Chapter 19

Follow Me!
How Internet Celebrities in China (Wanghong) Attract and Influence Their Chinese Fans

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to decipher how Internet celebrities in China, or Wanghong, accumulate their credibility and how they gratify fans in China. By conducting qualitative research based on interviews in Guangzhou, China, this study fills a research gap in understanding the internet celebrity culture in digital China. The analysis shows that Chinese fans were attracted by Wanghong because of their positive personality traits, e.g., being humorous and inner beauty. They followed Wanghong mainly because they gained useful information and advice from Wanghong who at the same time provided entertainment. The benefits from following Wanghong are mainly the acquiring of information and the fulfillment of emotional needs. This information was then shared to boost the follower’s self-esteem and to strengthen the follower’s connection with his or her social circle. However, although most interviewees were satisfied with their parasocial interactions with Wanghong, they expected more interactions.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has captured the hearts of Internet users around the world and makes users more dependent on these new forms of media every day. Statista (2018) shows that in 2010 there were only 0.97 billion social media users worldwide, but by 2021 the number of users will reach 3.02 billion. Leading social media providers have virtually penetrated every aspect of the consumer’s lives and changed the way in which consumers exchange information, attain knowledge, communicate with family and friends,
and engage themselves in social life (Leung, 2013; Huang & Zhang, 2016). Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, widely used worldwide, and Weibo, WeChat, and QQ in China help connect billions of Internet users each day. These service providers offer functions such as instant messaging, blogging, information searching, and multimedia content sharing; these services challenge traditional ways of socializing, gaining knowledge, and sharing information.

Social media allows Internet users to create, co-create, and exchange user-generated content through participating, communicating, and networking in various online communities and platforms, i.e., blogs, microblogs, forums, and the content community, each of which accommodates various needs of users (Rathore, et al., 2016). Hence, social media offers innovative channels for information acquisition and peer communications among connected Internet users (Hansen, et al., 2011, p. 3).

Social media has facilitated the interconnectedness between information providers and receivers and the co-creation of information and knowledge, but also produces a daunting amount of data. For example, 1.5 billion users are active on Facebook every day and 510,000 comments are shared per minute; such an amount of data is only a small proportion of the 2.5 quintillion bytes of data created on the Internet every day and the number of Facebook users is only a fraction of the 3.7 billion total Internet users (Marr, 2018). Therefore, seeking relevant and useful information on social media would be like finding a needle in a haystack, while the need for trustworthy information online creates an opportunity for intermediary individuals on social media; these intermediaries possess characteristics of opinion leaders, on whom information seekers can depend for valuable information.

**China’s Social Media Phenomena**

Although the most popular services such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are blocked in China (Thai, 2018), Chinese Internet users have been involved in forums and online communities since 1994 (Jin, 2018), well before the era of Youtube or Twitter in the West. Chinese users’ active engagement in social media emerged from the intense use of QQ in 1999 (Chiu, et al., 2012). QQ, developed by Tencent, allowed the user to use a PC-based text messaging system to connect with friends and share files. Since then, QQ has generated a sizeable number of active users that later became the customer base of another social media platform from Tencent, WeChat, developed in 2011. WeChat allows users to use smartphones to connect with family and friends on a personal level; users can communicate with family and friends and share files and news on the move.

Meanwhile, Weibo, a social media platform developed by Sina in 2009, is the most widely used microblogging service with 97.2% of its users from China (H. Yu, et al., 2017). It provides Twitter-like services and allows users to publish short posts as well as follow other users, celebrities, business organizations, and government agencies on a public level (China Internet Watch, 2017).

The noticeable difference between Weibo, WeChat, and QQ are the privacy and anonymity of users. Weibo allows users to reach openly accessible information from grassroots sources (Li, 2014) and focuses on the sharing of information and opinions (Hou, et al. 2018). The target audience of information disseminated on Weibo is not necessarily the sender’s family and friends but those sharing similar interests in, for example, dining, travel, books, and celebrities. In contrast, WeChat and QQ from Tencent are more for social interaction (Hou, et al., 2018), although they also offer similar instant text messaging functions and other functions comparable to Weibo, such as online gaming, videos, and calls. Communication through WeChat and QQ is more on a personal level and is used mainly for connecting with family and close friends (Li, 2014).
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