Motivations and Usage Patterns of Weibo

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Abstract

Referred to as “Weibo,” microblogging in China has witnessed an exponential growth. In addition to the Twitter-like functionality, Weibo allows rich media uploads into user feeds, provides threaded comments, and offers applications, games, and Weibo medals. This expanded functionality, as well as the observed differences in trending content, suggests potentially different user motivations to join Weibo and their usage patterns compared to Twitter. This pioneering study identifies dominant Weibo user motivations and their effects on usage patterns. We discuss the findings of an online survey of 234 Weibo users and suggest managerial implications and future research directions.

Introduction

Chinesegovernments control and censorship of the Internet does not curb its citizens’ enthusiasm toward social media. More than in many countries, social media are deeply integrated into Chinese people’s lives, and young people report having more online than face-to-face friends.¹ The banning of Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube in China has resulted in a flowering social media landscape dominated by domestic players such as social networking sites (SNS) Renren and Kaixin001, microblogging service Weibo, and video sharing service Youkou. Approximately 54.7 percent of Internet users in China own or visit blogs and 47.3 percent have an account on one or more SNS. More than 25 percent write 10 or more posts on forums, blogs, or SNS every day, and 92.3 percent of Internet users visit social media pages at least three times a week.² Additionally, half of the 500 million Chinese Internet users maintain a microblogging profile.³ Interestingly, while recent statistics show a slight decrease in the proportions of Internet users engaged in blogs, online gaming, and social networking, the participation in microblogging has increased by 34.9 percent in 2011 compared to 2010.³

Microblogging is a form of social media that allows users to broadcast short messages via multiple platforms to friends and followers, ensuring frequent and immediate updates on their activities, opinions, and status.⁴ The most popular microblogging platform in the world is Twitter. Currently reporting over 145 million registered users,⁵ it has inspired numerous clones and competitors around the world. After Twitter was blocked in China in 2009, several Chinese media companies launched their own microblogging services that are rapidly gaining popularity. Referred to as “Weibo,” microblogging in China has witnessed an exponential growth of 296 percent in 1 year (to 250 million users by end of 2011).³ Weibo combines microblogging functionalities with those of social networks, like Facebook. In addition to posting short messages and sharing pictures, Weibo users can upload videos, play games, and communicate through private instant messaging. However, unlike members of SNS, Weibo users are more inclined to follow strangers, including experts in the field, stars, and social celebrities and pay less attention to the content from friends and acquaintances. The loose social network on Weibo established user relationship through rich information flow. Since the launch of Weibo, many SNS users have joined the platforms and now spend more time on Weibo than on SNS. As a result, Renren has experienced slow growth rate while Kaixin001 has suffered a 65 percent drop in daily average visitor number from early 2010 to August 2011.⁶

The leader of the microblogging service (over 100 users) is Weibo provided by Sina, the largest Chinese-language information web portal.⁷ Much like Twitter, Sina Weibo enables users to post short (140 characters or less) tweets or messages that are displayed on a user’s Weibo page. Since each character in Chinese represents a whole word, Chinese tweets have richer content than what can be communicated through 140 characters in English. A user’s Weibo page is publicly viewable by anyone, and mutual followers (called fans) can exchange private messages. Like Twitter, Weibo has search, trending topics, and other utilities. In addition to Twitter-like functionality, Sina Weibo allows users to upload music, videos, pictures, and emoticons directly into user feeds. It also allows threaded comments on feeds, seen under the original message and not broadcast to the user’s

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followers. Given broader functionality of Weibo that allows posting photos, videos, and emoticons in tweets, as well as commenting on others’ posts, interacting and playing games, and considering the specifics of the Chinese censorship policies, it is possible that a different set of motivations drives Weibo users to tweet and retweet messages, follow others, and spend time on the site. While no studies to date have compared microblogging motivations in different cultures, data from other social networks suggest possible influence of value orientations on participants’ motives and usage patterns, which underscores the possibility of unique findings in the Chinese context. The objectives of the present study were to inductively arrive at major motivations to use Weibo, and to identify among them the motives affecting Weibo usage pattern.

