

A Whole New World: China, Social Media, and International Business

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Abstract

China is a global economic force, one of the world's largest trading countries, and an emerging market. Social media in China is a much larger phenomenon than in other parts of the world and can provide multinational corporations with a distinct advantage in reaching China's consumers. However, when communicating with Chinese consumers utilizing social media, multinational corporations must consider the unique social media environment, which is different from other countries due to cultural differences and the regulations and restrictions imposed by the Chinese government. Social media platforms in China are highly fragmented and local, content rich, and increasingly mobile. Further, bulletin board systems are utilized more frequently than in other countries; blogging, not microblogging, dominates due to differences in language; and social media is integrated into internet search engines. Business strategy must recognize that multinational flexibility is a particular challenge in China and corporations should adopt a decentralized structure, customized marketing, and an overall strategy that is either transnational or multidomestic. Corporations must be mindful that the Chinese government controls the social media landscape on every level and the trend is toward tighter control. Culture is also a large factor in tailoring social media to Chinese audiences; companies should pay particular attention to language, reputation and branding, and the fragmented and local nature of social media. For maximum exposure, marketing should focus on brand management, exposure across social media platforms, the incorporation of traditional media, and technical strategies.

Keywords: China, social media, international business

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A strategic motivator compelling companies to become more global is the seeking of new markets to expanded sales, diversify revenue, and achieve greater economies of scale (Griffin and Pustay, 2010). China is an emerging market and a powerful global economic force. The impact of globalization provides multinational corporations with unique opportunities to enter into the Chinese market or expand Chinese operations.

Globalization is facilitated by technology, as technology makes globalization a more profitable and feasible endeavor (Griffin and Pustay, 2010). The emergence of social media as a communication medium provides multinational corporations with opportunities to reach consumers all over the world. However, the population of China, the world's largest at 1.38 billion, combined with its rapidly growing economy, present vast opportunities for market expansion (China, n.d.). Multinational corporations seeking to harness the Chinese market using social media must consider China's unique social media environment when forming business strategy and in managing the legal environment, cultural considerations, and marketing.

Economy of China

Following the death of communist leader Mao Tse-tung in 1976, China implemented economic reform, including a degree of free-market policies privatizing industry, permitting citizens to own businesses, and allowing foreign companies to establish joint ventures with Chinese firms (Griffin and Pustay, 2010). Further access to foreign markets was facilitated by China's membership in the World Trade Organization in 2001. Since these reforms, China experienced dramatic economic growth and is the fastest growing country in world economically; its real gross domestic product growth rate has increased by an average of 9% annually over the past two decades (China, n.d.). China is poised to become the world's largest

economy by 2030, a position currently held by the United States (Tian and Borges, 2011; United States, n.d.). Additionally, foreign domestic investment has skyrocketed since 1992, reaching a record level of \$124 billion in 2011; China is currently ranked as the number one preferred destination for investors (Griffin and Pustay, 2010; United Nations, 2012). China has evolved into one of the largest trading companies in the world and is the world's largest exporter of steel and timber, as well as the world's largest producer of coal (China, n.d.).

Economic growth and rapidly rising wages have dramatically improved living conditions for Chinese citizens and boosted consumption (The China Puzzle, 2011). As rural residents have relocated to take advantage of job opportunities in urban areas, China has experienced the "largest labor migration in the world's history" (Griffin and Pustay, 2010, p. 23). Barton, Chen, and Jin (2013) predict that urban household income will at least double by 2022, resulting in middle-class status for more than 75% of suburban Chinese households on the basis of purchasing power parity.

China's increasingly prosperous population affords unparalleled opportunities for multinational corporations seeking to harness the emerging Chinese market. Social media has evolved into a powerful marketing tool in many countries; however, it is especially influential in China. A study by Gilfoil and Jobs (2011) illustrates the distinct advantage of using social media as a marketing medium in China. Sixteen countries were studied to evaluate the gap between buyers and sellers utilizing social media. In every country except China, sellers using social media outnumbered buyers; however, contrary to the global trend, "an abundance of Chinese buyers want to use social media tools to make purchase decisions" (Gilfoil and Jobs, 2011, p. 95). This reflects a significant bias on the part of Chinese consumers in favor of buying

activities via the social networking space. Therefore, it is crucial to utilize social media to reach the Chinese market.

