A Cross-Cultural Comparison of a Global Brand’s Strategies on Micro-Blogging Sites: Sina Weibo vs. Twitter

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ABSTRACT

Micro-blogging platforms have been used increasingly by multinational companies as a marketing tool. Global corporations utilize platforms such as Twitter and Weibo, leading micro-blogging sites, and promote their brand equity and increase engagement with their customers. The question is whether they use these platforms strategically, localizing the content and the structure to meet the needs of their target population. This study uses case study content analysis to begin answering this question. Starbucks posts over a one-month period on Twitter in the U.S. and on Sina Weibo in China were analyzed using three existing validated frameworks: descriptive analysis, content classification, and content customization. The results indicate that Starbucks somewhat localizes its posts to its Chinese consumers, in terms of content, symbols, values, and offerings. In terms of descriptive analysis, the study found that Starbucks underutilizes its Sina Weibo site compared to its Twitter site; posts more community-related information on Sina Weibo than on Twitter; and provides more action-related information on Twitter than on Weibo. This paper 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.

KEYWORDS

Culture, Micro-blogging, Sina, Starbucks, Twitter, Weibo

INTRODUCTION

Social media has matured into a viable and valuable tool of 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, 65% of adults in the United States were using social networks in 2015 up from 7% in 2005. To be more specific, two-thirds of them self-report using Facebook, 20% are on LinkedIn, and 16% are on Twitter (Krzmarzick, 2013). More importantly, the usage of social networks can be witnessed among almost every age group as usage among individuals 65 and older has more than tripled since 2010 (The Pew Internet and American Life Research Project, October 2015).

Across the Pacific Ocean, a similar phenomenon can be observed in China. China has the largest online population in the world (Riegner, 2008; El-Haddad, Weerakkody, & Peng, 2012). China has 720 million Internet users in 2016 who represent 52% of the population (Internet Live Stats). Among different Internet applications, mobile usage is the highest, where 557 million (80%) use smartphones and tablets (McKirdy, 2015). With regard to Microblogging, the use of Sina Weibo one of the largest microblogging sites, has been growing steadily. The monthly active users base increasing to 261 million by March 2016, a 32% year over year growth (China Internet Watch). These Chinese Internet users have a very different profile compared to users in the U.S.: Chinese SNS users are relatively
young, wealthy, and well educated, which makes Chinese SNSs an essential communication medium for marketers (Tsai & Men, 2012). Another significant difference between China and the U.S. with regard to SNSs is that although some American SNSs like Facebook have attracted a loyal group of overseas users, Internet users in China can only register for the “Chinese version” of SNSs (e.g., Renren is the Chinese equivalent of Facebook and Weibo of Twitter) due to the ban on foreign SNSs 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; Vernuccio, 2014). According to Marketing Weekly News (March 16th, 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; Valos, Polonsky, Mavondo, & Lipscomb, 2015).

To help marketers develop successful SNS strategies, existing thriving social media practices of global companies should be systematically analyzed. Vernuccio (2014), for example, systematically analyzed 60 international corporations assessing their usage of social media sites as a communication tool for enhancing brand equity. Another recent study by Valos et al. (2015) sampled 27 senior marketing executives to gauge the challenges large corporations face with the implementation of social media platforms.

With 77% of the Global Fortune 100 Companies registered as users and a user base of more than 100 million individuals, Twitter provides marketers with access to a very loyal group of customers (Malhotra et al., 2012). 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. Based on literature review done by (Williams, Terras, & Warwick, 2013) who analyzed 575 Twitter-related publications from 2007 till 2011, 67% were focused on messages generated by users (e.g., time sent, specific use of words), and 21% on users (e.g., followings, profile characteristics). Many have primarily examined the frequency of tweets, retweets, and hashtags, termed as descriptive and statistical research (Jansen et al., 2009; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Barnes & Bohringer, 2011; Lovejoy et al., 2012). Williams et al. (2013) also discovered that only 27% of the 575 Twitter-related publications performed some level of analysis, (e.g., content, data, semantic) where content of tweets and retweets have been investigated and classified (Jansen et al., 2009; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Recently, a number of studies have started to emerge where companies’ tweets and retweets have been compared across countries (Burton & Soboleva, 2011; Ma, 2013). To our knowledge, none of them 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 and appearance of a company’s micro-blogging updates? More specifically, how localized is their communication on leading country-specific micro-blogging sites?

Companies with a Web presence are struggling to choose between two alternatives when it comes to reaching their international online consumers: some businesses develop standardized, global websites, whereas others localize their sites according to the cross-cultural differences among
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