A Dialogue with Social Media Experts:

Measurement and Challenges of Social Media Use in

Chinese Public Relations Practice

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Abstract:

With the advent and increasing popularity of new communication technologies, social media tools have been widely used in corporate organization-public communication. The extant literature on social media use in public relations practice has largely centered on the ways social media tools have transformed the practice of public relations in the United States. Limited studies have examined the role of social media in China. The present study represents one of the first to investigate the measurement and challenges of social media use in Chinese public relations practice. Based on 18 in-depth interviews with public relations executives, this paper concludes that traditional quantitative methods of social media production and message exposure have been utilized to measure social media campaigns, accompanied by the growing use of methods focused on intangible impact of public relations (e.g., online publics' awareness, advocacy, and participation). Challenges unique to China's social media landscape are also identified. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Challenges; China; Measurement; Public Relations Practice; Social Media

Résumé:

Avec l'avènement et la popularité croissante des technologies des nouveaux médias, les outils des médias sociaux ont été largement utilisés dans les organisations-publiques communication corporative. La littérature sur l'utilisation des médias sociaux dans les pratiques des relations publiques est grandement concentré sur les manières par lesquelles les outils des médias sociaux ont transformé la pratique des relations publiques aux États-Unis. Peu d'études ont examiné le rôle des médias sociaux en Chine. Cette étude représente une des premières à examiner la mesure et les challenges de l'utilisation des médias sociaux dans la pratique des relations publiques en Chine. Basée sur 18 interviews en profondeur avec des cadres des relations publiques, cet article conclut que les méthodes quantitatives traditionnelles de la production des médias sociaux et l'exposition au message ont été utilisées afin de mesurer les campagnes des médias sociaux, accompagnées par une utilisation grandissante des méthodes mettant l'emphase sur l'impact des relations publiques (par ex. savoir des publics en ligne, promotion et participation). Les challenges uniques aux médias sociaux en Chine sont identifiés. Des implications théoriques et pratiques sont discutées.

Mots-clés: Challenges; Chine; Médias sociaux; Mesures; Pratique des relations publiques

Introduction

Social media have emerged as a critical avenue for public relations practice (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Kent, 2008; Paine, 2008; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). A plethora of studies have examined how social media are transforming public relations practice in North America and Europe where social media use is minimally restricted (Luo, 2012). This body of knowledge has focused on the key features associated with social media use such as information dissemination, dialogue, interactivity, credibility, authenticity, transparency, and authority (Scoble & Israel, 2006). Nevertheless, measuring the success or effectiveness of social media in public relations remains challenging for scholars and practitioners (Paine & Lark, 2005, March; Rubel, 2005).

Moreover, few studies have investigated how social media are integrated into public relations practice in China (Luo, 2012). The purpose of this research is to explore the ways that Chinese public relations practitioners adapt to evaluate the effectiveness of social media use in China's unique social media landscape. It also attempts to address the challenges for public relations practitioners in social media practice. In addition, most previous studies have examined the use of social media in public relations from the perspective of communication staff at low levels who are usually not involved in corporate decision making relevant to social media (DiStaso, McCorkindale & Wright, 2011). This paper fills the gap by offering new insights into

the topic by studying the perceptions of top communication and public relations executives, including regional directors, managing directors, founders and CEOs, and so on.

Literature Review

Measuring the Effectiveness of Social Media Use

Along with the growing popularity of social media, the measurement of their effectiveness has become a great challenge that researchers and practitioners face (e.g., Briones et al., 2011; Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008; Lariscy et al., 2009; Paine, 2009, March; Yang & Lim, 2009). For example, some scholars and practitioners have categorized social media metrics in terms of "output", "outtake", and "outcome" (e.g., Paine, 2008). Scholars have developed the following five major methods of public relations measurement: measurement of production (i.e., counting the number of produced public relations tactics), measurement of message exposure (i.e., how many of the target audience are exposed to key messages), measurement of awareness (i.e., whether the target audience actually becomes aware of the messages), measurement of audience attitudes (i.e., whether the target audience's perceptions and attitudes have changed), and measurement of audience action (i.e., whether the target audience has been motivated to adopt an idea, vote, buy a product, or use a service) (e.g., Watson, 2012; Wilcox et al., 2011).