Social Media in China

Social media use in China is rapidly increasing. According to the China Internet Network Information Center (2013), 591 million people use social media in China, representing 42.1% of the population, up from 8.5% in 2005 and 22.6% in 2008. Most of China's *netziens*, as social media users are called, have joined the digital revolution in the last 5 years. Mobile technologies are becoming much more prominent and are a rapidly growing trend in Chinese social media; 75% of netziens use mobile phones to access the internet as of 2012, an increase of 64 million in one year (China Internet Network Information Center, 2013). Darragh (2009) asserts that social media is quickly replacing traditional media in China.

Additionally, social media is a much larger phenomenon in China than other countries and the Chinese social media environment is one of the most highly developed and sophisticated in the world. Chinese social media users are more active than in any other country, spending a greater percentage of their time online in social media platforms (Chiu, Ip, and Silverman, 2012). According to Crampton (2011), use of social media has "become deeply integrated into people's lives" and is "some of the most intense in the world" as the average user is online for 2.7 hours daily, significantly more than users in other developing countries (p. 29). Further, more than 80% of social media users have multiple social media accounts (Chiu, et al., 2012).

Crampton (2011) asserts that numerous factors have compelled the Chinese to engage in social media and make it a part of their culture more so than in other populations. First, the rural-to-urban migration separated families, motivating people to find new ways to connect and communicate over geographic distances, as well as exposing many Chinese to new technologies.

It is estimated that 60% of China's population will dwell in urban areas by 2020; only 40% of the population lived in non-rural locations in 2009 (Tse, 2010). Social media has become the preferred communication tool for geographically segregated families. Additionally, single child governmental policies caused people to seek out and invest in peer relationships using social media since many Chinese lack siblings. Further, a general distrust of government controlled information sources prompted citizens to seek out new information sources. Additionally, Chan (2013) states that "the whole Chinese internet is being socialized" (para. 11) and asserts that the diversity of Chinese social media has been a large factor in its expansion, as users can choose from a wide variety of social media platforms.

Social media platforms in China are unique because of the restrictions of governmental censorship and control; however, culture also has a large impact. While social media is used for entertainment and escapist activity as in other cultures, in China, it is used in large part for information gathering, due in part to the distrust of government information sources stated previously (Zhang and Pentia, 2012). Additionally, the Chinese do not distinguish between the internet and social media as in other cultures because the Chinese tend to use one social media service that "becomes their gateway to and concept of the internet" (Crampton, 2011, p. 31).

Further, Chinese social media sites are extremely fragmented and local, with different strengths, areas of focus, and geographic concentrations (Chiu, et al., 2012). For example, numerous platforms resemble Facebook but cater to different audiences based on education level, geographic location, age, income level, and interests. Some, like Kaixin, which attracts primarily white-collar young professionals, are for information sharing only; personal content is not included (Crampton, 2011). Social media sites are also becoming more mobile; the

exclusively mobile platform WeChat amassed 300 million users in two years, more than half of the total social media population in China (Beattie, 2013).

Weibo, the Chinese equivalent to microblogging platform Twitter, was introduced in 2009 and quickly became a major social media platform (Lowe and Nicholas, 2012). As with most Chinese social media platforms, Weibo is far more content rich than its international counterparts, allowing for rich media uploads of photos and videos into user feeds, as well as games, applications, and threaded comments. Another major difference is in language; while Weibo and Twitter both have a 140 character limit, the Weibo platform allows for much longer content as, for example, in Chinese 111 characters is actually equivalent to 434 characters in English (Crampton, 2011). This language efficiency essentially makes Weibo a blogging platform, as the language limitations of a “tweet” do not apply.

In contrast to many countries, social media users in China participate heavily in bulletin board systems, which are integrated into other platforms (Crampton, 2011). Kuo (2009) reports that 80% of commercial web sites have a bulletin board attached; users use the bulletin board to comment about products and services (2009). Further, at least one-third of netizens regularly post to bulletin board systems (Kuo, 2009).

Finally, Chinese social media is integrated into search engines more than in other countries. Baidu is the fifth most popular web site in the world and the most visited site in China, accounting for 95% of all Chinese internet searches (Green, 2012). Baidu is linked to Weibo and numerous other social media platforms, fully incorporating social media posts into internet searching (Green, 2012).