Methods

Five in-depth interviews (20 to 50 minutes each) with Weibo users were conducted with the goal to elicit information about the respondents’ uses of and behaviors on Weibo, reasons for joining, its importance in their lives, and what they enjoy in the process of using it. The transcripts were analyzed to generate a comprehensive list of 37 motivations. Subsequently, this list was sent to a Weibo user with more than 300 followers for feedback. Seven users provided comments that led to one item deletion due to its ambiguity and overlap with other items, and adding four items for the total of 40 motivational items.

An online survey was designed that asked respondents to rate, using a 7-point, Likert scale, the 40 Weibo use motives beginning with the following phrase: “I use Weibo to ______.” The scale was anchored at 1 (strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree). The survey also asked for the respondents’ demographics, time spent on Weibo each day, frequency of tweet updates, the time they first registered on Weibo, and the numbers of followers and those followed by them. The online survey was distributed to Weibo users by a marketing research company in China. Of the 237 responses collected, four were incomplete and 234 were retained for the analysis.

Results

The respondents represented 18 provinces, 4 municipalities, and 3 autonomous regions, well reflecting China’s geographic diversity. Table 1 shows the respondents’ demographic information along with their tweet frequency. The respondents had a median of 67 fans (min = 0, max = 789093), followed a median of 56 other users (min = 0, max = 491771), and posted a median of 150 tweets (min = 0, max = 10981).

As recommended, an exploratory factor analysis with oblique rotation was performed on the motivations data. After deleting six items due to low loadings or cross-loadings, eight factors explaining a total of 67.42 percent variance were identified. Table 2 presents the items retained for each factor along with their Eigenvalues, percentage of variance explained, and Cronbach’s alpha scores (all above 0.696). The scale items for each factor were averaged to create composite factor scores for further analysis.

The “Professional Development” factor reflects Weibo use to expand career networks, find recruitment information, exchange working and learning experience, keep up with the latest industry development, and promote own products and...
services. The “Emotional Release” factor manifests needs to vent, complain, and relieve pressure on Weibo, and to show another side of oneself. “Information Seeking” includes search for and learning useful information, learning about news, and getting help from others. “Citizenship Behavior” reflects Weibo users’ desires to not only provide help and information to others, but also to earn attention and recognition, which is more indicative of reward- and approval-seeking. “Social Connection” motivation stems from the need to keep in touch with real-time friends and to find those they lost contact with. It also reflects needs to discuss hot topics with others, search for interesting people, and join a Weibo group. “Visibility” factor items include communicating with celebrities, improving own status, and gaining more fans. “Self-Expression” motivations include recording and preserving thoughts and feelings on Weibo and expressing opinions. Finally, “Interaction with Weibo” factor included such items as posting pictures and videos, participating in activities sponsored by Weibo, and earning Weibo medals.

### Weibo motives and user demographics

Previous research shows that women and men perceive and use technology differently. For example, female bloggers discuss their personal life more frequently and write in a more personal style. Male bloggers, on the other hand, write more about technology, money, and politics than women. On Facebook, women are more likely than men to view and share photos, keep in touch with friends, and post status updates. A study from PEW research center shows that women are more likely to consume social media to connect with families than men. We conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) test to compare the difference in Weibo motivation between females and males. The result showed a marginally significant difference between men and women on the scores across the eight motivation scales ($F = 1.971, p = 0.051$). Further analysis of between-subjects effects showed that scores were significantly different on one factor: Citizenship Behavior ($F = 5.969, p = 0.015$). Women are more likely to use Weibo to provide help and information to others. Other motivations appear to be equally important for both men and women. These results warrant further research into gender differences online and their potential cultural or value-based antecedents.

