Perceived values of branded mobile media, consumer engagement, business-consumer relationship quality and purchase intention: A study of WeChat in China

Yi-Ru Regina Chen

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ABSTRACT

With the dominance of digital media, corporations increasingly attempt to engage their strategic stakeholders, especially consumers, on digital media for the purposes of interactive marketing and relationship management. Utilizing an online survey data of 272 Chinese users of WeChat, the most influential mobile social networking application in China, this study examined the relationships between perceived values of branded WeChat accounts, consumer engagement on the account, quality of business-consumer relationships, and purchase intention.

Results: showed that consumer engagement is driven by five perceived values. Consumer engagement affected relationship quality and overall purchase intention. It also mediated the effect of perceived values on both. Intention to purchase via WeChat, however, was predicated by perceived values (i.e. usefulness) only. Theoretical contributions to stakeholder engagement theory and practical implications for corporate mobile (WeChat) strategy are discussed.

1. Introduction

Many people today heavily rely on mobile technology (e.g., smartphones, mobile social networking sites, mobile applications, mobile payment, etc.) to perform various tasks in their lives. Consequently, mobile technology has changed people’s communication, decision-making, and lifestyles. Successful corporate communication toward stakeholders, especially consumers, using mobile technology should go beyond effective information provision to drive the stakeholder engagement in such communication (Kim, Kim, & Wachter, 2013). To reach that end, stakeholder engagement in digital (i.e., social and mobile) media has rapidly become a research and practical focus in many disciplines, including public relations. A keyword search using engagement and social/mobile media in the Communication Source databases (i.e., Communication and Mass Media Complete and Communication Abstract) identified 558 peer-reviewed academic articles since 2005; 27 of which have appeared in the two SSCI-indexed public relations journals. This study examined the factors that drive consumer engagement on corporate mobile media and the effect of consumer engagement on relational outcomes and business performance from the perspective of millennial WeChat users in China.

Previous research has indicated that consumer engagement with organizations on mobile media starts with the consumer’s acceptance of technology and is cultivated by continued involvement with the organizations using the technology as part of life (Wu, 2015). Following this rationale, WeChat, the most influential mobile social networking (SNS) application in China (Bonhomme, 2015), was the chosen mobile technology in this study. WeChat is a closed-source SNS for multimedia instant messaging that has features of blog-space (Facebook’s main function), micro-applications, and mobile payment (WeChat payment). According to Tencent
(WeChat’s developer) (Tencent Tech, 2016), it had reached 650 million active users¹ as of February, the majority of whom are males in full-time employment. About 86.2% of the users are aged between 18 and 36. Among the active monthly users, 94% utilized the application daily while 61% used it more than 10 times per day and 36% more than 30 times per day. On average, 700,000 articles are posted on WeChat daily. 200 million users registered a WeChat payment (equivalent to Ali Pay or Apple Pay) account using their credit cards and 58.1% of them had used WeChat payment. The prevalence of WeChat and the high level of its user activity is a result of China’s controlled mainstream media system (which results in social media serving as an alternative public communication arena), WeChat’s unique and diverse functionalities, and the limited number of SNS available in China.

By the end of 2015, WeChat hosted 650,000 corporate official accounts² that allow corporations to disseminate information by categories using an account’s menu tabs or by tailored content, cultivate consumer engagement through online and offline interactions, build a visual community, and perform e-commerce (Tencent Tech, 2016). Thus, WeChat is a more effective platform than other SNS, such as Weibo (China’s Twitter’s equivalent), for consumer relations management (Jin, Park, & Li, 2015). Engaging in WeChat official accounts for content consumption and/or interaction with the account administrators (e.g., brands, organizations, or key opinion leaders) was the third most important purpose of WeChat usage by individuals (Tencent Tech, 2016). The data also showed an increase of corporate investment in WeChat communication in 2015: 21% (19% in 2014) spent $10,000 to $100,000 Renminbi for corporate WeChat account operation, 5% (3% in 2014) spent up to $500,000 Renminbi, and 3% (2% in 2014) spent more than $500,000 Renminbi (Tencent Tech, 2016).