Beyond the Measurement of Production and Message Exposure

The use of social media has made the dissemination of information to stakeholders an easier and faster job for practitioners (Lariscy et al., 2009). Social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace have allowed organizations to create their profiles and publicize the information about their existing brands or new products (Waters et al., 2009). Nevertheless, it is never sufficient to quantitatively examine the coverage of messages on the sites. More advanced methods of assessment are needed to evaluate how social media have contributed to engaging multiple stakeholders in dialogues (Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008; Smith, 2010; Waters & Jamal, 2011), building and enhancing relationships (Yang & Lim, 2009), and advancing organizations' missions and programs (Waters et al., 2009). On the other hand, it is critical for us to assess the effective use of social media from the publics' perspective (Lee et al., 2010). Previous literature has concluded that publics tend to accept and use more often the information delivered via social media that they believe are highly credible than via other media that they evaluate to be less credible (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2005). Nevertheless, in the new social media landscape that we live with, it is very often difficult to determine the original sources of messages (Lee et al., 2010). Furthermore, in terms of media modality (e.g., text, text and picture, video), social media with high modality forms (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, and many other motion media platforms) are more appealing and memorable than those with low modality (Lee et al., 2010). This suggests that an assessment of publics' cognitive processing of social media information or messages needs to be included in the evaluation plan.

Concrete and Meaningful Measures of Impact

Public relations practitioners have realized that it is important for them to adopt social media tools to achieve concrete and meaningful outcomes (Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008).

Examples of such outcomes include: 1) monitoring the substantive issues in online commentaries (i.e., environmental scanning); 2) connecting social media tactics to corporate communication strategies; 3) eliciting desired behavioural outcomes (e.g., stakeholder engagement and increase of consumer purchases); 4) strengthening brand awareness and organizational reputation; 5) demographic analysis of audiences' profiles; 6) calculating return on investment; and 7) measuring credibility and trustworthiness (DiStaso, McCorkindale & Wright, 2011).

Interactivity and Relationship Cultivation

Social media use has greatly changed the practice of relationship building with organizations' internal and external stakeholders (Yang & Lim, 2009). Interactivity and relationship cultivation has become an important indicator for social media measurement. Studies (e.g., Berman et al., 2007; Kelleher, 2006) have indicated that key strategies of relationship cultivation through social media should involve openness and transparency, usefulness for the stakeholders, and interactive features.

Social Media in China

Social media have not only been growing in the practice of public relations in the U.S. but also been widely used in other parts of the world (Toledano, 2010). Unfortunately, the research on social media and public relations in non-U.S. countries remains limited in the extant academic discussion. Notably, very few studies have examined the challenges that practitioners face in carrying out social media campaigns in China and how to measure the use of social media in Chinese public relations. Based on the convergence of many definitions of social media (e.g., Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Solis & Breakenridge, 2009; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008), social media in this paper are broadly defined as Internet based platforms facilitating conversations and interactions among users (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009).[1]

The Status Quo

Today, the public relations industry in China is one of the fastest growing in the world (Sha, 2007). China's social media landscape vastly differs from those in the rest of the world. For instance, Facebook and other social media sites popular in the U.S. are unavailable in China due to its stringent regulatory environment.[2] China has developed its own vibrant social media scene (Reisinger, 2010, December 9). Millions of Chinese are active on domestic social media sites such as Kaixin (similar to Facebook), Weibo (similar to Twitter), YouKu (similar to YouTube), just to name a few. These social media sites have played an important role in the industry of communication. For example, YouKu, worth $3.3 billion, attract 200 million viewers monthly (Ibid). Overall, social networking sites have been dominated by Facebook-like sites including Renren, Kaixin, Douban, Qzone, and Pengyou. Qzone, for instance, has garnered more than 190 million users, followed by Renren with approximately 95 million users and Pengyou with nearly 80 million users (Lukoff, 2011, March 8). The world of microblogging is shared by Jiepang, Kai, Sina Weibo, and Tencent Weibo (Kan, 2011, May 11). As for video sharing, Tudou, Youku, Sougua, and Qiyi are the major players. Similar patterns can be detected in review/ratings, music, picture sharing, social bookmarking, Q&As, and social commerce (Luo, 2012).

