Twitter use, two studies (Leung, 2013; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010) on Facebook users found that people use Facebook to meet their social needs. The results imply that the specific features of social media may moderate the associations between the gratifications and the usage behaviors. However, the definition and measurement of media use differs in previous research. Whereas some researchers refer to it as the frequency of site visits or the time spent on a site (Johnson & Yang, 2009; Joinson, 2008; Wang & Tchernev, 2012), some others counted certain activities such as generating new content and updating profiles (Leung, 2009; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). In addition, these studies collected usage data either by asking the participants to estimate how many times or how much time they use the site (Johnson & Yang, 2009) or to rate their usage on five- or eight-point scales (Joinson, 2008; Leung, 2013; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). The accuracy of the data is thus questionable.