The moderating role of customer experience in eWOM in the microblogging network

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Introduction
A growing reliance on the Internet as an information source when making choices about products or services raises the need for more research into electronic world of mouth (eWOM). Recently, industry research reports have showed that microblog is now the second only to Facebook in the social networking category (CINIC, 2013; Neilsen Report, 2012). Microblogging sites have grown explosively which have intrinsic value for disseminating, collecting, and sharing rich and timely data because of its connectivity, rapidity, and accessibility without original author’s permission (Tapia et al., 2001; Vieweg et al., 2009). In China, Sina Weibo, a hybrid microblogging of Twitter and Facebook, providing a primary channel for eWOM to take place has greatly empowered people themselves to act as sensors or sources of information that could impact on consumer choice. Particularly, the reviews and recommendations from online blogs are critical for interacting social activities and influencing consumers’ purchasing intentions (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Hsu & Tsou, 2001; Park et al., 2007).

Microblog in China reached 97% of all mainstream social media users (Chiu et al., 2012). Past research indicated that the majority of Chinese customers preferred peer-to-peer conversations and recommendations in the social media world, and they tended to use Sina Weibo as the informal channel for collecting product-related information (Bao et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2012). Those social interactions (Godes et al., 2005) may lead to the establishment of new social issues and substantial changes in values and ideas (Thorson and Rodgers, 2006). With over 46 million messages were posted each day on Sina Weibo (Lam, 2013), Chinese social media users like to talk about their experiences with products; in particular, they place greater trust in companies that have microblogging sites (Deans & Miles, 2011). By analysing 150,000 microblog postings, Jansen et al. (2009) found that 19% of microblogs mentioned of a brand and nearly 20% contained some expression of brand sentiments.

Prior research indicates that eWOM has a strong impact on consumer choice (Jansen et al., 2009), organisation’s operation (Dellarocas, 2003), and consumer’s decision-making process (Chatterjee, 2001). Given the high level of social interactivity (Kaplan & Henlein, 2010), both academics and practitioners need to understand how eWOM behaviour influence consumer’s purchase intention in the microblogging site. Prior research focuses on Western microblog, primarily the United States (e.g. Fischera & Reuberb, 2001); little is published to understand the role Sina Weibo in predicting user’s behaviour. Besides, China, being the world’s largest social network market (Statista, 2015), is an ideal country to investigate the extent of this eWOM behaviour. Furthermore, the proliferation of online shopping has led companies to focus on satisfying the consumption experience of shoppers as a competitive advantage. In light of this observation, this study also argues that the relationships between eWOM and purchase intention are moderated by customer experience. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed research framework.
The primary value of this paper lies in providing a better understanding of microblogging service as a key communication platform for organisations in China. In addition, the results of moderating effects of customer experience will provide companies with further insights on the importance of consumption experience when designing their websites.

![Figure 1 eWOM Behaviour Framework](image)

**Literature Review**

Empirical results confirm that both offline and online WOMs play essential roles in the consumer’s decision-making process (Chatterjee, 2001; Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988) and effective communication strategies (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006). Compared to WOM, the immediacy and convenience of eWOM is more influential which people can engage in mass-mediated sharing personal opinions and experience without face-to-face human pressure (Sun et al., 2006). In addition, the degree of connectedness in microblogs provides an opportunity for marketers to converse with customers, thus the key discipline is meaningful dialogues which can build relationships and engage in conversations with consumers (Gillin, 2007). The rapidly growth of microblogging platforms have provided immediate response services with short comments to interact among individual networks. Jansen et al. (2009) explain the additional reason for consumer attention to eWOM that the emergence microblogging is seen as a new online communication medium because of the constant connectivity of modern social networking services in the commercial area, where brands continuously compete for the attention of potential customers. Furthermore, the purchase intention is often used to anticipate consumers’ future responding behaviours based on their attitudes and preferences towards products and brands (Laroche et al., 1996). Several studies have demonstrated that eWOM behaviours positively influence consumers’ purchasing intentions (Park et al., 2007; Shim et al., 2001).