Methodology

Based on the reviewed literature, this study attempts to fill the gap in the existing scholarship by answering the following two research questions:

> **RQ1:** How are social media campaigns measured in China?
> **RQ2:** Why is it difficult to measure the effectiveness of social media campaigns in China?

Because this study asked how and why questions about measuring and dealing with challenges in social media campaigns in China, a qualitative approach seemed appropriate for the explorative nature of the study and for answering these research questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative interviewing also has the advantage to disclose in depth the details of a complex phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) such as measuring the effectiveness of a social media campaign in China that has its own dynamic and distinctive social and political environment.

Sample

This study employed a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods (Patton, 2001). Particularly, this study purposively recruited participants with expertise in using social media and experience in managing social media campaigns in China. Potential participants were identified by searching on the websites of the four largest public relations conglomerates in the world (Interpublic, Publicis Groupe, WPP, OMNICOM) and the major public relations firms listed on the Chamber of Commerce and www.pr-directory.asia in major cities (e.g., Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou).

A total of 18 public relations executives, managers, and senior practitioners was interviewed. These participants (13 males and 5 females) came from top global public relations agencies, domestic public relations firms, global 100 companies, and foreign-owned independent public relations consulting agencies. These interviewees occupied middle to top managerial positions such as account manager, regional director, senior vice president, or CEO. Out of the 14 participants who were native English speakers, 10 were Asian Americans fluent in both Chinese and English and with extensive experience practicing public relations in China. The remaining four participants were Chinese. All participants have practiced or managed social media campaigns in China for an average of five years. As for the education level, eight participants received master's degrees and the rest bachelor's degrees. The diverse backgrounds of these participants provided a great opportunity to look for consistent patterns and/or contradictions.

All interviews were conducted and audio-recorded via Skype. Among the 18 interviews, 14 were conducted in English and the rest in a mix of Chinese and English. On average, each interview lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. Chinese interview transcripts were translated into English by the first author who is competent in both languages. English transcripts were then back translated into Chinese by the second author and two student assistants who are bilingual in Chinese and English to check the accuracy and reliability of the transcripts.

Data Analysis

This study used Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework of data analysis. Particularly, each interview transcript and notes were read repeatedly to identify recurring patterns and themes. For example, counting the frequency of posting or tweets was categorized under the theme of traditional measures. Monitoring the activities of the returned users on social media sites was categorized as measuring awareness. Each of two authors coded half of the interview transcripts independently. First, the authors randomly chose three transcripts. After the initial coding, the two authors compared their coding and discussed the differences in the identified categories. The two coders then recoded the five transcripts and discussed the findings again to reach mutual agreement. Finally, each author coded six randomly selected interview transcripts to check inter-coder reliability. The Scott's pi reliability test was conducted and ranged from 0.78 to 0.87.

Findings

RQ1: How are social media campaigns measured in China?

Both conventional and advanced methods of measurement emerged through interviews. Measuring the effectiveness of social media campaigns seemed to be a central focus. Participants agreed that campaign evaluation "demonstrated the value of public relations" to their clients and strongly justified "sustained investment of resources" (e.g., time, money, staff, and technologies) in social media. Conventional measurement mainly focused on counting the number of followers, visits, re-tweets, or comments; whereas more sophisticated measures centered on the cognitive (e.g., awareness) and behavioural (e.g., dialogue participation) among the target online publics.

Traditional Measures

Traditional measures such as counting the number of online followers, fans, comments, or re-tweets were widely adopted in the public relations firms interviewed in the study. Majority of the participants (16 out of 18) specifically called such method as gauging the "buzz". One senior research analyst from a China's leading social business intelligence provider defined buzz as "the number of user-generated content such as the number of posts or comments in BBS (Bulletin Board System), tweets in microblogs, or videos or comments on a video sharing site". These buzz indexes served as quick indicators of "the popularity or impact of a social media campaign", according to an account associate at Trends, a local public relations agency. Counting the number of user-generated content (e.g., posts, tweets, or videos), as commented by the senior research analyst from the same intelligence provider, to a large extent reflected the unique feature of "viral spreading" for social media campaigns. Nearly all public relations firms interviewed in the study have designated staff to regularly monitor and report these buzz indicators to clients.

