

The Influence of Internet Celebrities (Wanghongs) on Social Media Users in China

En-Chi Chang¹ and Tony Woo²

¹ AMG Digital Marketing & Design Company, Taichung, Taiwan
Enchi.chang9@gmail.com

² Crown Jewelry Manufacturers Limited, Kowloon, Hong Kong
cjm@hkstar.com

Abstract. This study aims to decipher how internet celebrities in China, or Wanghongs, accumulate their credibility and how they gratify the follower in China. By conducting qualitative research based on in-depth interviews in Guangzhou, China, this study fills a research gap in understanding the internet celebrity culture in the digital China. The analysis shows that Chinese followers were attracted by Wanghongs because of Wanghongs' positive personality traits, e.g. being humorous. They followed Wanghongs mainly because they gained useful information and advice from Wanghongs and at the same time got entertained. The benefits from following Wanghongs are mainly the fulfillment of information and emotional needs. This information was then shared to boost the follower's self-image and to strengthen the follower's connection with his or her social circle, i.e., to fulfill other needs as being categorized by Katz, et al (1973). However, interviewees were not satisfied with their parasocial interaction with Wanghongs.

Keywords: Internet Celebrity, Wanghong, Chinese Social Media.

1 Introduction

1.1 China's Social Media Phenomena

Although the popular social media might have their inception in the US and those most popular services such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are blocked in China [1], Chinese internet users have not been immune from the social media fever. Chinese users' active engagement in social media emerged from the intense use of instant messaging service such as QQ in 1999 [2]. Since then, QQ has generated a sizeable amount of active users who later became the customer base of the other social media platform, WeChat, in 2011. WeChat allows users to use smartphones to connect with friends on a personal level; users can communicate with family and friends and share files and news on the move. Meantime, Weibo, a Twitter-like service developed by Sina in 2009, is the most widely used microblogging service in China [3] and allows users to follow other users, celebrities, business organizations and government agencies on a public

level [4]. The noticeable difference between Weibo, WeChat, and QQ are privacy and anonymity of users. While Weibo allows users to reach openly accessible information from grassroots sources and focuses on sharing of information and opinions, WeChat and QQ are more for social interaction on a personal level [5].

Besides the above mentioned social media platforms, several other services similar to the social media in West can be found in China, e.g., Toudou Youku (vs. Youtube), Meipai (vs. Instagram) and Momo (vs. Tinder) [1]. These services have been developed into a ‘social media ecosystem’ containing the core services, such as WeChat, QQ and Weibo, for social interactions and the derivative services mainly letting users acquire information [6]. The latter is the main breeding ground for China’s internet celebrities, or Wanghongs. In the following discussion, we will therefore use internet celebrities and Wanghongs interchangeably.

1.2 Internet celebrities: West vs East

The advent of internet celebrities might be traced back to the appearance of Lonelygirl15 in 2006 [7]. Since then, attracting and accumulating fans and followers through posting contents in various social media platforms such as Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram has become a phenomena. For instance, Ryan Higa reached his stardom by ‘strategically’ posting, e.g., funny videos, to gain noticeability; he is named a ‘digital star’ and owns the most followed comedy Youtube channel (Forbes.com, not dated).

Internet celebrities manage their fan base using varieties of affiliating methods and gain popularity by creating a sense of closeness between themselves and their followers; they share common languages with their supporters and use alike cultural references to create relationships with and attachment of their fans and followers in various online communities. They often become opinion leaders for fashions, books, restaurants, movies and travels and interact with fans and followers as if the followers were friends.

Wanghongs, Chinese interpretation of internet celebrities, are ordinary people who attract millions of fans and followers by creating original digital contents on social media platforms and demonstrating the characteristics of opinion leaders [8][9]. Wanghongs might generate original contents through live-streaming, blogging and microblogging to provide rich information for their fans and followers, or to provide shopping advice as ‘fashionistas’ [10].

