Chapter 2

Corporate Communicative Engagement in Micro-Blogging: Cross-Cultural Analysis of Weibo and Twitter

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ABSTRACT

Micro-blogging platforms have emerged as marketing tools that multinational companies increasingly utilize to establish and promote their brands. The question is whether they use these platforms strategically, localizing the content and the structure for their target population. This chapter uses case study content analysis to begin answering this question. Social media updates posted by Starbucks over a one-month period on Twitter in the U.S. and on Sina Weibo in China were analyzed using three existing validated frameworks. The results indicate that Starbucks somewhat localizes its posts to its Chinese consumers, in terms of content, symbols, values, and offerings. However, it underutilizes its Sina Weibo page compared to its Twitter counterpart. This chapter goes on to suggest micro-blogging strategies for multinational companies in the Managerial Implications section and concludes with a discussion on the direction of future research for scholars in this field.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has matured into a viable and valuable tool for communication (Krzmarzick, 2013) mainly because it increasingly targets larger sets of audiences in the market. According to the Pew Internet and American Life research project, 69% of adults in the United States were using social networking sites as of August 2012. To be more specific, two-thirds of them self-reported using Facebook, 20% were on LinkedIn, and 16% were on Twitter (Krzmarzick, 2013). More importantly, the usage of social network-
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ing sites can be witnessed among almost every age group and is steadily growing (The Pew Internet and American Life Research Project, 2012).

Across the Pacific Ocean, a similar phenomenon can be observed in China, which has the largest online population in the world (Riegner, 2008). More than 500 million people in China use the Internet, 100 million blog, and 300 million are active on micro-blogging sites (Sullivan, 2013). Chinese online consumers are very active in terms of utilizing many community building tools to facilitate connecting with friends and family and making social contacts. According to the China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC] (n.d.), almost 93 million Chinese online consumers use instant messaging (IM). The main motivations behind utilizing IM are for chatting with friends (83.8%), working (61.6%), and making new friends (42.3%).

These users have a very different profile compared to users in the U.S. Chinese social media users are relatively young (average age of 28), wealthy, and well-educated, which makes Chinese social media sites an essential communication medium for marketers (Tsai & Men, 2012). In comparison, U.S. netizens are on average 40 years old (Sullivan, 2013). Another significant difference between China and the U.S. with regard to social media is that although some American platforms like Facebook have attracted a loyal group of overseas users, Internet users in China can only register for the “Chinese version” of social media sites (e.g., Renren is the Chinese equivalent of Facebook and Weibo of Twitter) due to the ban on foreign social media sites by the Chinese government (Tsai & Men, 2012).

Social media networks create opportunities for companies to communicate with their customers in a new, more interactive, and engaging way (Mergel, 2013). According to the New York Business Journal (February 28th, 2013), for example, Nautica signed a sponsorship deal with PGA Tour player Cameron Tringale, who, in addition to wearing the brand’s apparel, will be showcased on Nautica’s website and its social media channels: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. In China, celebrity figures, such as the founder of Google China, Kai-fu Lee, regularly tweets; he even promoted his book entitled Weibo Changes Everything on Sina Weibo in 2011 (Collett, 2012). With social media fundamentally changing the ways companies communicate with and sell to their customers, learning to capitalize on these changes has become an enormous challenge for today’s marketers (Fernandez, 2012).

To help marketers develop successful strategies, global companies’ existing thriving social media practices should be systematically analyzed. With 77% of the Global Fortune 100 Companies registered as users and a user base of more than half a billion accounts, Twitter provides marketers with access to a very loyal group of customers (Malhotra, Molhatra, & See, 2012; Mamic & Almaraz, 2013). The same is true for Weibo, with an estimated 300 million registered users in China (Nooruddin & Zhang, 2012). Thus, Twitter and Weibo dominate the micro-blogging space in the U.S. and China, respectively.

Only recently have researchers begun to analyze micro-blogging strategies focusing on Twitter. They have primarily examined the frequency of tweets, retweets, and hashtags (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Mamic & Almaraz, 2013; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). A handful of studies have investigated and classified the content of tweets and retweets (Han & Cho, 2013; Jansen et al., 2009; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012), while even fewer have compared companies’ tweets and retweets across countries (Burton & Soboleva, 2011; Ma, 2013). None so far have systematically analyzed and compared how different micro-blogging sites are being strategically used by the same company. The present study attempts to fill this gap, answering the following research questions: how do marketers use micro-blogging sites, such as Twitter in the U.S. and Weibo in China to interact with consumers? Do global companies utilize the two platforms differently? Does culture affect the content
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