Despite the prevalent adoption of these conventional measures, participants stressed that those measures are rudimentary and limited in their ability to capture the impact of social media campaigns. Based on participant responses, two reasons accounted for the popularity of these traditional measures. First, many public relations firms, especially domestic ones, are still in the experimental phase of using social media and hence have insufficient resources to conduct

evaluation research. The general manager and vice president (VP) of a global public relations firm commented: "We have a very strong social media research team that live and breathe the social media war in China every day. I doubt those local [public relations] firms will have such a team dedicated to research when their major concern is to survive at this point". Another corporate public relations manager with ample experience in public relations practice in China added that many marketing and advertising firms just added social media and public relations to their services without solid research experience particularly related to public relations. Such a "simple switch", as noted by this corporate public relations manager, "hindered these firms to advise and conduct systematic research for their clients". Next, many companies have limited knowledge on social media, which attributed to another reason for the heavy reliance on traditional measures. Most participants (15 out 18) admitted that many clients demanded using social media in their campaigns mainly because their competitors are using it.

The founder and strategy director of a high-profile domestic public relations agency, who leads one of the first local social media public relations firms in China, mirrored the above reasoning: "Many companies in China are still trying to figure out how to apply social media into their business. They have no idea that it's toward their advantage to invest substantially on evaluation research. We have to educate them first". Lacking clear goals for using social media seemed to prevent many companies in China from integrating evaluation research into their strategic planning. Fortunately, nearly all participants observed a rise of conducting systematic research on awareness, participation, and relationship though.

Measure through Awareness

Most participants (15 out of 18) have observed a rise in using research to measure how online publics were aware of a particular brand or product. In particular, domestic companies have increasingly relied on such research. According to interviewees, awareness was mostly measured from three aspects: 1) ranking on search engines; 2) search initiated by users; and 3) the activities of returned users. Feedback on these three areas of awareness provided "insights on how effectively a social media campaign has increased target audience knowledge on certain products and hence motivate them to seek more information", as commented by the managing director from a global public relations firm. Such understanding in return, as reasoned by the founder and strategy director of Resonance China, laid a solid foundation "to engage these social media users into dialogue or actions".

One example of using awareness research came from a case discussed by the managing director from another global public relations agency in China. This public relations firm launched a social media campaign for introducing new sportswear for a global brand. Particularly, the firm live-streamed several events such as athletic coaching clinics, meetings between professional players and fans, and online chats between fans and company representatives. Synchronous blogging and tweeting were encouraged at each event. After each event, the firm outsourced a research firm to provide information on the client's rank on search engines, user-initiated searches on the products, and the online activities of the returned users. For example, the company quickly emphasized the sustained comfort of the sports shoes for jogging on the client's fan page and opened a dialogue forum between professional athletes and fans after knowing that online users searched about the comfort of long-distance jogging. As the managing director observed, "Knowing what the online users are aware of the products after

each event provided us timely feedback on providing the information that the product users cared most about. Their comments showed that they appreciated our quick adaptation to their needs".

Among the public relations firms interviewed in the study, some conducted such types of research themselves, while others outsourced to external research firms. The outsourcing decision was typically based on a firm's technical expertise. As the managing director from a global public relations agency stated, "We have a special team in almost every branch office to monitor our clients' ranking on major Chinese search engines or what those subscribed online users actually did in each of their visit". According to the research manager from the intelligence provider, many public relations firms including top global ones often recruited external research firms for research such as tracking the users' search activities because of "the rich resources in staff and technologies to quickly adapt to the fast changing technologies and users' behaviour in social media".

Measure through Engagement

Engagement involved how social media campaigns engaged target users into advocacy on behalf of the organization, dialogic communication, and actions mutually beneficial to the target users and organizations. The founder and strategy director of a large domestic public relations firm described this rising trend in engagement research as an "enlightened move" from initially looking at the number of visits or subscribers to examine various behavioural phases.