1.3 Research Aims

Extant studies, e.g., [11][12], often focus on internet celebrities’ or social media’s credibility in delivering brand messages, but few has focused on why and how an internet celebrity as a brand influences followers’ and fans’ attitudes and behavior. By conducting qualitative research based on in-depth interviews in China’s third most populated city, Guangzhou, this study fills a research gap in understanding the internet celebrity culture in the digital China. This study aims to decipher how Wanghongs accumulate their credibility of being reliable sources of information in social media and how they gratify the follower in China.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Source Credibility Theory

Source credibility theory posits that ‘individuals or receivers are more likely to be persuaded when the source presents itself as credible’ [13]. When social media users perceive that an internet celebrity has higher credibility, it is more likely they will build connection with the internet celebrity [14][15].

Past studies have found that ‘trustworthiness’, ‘expertise’ and ‘attractiveness’ are dimensions, which highly influence source credibility [15-19]. Trustworthiness is the honesty and believability of a source [14]. When an internet celebrity is trustworthy, social media users might be more likely to take actions, such as following the celebrity and sharing personal information with the followed celebrity [18]. Expertise is the extent to which an information source is considered to be able to make correct assertions [15]. Attractiveness encompasses not only physical attractiveness, but also psychological traits, such as intellectual skills and personalities [13]. In advertising studies, attractiveness of an endorser is found to be more important than expertise and trustworthiness [15].

2.2 Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and gratifications theory [20] posits that an individual actively seeks out and uses particular media to satisfy specific needs. Katz, et al. [21] classify needs that users seek to fulfil through the use of media into 5 groups: needs for information, knowledge and understanding; needs for aesthetic, pleasurable and emotional experience, needs for credibility, confidence, stability and status, needs for contacts and needs for tension-release. Traditional media were an agent for information and exerted great influence on individuals, but the user played a passive role in media consumption. In contrast, social media users have become also media content creators who can share multimedia contents, such as texts, photos and videos. Sharing contents and information with other users on social media enables individuals with common interests to interact in a shared platform and creates parasocial interactions [22]. Therefore, social media provide an individual with the opportunity for fulfilling their social needs of belonging. At the same time, social media could help the user fulfil psychological needs, such as feeling competent and knowledgeable.

Although the function of social media seems multifaceted, it can be said that the essential objective for social media users is to gratifying users’ needs [23]. Hence, uses and gratifications classification [20] could provide a framework for understanding social media users' various needs.

3 Methodology

The data were collected through in-depth interviews by one of the authors with 12 undergraduate students from Guangdong, China; all 12 students, 6 male and 6 female, are

single and aged between 21 and 23. All interviewees were online at least 3 hours per day and almost all (11) had over 10 years (included) of using the internet at the time of the interview. The interviewees' profile is consistent with the profile of Wanghong followers reported by [24]. The top three social media used by the interviewees were WeChat, Weibo and QQ. The main purpose of using social media was communication, followed by information search and checking news. All interviewees mentioned that they followed Wanghongs every day; the number of Wanghongs followed by interviewees ranged from 1 (3 interviewees) to more than 5 (2 interviewees).

The interview questions (available upon request) were designed in order to understand why the interviewees follow Wanghongs (based on source credibility theory) and what benefits the followers could get from Wanghongs (based on uses and gratifications theory). The interviewees were briefed with research ethics policy before the interview. Collected data were coded and categorized by one of the authors and the results were discussed between the authors.

4 Discussion and Conclusions

4.1 Basic conditions for building a fan base

Regarding the social media used by interviewees for following Wanghongs, the most frequently used was Weibo (58.33%), followed by WeChat (33.33%) and YY (8.33%). YY is a live-streaming platform; such type of social media is currently very popular in China. The use of live-streaming platforms could indicate that fans are seeking prompt responses from Wanghongs [25].

Each interviewee provided multiple answers for which characteristics a Wanghong should have. 29 positive characteristics (e.g., cheerful, daring and pragmatic) were coded and categorized; among them, being funny and humorous (24.14%) is the most important characteristics. Majority of interviewees (75%) also expected that Wanghongs could post funny videos.

To keep interested, interviewees expected that Wanghongs are present online (75%). Further, 9 interviewees explained what they hope Wanghongs could do on social media; 4 expected that Wanghong could interact with fans (41.67%) and 5 hoped that Wanghongs could provide useful information (33.33%). The information is not only from Wanghongs' postings, but also Wanghong's interactions with fans. And fans not only took information shared by Wanghongs as advice for themselves, but also shared this information with family and friends.