“Millennials” refers to those born approximately between 1980 and 2000 (Howe & Strauss, 2000). As McKay (2010) argued, this generation generates an estimated $54.3 billion opportunity for brands. It also largely represents the WeChat user portfolio (Tencent Tech, 2016). With their consumption capability and communication behaviors, they represent a strategic public for corporations’ mobile communication in China and should therefore be studied and better understood. Primarily conducted in western countries, previous research suggests this generation is diverse, educated, technologically savvy (Hood, 2012), supportive of socially responsible corporations (Cone Communications, 2015), and applying to unique values for decision-making (Weiss, 2003). By examining this generation, the study provides insights into mobile user behavior on WeChat that contribute to the social/mobile media engagement literature in public relations, relationship management, and interactive marketing.

This study had three objectives. One was to test if perceived values of branded WeChat accounts drive the engagement of Chinese millennial WeChat users (who are existing or potential consumers) with the given brand on the platform. A second objective was to examine the effect of perceived values and consumer engagement on quality of business-consumer relationships and purchase intention of the Chinese millennial WeChat users. Thirdly, the study sought to determine if consumer engagement mediates the effect of perceived values on business-consumer relationship quality and purchase intention of Chinese millennial WeChat users.

2. Literature review

2.1. Consumer engagement on corporate mobile SNS accounts

The rapid development and prevalent use of digital communication technology allows people to easily disseminate/share information, exchange ideas, express comments, and form conversations with organizations and the mass population (Wirtz et al., 2010). This results in stakeholder (e.g., consumer) co-creation and/or activism. Coupled with intense business competition, consumer engagement has become a popular research area in diverse disciplines such as marketing, public relations, and advertising. For example, relationship marketing scholars focus on how corporations can interact with consumers through various touch-points of the consumer journey using a value-adding service experience that meets consumer needs. They posit that consumer engagement results in relational outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, consumer loyalty, and commitment), advocacy, and (intentional and actual) purchase (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013). Public relations scholars examine stakeholder engagement as a level of involvement in (1) an organization’s message or activity (e.g., Slater, Chipman, Auld, Keefe, & Kendall, 1992), (2) its decision-making or collaboration (e.g., Bruce & Shelley, 2010; Edelman, 2008), or (3) itself (e.g., Kang, 2014). They also investigate effects of the engagement on organization-public relationships (OPRs) and supportive behaviors toward the organization.

The concept of engagement lacks a consistent conceptualization. Engagement is often defined as “deep involvement,” “interaction” (e.g., Bruce & Shelley, 2010) or “both an orientation that influences interactions and the approach that guides the process of interactions among groups” (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 384). Scholars have identified three dimensions of consumer engagement: cognitive engagement, affective engagement, and behavioral engagement (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Cognitive engagement refers to the consumer’s thought toward an organization or its absorption or apprehension of the corporate communication (Paek, Hove, Jung, & Cole, 2013; Slater et al., 1992; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Affective engagement refers to the consumer’s emotional bond or attachment to a corporation (Gustafsson, Johnson, & Roos, 2005). Behavioral engagement refers to the consumer’s behavioral interactions with a corporation. While relationship marketing scholars often consider consumer engagement at all three levels (familiarity and satisfaction as cognitive engagement; affective commitment and intimacy as emotional engagement; and word-of-mouth, comments or user-generated content, and product/policy development participation as behavioral engagement), public

¹ An industrial report revealed that over 90% of WeChat users are located in China (BI Intelligence, 2016).

² Similarly to the business model of Facebook, WeChat provides a service for official (public) accounts that have features unavailable on private accounts. Both organizations and individuals (mainland Chinese citizens) can apply for a WeChat official account. There are two types of official accounts: a subscription account and a service account. The latter, shown as a user’s contact on the list, has more features than the former shown in the subscriptions folder on a user’s contact list. Limited subscription accounts can be supported by WeChat Payment.
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