Online advocacy (Word of Mouth). Findings showed that online advocacy involved two key indicators: the extent to which messages prompted social media users to relay these messages to others and to promote a company, or particularly its products, in a positive light (i.e., word of mouth). The frequency of passing relevant messages to their online group communities reflected the "relevancy" or the "interest" of those online advocates. How those advocates discussed the messages from a social media campaign demonstrated their "reactions". These two indicators in turn "provided a direct assessment of the extent to which the core messages in a social media campaign can be amplified and of the receptivity of those messages", as summarized by the account executive from a local public relations agency. Nearly all participants stressed the centrality of identifying the online champions who actively seek out relevant information and have credibility among their connected groups. The senior research analyst from the intelligence provider pointed out that in terms of credibility online advocates in China were ranked next to family and friends according to the intelligence provider's 2011 survey on online WOM.

Another account manager from a local public relations firm, echoed, "studying the discussions and online activities of those advocates served as barometers of the general sentiment toward our social media programs because they [advocates] can impose strong influence on the opinions of their followers". The above comments demonstrated that identifying and analyzing the responses from online advocates provided timely and constructive feedback to cultivate a supportive online environment.

Based on interview responses, online advocates can be distinguished by their time spent on the Internet, education, group linkages, and leadership in offering insights. The first two indicators (i.e., time spent on the Internet and education) can be easily collected through users' profile information. The number and density of users' linkages to other social media groups can be mapped out by monitoring their online activities through various software programs. The leadership role of providing valuable inputs involved complex content analysis combining both

software and manual analysis. As the managing director from a global public relations agency described, texting mining software programs were keen to quickly identify the key categories out of massive data. Interpreting those major categories, however, necessitated analysis from some seasoned researchers. The research manager from the intelligence provider provided rationale for this combined computer and manual analysis: "Most popular text analysis software were imported from the Western countries, which fell short of capturing the complex feature of Chinese language and the culture embedded in that language. That's why it's crucial to involve researchers knowledgeable on the culture of certain social media communities".

Dialogue participation. One distinctive feature of adopting social media in communication campaigns, as many participants claimed, lies in these media's ability to "serve as interactive platforms or hubs to foster dialogue among users themselves". Naturally, this central feature of social media became a salient benchmark for program evaluation. Participants converged on several dimensions to assess the effectiveness of dialogue participation: 1) the ease of use; 2) diversity of participants; 3) sustainability of conversations; and 4) quality of interaction.

The first dimension, the ease of use, related to the technical features on the social media sites, such as what the senior vice president and managing director of a large communications agency described as "how easy users felt on those [social media] sites to connect with their friends or find relevant conversation topics to join". The next dimension, diversity of participants, focused on the inclusiveness of a social media campaign to connect with its key audiences. The sustainability of conversation, the third dimension, examined the likelihood of users to keep generating new conversations among themselves and/or with the focal organization. The more users talked about a company, the better the company would understand the users' reactions toward the company's communication messages on these platforms. The fast waning of conversations among users signalled an inadequacy of a social media campaign to provide information relevant enough for them to engage in dialogue. Messages on social media should serve as "stimulant", as emphasized by the digital media specialist from a large global public relations agency, by conveying how a product or a company's actions related to the lives of these users. The last dimension, quality of interaction, examined the impact of dialogic interactions among users.

Interestingly, a few (5 out of 18) participants explicitly mentioned that analyzing the dialogic interactions among users on social media sites provided a specific indicator of the relationship between an organization and its key publics. The CEO from a foreign-owned independent public relations firm stressed that a significant portion of online dialogues about corporations across various social media sites in China pertained to the actions of these corporations. Through these social media, the users expressed satisfaction, support, or resentment of those corporate actions, which "clearly indicated how these concerned publics associated themselves with a particular organization, a barometer of the relationship between the company and its publics". It was thus pivotal for companies to constantly analyze those dialogues, continued this executive director. Similarly, the public relations manager from a Global 100 telecommunications company recalled how the journalists and users through self-engaged conversations defended the company on various social media sites (e.g., SNS, microblogging, and BBS) in regards to the news about an unstable performance of a product's advertised function. Such dialogue, as this manager stated, "indicated the good relationship with the company's key publics who were well aware of the company's sensitivity to the needs and interests of customers through communication carried out on various social media platforms".