International Business Considerations

Business Strategy

Multinational flexibility is identified by Griffin and Pustay (2010) as one of three primary challenges of international strategic management. Due to the legal, economic, cultural, and political differences in China, multinational flexibility is especially challenging for international corporations engaging in the Chinese market. Jing (2012) stresses the importance of adapting to the specific needs of the Chinese market, emphasizing that innovation is required of multinational corporations to modify their existing systems to integrate with the unique Chinese environment, including the segmented social media landscape.

Overall flexibility is a crucial component of business structure in China and is vital to managing the highly fragmented and local nature of the Chinese social media landscape. A decentralized business structure allows for the customization required to manage China's social media environment while affording the responsiveness that is a crucial aspect of managing a company's social media presence in any environment (Lowe and Nicholas, 2012). Further, it is important to maintain the flexibility and responsiveness of a decentralized structure to manage China's unique governmental structure, market, and consumers (Tse, 2010).

Also important to business strategy in China is the use of both transnational and multidomestic strategy. While both strategies require high local responsiveness and flexibility, a transnational strategy prioritizes global efficiencies while a multidomestic strategy trades efficiency for market customization (Griffin and Pustay, 2010). Magni and Poh (2013) assert that this dual strategy methodology is especially crucial when considering the complexities of the Chinese market and recommend that a multidomestic strategy be employed for targeting China's emerging urban middle class and high profit products; a transnational strategy is recommended

to target rural, less affluent markets and products designed for volume sales. These dual strategies also require companies to customize their social media presence to fit the wide variety of social media platforms.

A polycentric marketing strategy, defined by Griffin and Pustay (2010) as a customized marketing mix that meets the needs of the specific market it serves, is warranted when targeting Chinese social media users. Herb Kohler, CEO of plumbing fixture company Kohler Co., explains the need for this type of marketing strategy: “You can’t do business globally and try to make your customers worldwide interact with you as if they were Americans” (Klein, 2011, p. 10). Kohler Co.’s online presence has been renovated to become more polycentric; Kohler explained that while the primary engine is standardized within product fields, marketing is highly customized and “purposely had very local feel for people in . . . China.” (Klein, 2011, p. 10).

Laws and Regulations

A country’s laws and regulations can be a significant barrier to entry for corporations seeking new markets. China’s bureaucratic system and the many laws and regulations enacted for the internet present a particular challenge for companies. The Chinese government views the internet as a part of its economic structure, not a medium for communication; as such, it is viewed as a threat to political and social stability (Eko, Kumar, and Yao, 2011). China’s government has created a “closed national intranet that it protects with a censorious architecture of information technology, regulatory agencies, Internet Service Providers, and an internet police squad” (Eko, et al., 2011, p. 4). The government has appointed itself as gatekeeper, controlling international and national gateways and content, internet service providers, and the activities of its citizens in a system referred to as the Great Firewall of China (Lagerkvist, 2011).

Internet service providers and businesses must accommodate government regulations and demands; corporate obedience is viewed as a “necessary pillar of patriotism”; social media providers are routinely visited by government officials and encouraged to comply (Lagerkvist, 2011, p. 178). The Internet Society of China, tasked with maintaining the “health” of the internet, encourages self-discipline among companies; if that does not work, companies are put on a “blacklist” (Lagerkvist, 2011, p. 172). Internet service providers are limited to Chinese-owned corporations, must have a license to operate, are required to report all online activities, and are liable for all content transmitted (Eko, et al., 2011). Lagerkvist (2011) asserts that this state-capitalist alliance, which heavily promotes self-censorship, is responsible for the lack of political and social reform that have been linked to social media in other parts of the world.

Citizens also experience the effects of the Great Firewall of China. Internet users must comply with real identity laws, providing their name and contact information for all social media profiles, as well as register with the police if they use the internet (Eko, et al., 2011). China enacted the Green Dam Youth-Escort in 2009, which requires that all notebook computers sold in China install screening software to monitor internet activity and censor sites (Lagerkvist, 2011). Further, citizens who violate internet policies may receive lengthy prison terms (Eko, et al., 2011).

Many platforms popular in other parts of the world are blocked in China. Facebook and Twitter were blocked in 2009 after authorities asserted that riots in the province of Xinjiang were abetted by the sites (Ruwich and Oreskovic, 2013). News media including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Business Week* have also been blocked due to content the Chinese government found objectionable (Ruwich and Oreskovic, 2013). Google withdrew in 2010 when it refused to continue censoring search results (Lagerkvist, 2011).