Age has also been shown to affect social media use. For example, younger people are more likely to connect with friends and view and share pictures on Facebook than older users. Younger participants also spend more time on Facebook and have more friends than older participants, while middle-aged and older adults are more likely to use social media as a tool to connect with people with common interests. A MANOVA test conducted to compare Weibo motives across different age groups showed an overall marginally significant difference ($F = 1.439, p = 0.081$). Further tests showed that users between 26 and 30 years old scored much higher on Visibility factor than other age groups ($F = 4.099, p = 0.007$). This difference may indicate that younger people are more likely to use Weibo for self-promotion, possibly for professional or dating purposes.

### Predicting Weibo use patterns

A series of multiple regressions were run using motivation factor scores to predict frequency of tweet updates, time spent on Weibo every day, total number of tweets, and number of fans. Age and gender were used as control variables (Table 3). Tweet update frequency appears to be influenced by the motivations of Self-Expression ($\beta = 0.438, p < 0.01$) and Interaction with Weibo ($\beta = 0.231, p < 0.05$). Only Self-Expression ($\beta = 0.334, p < 0.01$) is significantly related to time spent on Weibo daily. The natural log of the number of tweets posted was used as the dependent variable in the regression that, in addition to Weibo use motivations, contained the control variables of age, gender, time spent on the site daily, and the time since Weibo registration. Only Self-Expression motivation ($\beta = 0.501, p < 0.01$) was significantly related to the number of tweets, along with the time spent on the site daily ($\beta = 0.584, p < 0.01$), and the time since Weibo registration ($\beta = 0.236, p < 0.01$). Finally, the natural log of the number of fans, used as the dependent variable, was significantly influenced by Social Connection ($\beta = 0.623, p < 0.01$) and Citizenship Behavior ($\beta = 0.423, p < 0.05$) motivations, as well as by the time spent on Weibo daily ($\beta = 0.368, p < 0.01$) and time since Weibo registration ($\beta = 0.155, p < 0.05$). Finally, only age ($\beta = 0.048, p < 0.05$) and time spent on Weibo daily ($\beta = 0.417, p < 0.01$) affected the number of other users the respondents followed on Weibo.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The study examines the motivations to use Weibo—a relatively new social media platform that has attracted nearly half of the Chinese Internet users. Weibo has been deeply integrated into users’ life and provides a wide range of functions that characterize it as a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook. Our findings suggest that in addition to the two major motivations identified in prior research for using Twitter (informational and social), Weibo users join the service also to facilitate their professional development, fulfill emotional needs, reciprocate by helping other users with advice and information, enhance their social status, express oneself, and interact with the site and other users. The wider spectrum of motivations may be attributed to the more comprehensive functionality and flexibility that make Weibo a synthesis of microblogging and social networking. As a microblogging platform, Weibo facilitates professional development, broad visibility and self-promotion, as well as real-time information updates. It supports weak-tie relationship formation and maintenance. As a social network, Weibo
serves as a platform for personality expression, social connection, entertainment, as well as providing and seeking assistance. Users can express themselves fully through rich media, threaded comments, and relatively longer tweets afforded by 140 Chinese characters. The strong ties in the physical world can be enhanced through this digital system. Users can keep in touch with current friends and often reconnect with friends and acquaintances whom they lost contact with. In addition, applications such as games, Weibo events, and rewards offer relational and experiential appeals to users.

