Wechat Brands: Communal Interaction and Brand Publicity in Chinese Social Media

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Recent research on communal consumption has shifted its theoretical focus from a brand’s linking value in sustaining interaction to its publicity value of facilitating visibility. We examine brands on Chinese social media platform WeChat and report a hybrid form of sociality that conceptually lies between communal interaction and brand publicity.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Extant research on communal consumption has previously focused on how brands facilitate communal interaction and the expression of collective identity (Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar 2007; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009) to recently how brands also enhance publicity, visibility, and other forms of sociality (e.g., Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016; Kozinets et al. 2010; McQuarrie, Miller and Phillips 2013). This stream of work suggests a changing focus from a brand’s “linking value” to its “publicity value”, and argues that consumer assemblies are motivated not only by the desire for interaction but also by the desire for visibility and publicity. The essential issue is how varied communication forms shape communication content and communal practices (Kozinets et al. 2010). In this paper, we examine a hybrid form of sociality that conceptually lies between communal interaction and brand publicity.

The context of our study is China’s dominant social media platform, WeChat. With more than 846 million monthly active users, WeChat has dominated Chinese social media space since its launch on January 21st 2011. It successfully integrates a variety of social media functions offered only separately by other Western platforms, most of which are not available for Chinese consumers (e.g., Twitter/Facebook/Instagram). WeChat allows users to do instant message, make video-calls, share experiences, pay bills, play games, shop, blog, book hotels and flights, and even to call a taxi. This integrated social media hybrid provides a unique opportunity to examine how technology shapes consumption and how social media form shapes its content (see Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman 2017).

In this study, we focused on a particular function, WeChat Blog or Public Account. WeChat bloggers create various content including food, health, fashion, travel etc. WeChat blogs often have a large devoted audience, whose comments are routinely integrated by bloggers to create more engaging commercial content. Although everyone can leave a comment, only comments selected by the blogger will be publicly displayed. Filtered comments and the original blog become integrated and contribute to the development of a personal brand but not necessarily a community.

We used netnography (Kozinets 2015) and in-depth interviews (McCracken 1988) to collect data. Online fieldwork focused on WeChat blogs and reader comments. As a WeChat blogger with over 20,000 followers and several brand collaborations to date, the first author also kept notes of her experiences and interactions on WeChat. 30 in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 popular bloggers from various fields and 10 marketers who used WeChat public account for promotions in China. Our analysis took an iterative approach moving between data and theory (Spiggle 1994; Kozinets 2015).

Our findings suggest that WeChat brands represent a markedly different form of sociality to the brand community or brand public discussed in previous studies. WeChat blogs discourage interaction among users and attention is carefully directed toward the communication content. Participants’ comments are not immediately displayed but are carefully filtered by bloggers. Promotion is an iterative process, in which the blogger generates a blog entry, elicits comments, then select and use the comments to construe new meanings that are consistent with the blog.

Previous research has noted consumers’ dislike of commercial messages on social media (Pashkevich et al. 2012) and has highlighted the commercial-communal tensions (e.g., Kozinets et al. 2010). However, we found that Chinese users appear more receptive toward commercial content. Although consumers may not necessarily reject or detain commercial messages on blogs (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013), motivations for positive responses are culturally embedded and may go beyond the notions of authenticity that has been offered as an explanation in extant research.

Within this “semi-closed” social media platform, utilizing reader comments is important in sustaining a successful WeChat brand. Four types of comments that illustrate the engagement of devoted readers are identified: loyalty and devotion, blog content extension, inquiries about promoted brands, and opposition to bloggers’ views. WeChat bloggers do not change their narrative style or blogger communicative character in their word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) promotions. Key bloggers strategically select and use comments to build credibility and authenticity, to express connection, to provide empathetic understanding, and to remove unwanted audience and guard their WeChat brand. All these differ from the previous notion of WOMM, in which bloggers adopt varied narrative strategies (e.g., evaluation, explanation, embracing, and endorsement) to justify their promotion of marketing message (Kozinets et al. 2010). We discuss the theoretical implications of our study for our understanding of communal consumption and brand publicity.

REFERENCES