4.2 Why Do Fans Follow Wanghongs? – The Source Credibility Perspective

Data for source credibility were coded, based on three themes: trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness. Interviewees (50%) considered a Wanghong credible when s/he shows responsibility for what s/he says or does. Interviewees were more likely to trust a Wanghong they had known for quite a while (33.33%) and they trusted Wanghongs who had gained public acceptance (66.67%).

Although academic achievements may add credibility to a Wanghong (25%), interviewees considered that Wanghongs' expertise should be judged by their life experience (41.67%); Wanghongs' expertise should be from knowledge and experience gained from trial and error in real life and could be used for solving particular problems fans encounter (83.33%).

66.67% of interviewees considered Wanghongs' attractiveness is important for judging their credibility, but attractiveness should be based on 'inner beauty' (66.67%), rather than appearance (8.33%). Inner beauty could mean a Wanghong's connotation, humor (both combined: 40%) and other personality traits, such as out-of-the-box thinking, being humble, affable, credible and being unique.

The above analysis indicates that although public acceptance is important for gaining initial trust, a Wanghong's credibility is mainly built upon the long-term observation of fans or followers. To understand the 'inner beauty' and experience of a Wanghong and then to know whether a Wanghong is responsible for his or her behavior could not happen overnight. Besides, the analysis shows that 'inner beauty' is the interviewees' definition for 'attractiveness'; such a result echoes the definition by Shimp (2000; cited from Umeogu, 2012).

4.3 Uses and Gratifications From Following Wanghongs

Regarding the benefits of following Wanghongs, 6 interviewees (50%) mentioned that it is for knowledge and useful information, while the other 6 (50%) mentioned for entertainment. In order to interact with followed Wanghongs, 10 interviews (83.33%) would ask questions or share what they know with Wanghongs. However, not all the questions and sharing were responded by Wanghongs and only 4 interviewees mentioned that they felt gratified by the responses from Wanghongs.

Each interviewee provided multiple answers for the usefulness of information Wanghongs had shared. Among the 30 coded and categorized answers, psychological or emotional benefits (56.67%) were mentioned more frequently than intellectual gains (43.33%). Yet, feeling more knowledgeable (36.67%) is the leading benefit interviewees mentioned; feeling happy (16.67%) and being entertained (13.33%) are the second and the third.

10 interviewees (83.33%) mentioned that they would share the information with family and friends, particularly those with similar interests (66.67%). Sharing Wanghongs' information not only makes the whole social circle more knowledgeable (33.33%), but also brings the interviewees a happy feeling. 10 interviews mentioned that such sharing is positive for self-esteem, mostly because they gain confidence from possessing new and useful information (50%), besides getting noticed by friends.

Regarding the feedback from family and friends after sharing the information, 7 interviewees (58.33%) mentioned that they were praised by friends and family. These 7 interviews also mentioned that friends considered that they are more knowledgeable (42.86%) and counted on them for more information in the future (57.14%).

Based on the above analysis, it appears that following Wanghongs mainly fulfilled interviewees' needs for information and for emotional experience. Meantime, interviewees shared Wanghongs' information with family and friends to fulfill other needs,

such as needs for contacts and needs for confidence and status [21]. The above analysis also indicates that the interviewed followers were gratified not by their parasocial interactions with Wanghongs, but by strengthening their current social circle through sharing Wanghongs' information.

4.4 Limitations

Although this qualitative research produced useful insights, some limitations should be considered. First, the qualitative research design limited the sample size and research location. Future research should consider a large scale survey incorporating multiple locations and a larger sample pool. Second, since the social media ecosystem evolves rapidly, how and why fans follow Wanghongs could also change rapidly. Future research might take a longitudinal approach to study how fans of Wanghongs or internet celebrities change over time. Besides, a cross-cultural comparison between fans in East and West could also help the understanding of cultural differences in the internet-celebrity-fan interaction and even the phenomena of the internet celebrity economy.

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