Our results show that only motivations traditionally associated with social networks assert significant influences on Weibo usage patterns. The single important driver of both spending more time on Weibo and posting more tweets is the Self-Expression motivation. This motivation, together with the need for interactivity, is also responsible for increasing the frequency of tweet updates. By providing an opportunity to share rich media, use applications, and participate in games, Weibo facilitates both self-expression and interactivity, leading to more frequent contributions and longer stay on the site. Consistent with earlier research reporting that the two most important motives for hosting a personal webpage and exhibiting more activity on Facebook are impression management and self-expression,22,23 user activities on Weibo also appear to be mainly driven by these objectives.
Interestingly, the number of followers (a surrogate measure of popularity) is influenced by different user motivations: the needs for social connection and citizenship behavior, as well as by the amount of time spent daily on Weibo. It appears that those who join Weibo to participate in discussions, join groups, get in touch with friends and interesting people, and to provide help and information, offer greater value to other participants (probably by generating more content) and thus enjoy higher popularity. Our results show that not all identified motivations affect the degree of user content creation and patterns of interactivity with the site and other users. While the needs for social connection and citizenship behavior are major determinants of popularity, they do not affect frequency and number of updates or time spent on Weibo daily. What makes these users popular, apparently, is not their level of activity, but the quality of their contributions. The need for self-expression, while an important driver of the frequency of updates, time spent on Weibo, and the total number of tweets, does not ensure more followers. Similarly, those who join Weibo to interact, play games, and receive awards, while exhibiting higher activity, do not spend more time on the site or attract more followers. Finally, the needs for professional development, emotional release, or information seeking do not appear to have any differential influence on Weibo usage patterns. These motivations may be indicative of more passive usage patterns that do not require proactive contributions. The lack of the visibility motivation to affect usage indicators beyond the time spent daily on the site is surprising and deserves further investigation. Future research could also compare the number of followers to the number of retweets to better understand the dynamics of popularity on Weibo and clarify whether contributions to strong- or weak-tie networks lead to increased popularity.

Our findings can assist professionals in targeting Weibo users with commercial or social messages by segmenting them based on their Weibo motivations and usage patterns. For example, participants with more total tweets and higher frequency of updates would be more responsive to messages appealing to their needs to express thoughts and opinions, to engage through sharing music and videos, and to interact with the site and receive Weibo awards. Those with higher numbers of followers would be more likely to be influenced by altruistic messages and calls to help others and offers to join discussion groups and opinion forums. By addressing the needs and motivations of Weibo “influencers” (those with high numbers of followers and higher number of post retweets), advertisers can reach broader audiences with more narrowly targeted messages and thus help achieve Weibo monetization and profitability. International marketers should capitalize on more interactive use of Weibo compared to Twitter and originate or participate in threaded comments, encourage exchange of rich media and offer apps, games, and rewards to those users who spend longer time on Weibo and tweet frequently. Given the social media functionality of Weibo, introducing Weibo Marketplace (similar to Facebook Marketplace) to encourage social shopping without leaving the site may be a productive way to enter this vast market.

As Weibo is undergoing dramatic growth, future research should consider other usage behaviors, such as mobile and cross-platform use of Weibo, and the role of various motivations in affecting their usage patterns. Motivations and usage behaviors of passive Weibo users (those who either do

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Table 3: Regression Results of Relationships Between Motivations and Behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Frequency of tweet updates</th>
<th>Time spent on Weibo daily</th>
<th>Total number of tweets</th>
<th>Posted photos</th>
<th>Number of following</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.116</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>-0.073</td>
<td>0.106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender development</td>
<td>-0.097</td>
<td>0.252</td>
<td>-0.147</td>
<td>-0.230</td>
<td>-0.187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional release</td>
<td>-0.048</td>
<td>0.199</td>
<td>-0.145</td>
<td>-0.250</td>
<td>-0.231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Info. Seeking</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>-0.016</td>
<td>-0.161</td>
<td>0.169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social behavior</td>
<td>-0.078</td>
<td>0.161</td>
<td>0.161</td>
<td>0.141</td>
<td>0.058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-expression</td>
<td>-0.009</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>0.034</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adjusted R-sq.:
- Time spent on Weibo registered: 0.182
- Time spent on Weibo daily: 0.236
- Frequency of tweet updates: 0.05
- Time spent on Weibo daily: 0.011
- Total number of tweets: 0.073
- Number of followers: 0.196

Notes:
- p < 0.01
- p < 0.05
- p < 0.1
not register at all or do not actively contribute to the conversation) and how they compare to those of active users present another interesting avenue of research. User retention motivations may present an important research direction, since user-created content can become part of marketing messages and encouraging users to continue contributing may present a challenge. Finally, studying microblogging services in different countries and cultures may lead us closer to a better understanding of the microblogging phenomenon in general and its specifics in various contexts.

Disclosure Statement

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