Through advancements in information technology, companies and people can allow connecting and sharing experiential universe with one another at any time. The transformation in media (e.g., microblog, smartphone) does not only speed up the process of communication, but also shift the use of communication from function-and-benefit orientations into pleasurable experiences (Schmitt, 1999). The concept of experiential marketing aims to, through the means of full sensory stimulations (see, hear, use, participate), mobilise consumers (Sense), emotional (Feel), thinking (Think), action (Act), association (Relate) factors at both emotional and rational levels when customers spending. On the other hand, customers co-create their own unique experience and expectations by interacting with organisation’s physical performance, the senses stimulated and emotions evoked through social media (Meyer & Schwager 2007; Shaw & Ivens, 2005). Thus, customer experience is defined as a set of interactions between companies and customers, which provokes a reaction, i.e. customer’s consumption experience (LaSalle & Britton, 2003). Experiences are memorable and unique because they have to do with inspiring thoughts about comfort and pleasure, as well as inspiring a sense of practicality at multiple levels (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004). Striking displays with powerful visual elements like...
microblogs, companies can integrate the notion of experiential marketing to shorten attention spans demand, accordingly they must engage with customers as many of the senses as possible in order to create valuable customer experiences. This importance of user experience acts as a competitive advantage for operating business (Kotha et al., 2004). For example, in a study on retailers’ e-servicespaces, microblogging postings had a negative impact on consumers’ perceptions, but retail web site’s entertainment value positively affected consumer’s trust which leaded positive eWOM intentions (Tran et al., 2012). Furthermore, Mathwick et al. (2002) found that congruent interactions between shopping task and retail information display properties exert an enhancing effect on the reactive dimensions of value, as evidenced by perceptions of visual appeal, entertainment value, and service excellence. Recently, research shows that customer experience may influence purchase intention in online blog environments (Hsu & Tsou, 2011; Rose et al., 2011). The more consumers perceived positive consumption experiences with microblogs, the more likely it is that they will engage with those microblogs, and thus indirectly influence the consumer’s purchasing intention. We predict:  

**H:** Customer experience with Sina Weibo positively moderates the relationships between eWOM behaviour and purchase intention in such a way that the impact of eWOM behaviour with Sina Weibo on purchase intention will be greater when customer experience is positive than when it is negative.

**Methods**

A convenience sample of Weibo users in China were created by inviting volunteers to participate via a self-administered online survey. An invitation message with the URL to the online questionnaire was posted on a number of Chinese social media (e.g. Sina Weibo, QQ, Renren and BBS). A screening question was used to ensure that the respondents were current active users of Weibo. The questionnaire was initially developed in English and then translated into Chinese by using the back-translation method to ensure the equivalent meaning (Brislin 1970). The Chinese questionnaire had no major problems with understanding and wording after pre-testing with 20 Weibo users. A total of 256 useable respondents were collected. Both female and male respondents almost equalled (50.4% of male). The main age groups were at aged 18-25 (66%) and 26-35 (18%). The majority of the respondents (94.2%) had a bachelor degree. 49% of respondents were employed likely made higher incomes (23% earned RMB2,000-3,999; 18.4% earned RMB4,000-5,999) than 48% of students did (42.6% earned under RMB1,999). Further, Brown et al. (2007) also confirmed that a similarity amongst members’ characteristics in terms of gender, age, education, or lifestyle influenced WOM. The majority of the participants had very good experience in blogging. Astonishingly, about 80% reported purchasing products discussed in blogs in the past year at least three times and slightly over 20% purchased products at least 4 times. The three constructs of eWOM behaviour, customer experience and purchase intention were adapted from previous studies to the microblogging context (Flynn et al., 1996; Pavlou & Gefer 2004; Schmitt 1999; Sun et al. 2006). All the items were assessed on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “1 = strongly disagree” to “5 = strongly agree”. All Cronbach’s alpha values present well above the recommended level of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978), except eWOM behaviour (α = 0.678). However, evidence has indicated that other studies in many contexts present α values between 0.60 and 0.70 (Ntoumanis 2001). To test the research hypothesis, a moderated regression analysis was performed to test the effect of customer experience on the relationships between eWOM and purchase intention by creating an interaction term. Initial results showed that customer experience had a positive moderating influence on eWOM and purchase intention.
References