Far from loosening its policies, even tighter control has been exercised by the Chinese government following worldwide events that illustrate the potential power of social media. The Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East in 2011, which deposed dictators, changed cultures, and won women the right to vote in Saudi Arabia, were propelled by social media, which turned the uprisings into full-scale revolution (Hall, 2012). As a result, Chinese leaders have exercised increased control over social networks (Madden, 2011).

One exception to more rigorous internet control are the concessions made for the Shanghai Free Trade Zone, which was formally launched September 29, 2013 to welcome foreign investment and open up the Yuan-dominated financial sector to rest of world. In the Shanghai Free Trade Zone, some aspects of the internet have been unblocked, such as Facebook and Twitter, and foreign telecommunication firms are allowed to provide internet services. Far from being a concession to free speech or a sign of reduced control, the government explained that it took these measures to make foreigners “feel like at home” (Ruwitch and Oreskovic, 2013).

Firms also must contend with weak intellectual property rights in China. The country ranks in the top 20 for software piracy, which has been facilitated by technological advances, including China’s content-rich social media platforms (Griffin and Pustay, 2010). Content on Youku, China’s counterpart to YouTube, is highly pirated (Crampton, 2011). Additionally, 82% of software and up to 90% of recorded music in China is pirated (Griffin and Pustay, 2010).

Culture

Chinese culture is formal, high-context, and values all aspects of tradition (Griffin and Pustay, 2010). Social media increasingly acts as an extension of culture (Tian and Borges, 2011). Tian and Borges (2011) state that cultural considerations are especially crucial in China,

where cross-cultural communication can either form an invisible barrier to success or be the determining factor in rising above the competition. Multinational corporations utilizing social media in China must address three primary cultural issues: language, localization, and reputation and branding.

Language is a powerful competitive weapon (Griffin and Pustay, 2010). Green (2012) states that, despite English being the *lingua franca* of international business, the majority of the population in China speaks Mandarin Chinese, making it essential for international corporations to have a social media presence optimized in that language. Green (2012) also points out that companies who route Chinese consumers to an English language website have already lost the bid for Chinese business. A web site optimized in Chinese is also less likely to be banned or blocked by the Chinese government (Darragh, 2009). Additionally, Chinese seek out information directly from companies more than citizens in other countries because it is not filtered; this high level of confidence in company-sourced content makes it especially important to provide easy to understand information using the Chinese language (Insight: Media Debate, 2012). Further, Lowe and Nicholas (2012) highlight the importance of culturally meaningful communications, asserting that companies should not simply translate their content into Chinese, but ensure that it is fully adapted to the localized language.

Arguably, the largest cultural difference in the Chinese social media landscape is localization; therefore, customization is essential (Insight: Media Debate, 2012). Green (2012) asserts that “local is king” (p. 33) due to the complexity of the social media landscape, which is highly segmented by audience, geography, education, and interests, as previously discussed. The fragmented and locally complex nature of Chinese social media calls for the need to address

market segmentation and diversity so that content will be relative to targeted users (Lowe and Nicholas, 2012; Tian and Borges, 2011).

Reputation and brand is especially important in China, where people trust and appreciate brand web sites more than in other countries, making it particularly important to provide integrated and interactive brand experiences via social media (Insight: Media Debate, 2012). In China, companies are often competing against brands, not necessarily products (Lowe and Nicholas, 2012). Reputation and brand are important in buying decisions; 87% of Chinese consumers check labels to see what company is behind a product they consider buying (Lowe and Nicholas, 2012). Seventy percent of social media users follow brands; further, 55% of China's netizens report that they have initiated or participated in online discussions about companies; significantly more than other countries (Chan, 2012; Crampton, 2011). Additionally, Chinese consumers are attracted to foreign brands because of their quality and safety reputations (Lowe and Nicholas, 2012). Illustrating the sensitivity of Chinese consumers to brand reputation is damage sustained by the Kentucky Fried Chicken brand following a November 2012 food tainting issue. Same store sales in China plummeted 41% for the fourth quarter of 2012; as a result, earnings for parent company Yum Brands were downgraded on a global scale (Insight: Brand Health Check, 2013).

Marketing

The advertising market in China is the most aggressive in the world (The China Puzzle, 2012). Callahan (2012) asserts that social media has become the first, not second, marketing platform in China. Companies harnessing social media as a marketing medium must be mindful to maintain consistency and synergy with overall business strategy (Griffin and Pustay, 2010). Several other factors affect social media marketing in China.

First, it is vitally important to invest in and manage your brand and its reputation. Lowe and Nicholas (2012) suggest that social media is beneficial to reputation and brand in China in that it gives a stage and audience to promote and defend your brand and recommend that companies integrate with social media platforms to facilitate brand management. To this end, Lowe and Nicholas (2012) suggest vigorous ongoing monitoring and the formation of a crisis committee to manage online reputation issues. Additionally, Chinese social media users expect a response to each post, which requires additional personnel and diligent oversight (Chiu, et al., 2012).

The power of branding also makes it essential to harness the potential of established key opinion leaders via social media to take advantage of the effects of word of mouth advertising, which is especially powerful in China (Magni and Poh, 2013; Gilfoil and Jobs, 2011). Collaboration with influential bloggers, who the Chinese view as a trusted sibling, was particularly effective for Dettol, manufacturer of a spray cleaner, who sent product samples to 4,000 social media influencers. In one year, top of mind awareness for the Dettol brand increased by 500% in the target areas and sales increased by 86%, resulting in a return on investment that was 15 times greater than television advertising efforts (Chan, 2012).

Broad social media exposure is also important. Darragh (2009) asserts that it is vital for marketers to consider the segmented audiences that exist in the Chinese social media environment and “take their message to the places where netziens are already investing their time and trust” (p. 37). Due to the fragmented and highly localized nature of Chinese social media, this means maintaining a presence on a variety of platforms (Lowe and Nicholas, 2012). Additionally, it is important that marketing be customized to its audience and contain consumer-

relevant content; for example, regional differences must be considered and the geographic divide makes it necessary to market differently to rural areas than urban ones (Chan, 2012).

Despite the great influence of social media in China, marketers must not ignore traditional media, which is still the most influential (Green, 2012). Because China restricts the number of outlets allowed to produce news, having content originating on social media picked up by traditional media sources and coordinating content across mediums aggregates content and contributes to total return on investment (Green, 2012). Green (2012) asserts that Wal-Mart does this particularly well, incorporating press releases and content supplemental to social media in its traditional media efforts to enhance its online presence.

Social media platforms in China provide a much richer user experience than their counterparts around the world and allow users more opportunities to embed multimedia content (Chiu, et al., 2012). Many social media platforms utilize tools more advanced than their counterparts in other countries and technological advances are sometimes far ahead of world counterparts; Chinese users had the ability to embed multimedia content 18 months prior to counterparts in the United States (Chiu, et al., 2012). For example, WeChat, the exclusively mobile social media platform, allows users to trade text, audio, photos, and video. For this reason, the use of images and videos, as well as archiving them on a variety of social media platforms, is essential and increases the likelihood of content being shared (Green, 2012).

Companies should also make certain that they address technical issues to ensure that social media content will function on China's internet. As discussed previously, social media and blogs are incorporated into search engines, which make exponential exposure a possibility. However, search engines are also completely different from other countries, incorporating unique search rules; social media content must be search engine optimized in Chinese for

maximum benefit (Green, 2012). Further, it is important to register with a local internet service provider and upgrade from standard peering agreements so that content is delivered at a faster rate (Kim, 2011). While content upgrades can cost up to 800% more than standard agreements, the backlog created by the limited number of overall peering points provides an advantage to companies with faster delivery rates (Kim, 2011). Kim (2011) also suggests employing content delivery networks as an efficient time and money saving means to streamline entry into target markets.

Conclusion

Due to its state-directed capitalist stance, the Chinese government views the internet as economic infrastructure, not a means for communication (Eko, et al., 2011). Government controls have thus far prevented social media from facilitating political independence in China. While transparency has increased somewhat, censorship remains vigorous and the recent trend is toward increased control. However, China is an example that globalization can still occur in spite of censorship. Further, China is evidence that capitalism can be authoritarian and that control and freedom can grow in parallel (Lagerkvist, 2011).

Despite censorship, the potential power of communicating via social media in China has never been stronger and has not begun to be fully realized by international businesses who wish to participate in the fastest growing economy in the world. The highly fragmented social media landscape provides opportunities for multinational corporations to directly reach targeted Chinese consumers and expand their global reach into the world's largest market. Far from simply missing an opportunity, companies that neglect Chinese social media increase their business risk.

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