RQ2: Why is it difficult to measure the effectiveness of social media campaigns in China?

Based on interview responses, participants identified four major difficult reasons to measure social media campaigns: 1) lack of clear goals; 2) dealing with the network "navy"; 3) connecting to fragmented audience groups; and 4) dealing with rumour-driven behaviour. Prior to discussing those difficulties, it is important to note that, in terms of business use, participants hardly perceived noticeable impact of the Chinese government's restrictions on accessing certain Western social media sites such Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

Lack of Clear Goals

Despite the phenomenal rise of applying social media in communication campaigns, many clients had little clue about the specific purposes of launching a particular social media campaign as indicated in interview findings. Oftentimes clients requested using social media simply because they did not want to "lag behind their competitors who were using them". For example, the general manager and vice president from a large global public relations agency advised a local real estate agency to use traditional instead of social media for several key reasons. First, the key audiences, soon-to-be retirees, were not active social media users. Second, the company would not have adequate content to keep its subscribers engaged because the real estate project was still under construction. As this general manager further rationalized:

> Adopting social media is not always beneficial to every company. If the key audiences are not on those social media platforms, it'd be a waste to launch the campaign. More importantly, constructing quality messages for a specific platform is time-consuming and needs special talent who are familiar with the cultures on different online communities and skilful in using these various social media.

A managing director from another global public relations agency echoed, "Social media campaign is actually long-term oriented. You need to constantly develop interesting and unique messages to engage the users into dialogue, which demands investment in public relations professionals with such expertise". Unfortunately without knowing specifically how they can benefit from adopting social media, many companies underestimated the resources (e.g., time, staff, technology) necessary to ensure the effectiveness of the campaign, as noted by most participants.

Such vague understanding about the goals of using social media among many companies in China has created difficulty in measuring the effectiveness of a social media campaign. Many clients, as shown in interviews, were not sure whether they wanted to use social media campaigns to promote sales, introduce new products, publicize company events, or build relationships. As the founder and strategy director of a large domestic public relations agency reasoned, "How could we find a proper measurement to evaluate a campaign and hence make adjustments along the way if a client had no idea what they want to achieve by using social media?" Consequently, much time was spent on educating clients about the functions of social media and on figuring out specific goals for the clients in the beginning phase of campaign development.

Dealing with Network Navy

Another primary challenge that public relations practitioners have been constantly battling against in managing social media campaigns centered on issues of transparency, disclosure, and responsibility as shown in interview responses. Participants shared concerns over dealing with a network "navy", a newly coined term in China referring to a large group of individuals hired to perform specific tasks (e.g., writing raving or malicious product reviews with pseudonyms) on social media networks (e.g., SNS, BBS, blog, or microblog). According to participants, a company (a public relations or a marketing firm) usually hired these individuals. Participation from these network navies seemed to generate strong influence upon the opinions and behaviours of other online users.

The managing director from a large global public relations agency recounted a case where a local public relations firm for Mongniu (i.e., the largest dairy company in China) allegedly in July 2010 hired thousands of network navies to spread a rumour on various social media sites that consuming milk products from their competitors had accelerated puberty among teen girls. With the overwhelmingly fumed rumour online, people started boycotting the milk products from Mongniu's competitors. The rumour caught the attention from the state health agencies and was finally shut down. Sometimes, employees were "asked" to serve as network navies. The managing director and SVP from a large communications agency illustrated a case involving Sinopec, one of China's largest energy companies. Sinopec, starting in February 2011, brazenly asked its employees to present themselves as "average Joe" to post comments endorsing a rise in fuel prices. This case was a bit "extreme", as the senior vice president commented, that most average citizens soon figured out because most would not agree with a rise. This case "severely tarnished the brand's credibility and trust among its stakeholders", concluded the senior vice president.

Faced with the prevalence of network navies in China, participants suggested self-regulation within the industry as a tentative solution. The public relations manager from the Global 500 multinational explained: "Do you really want to play in that kind of game? Do you have 200 students clicking and posting things? It's ridiculous! Our industry needs to reinforce professionalism to avoid such embarrassing conduct". The managing director from a top 10 global public relations firm echoed: "Hundreds and thousands of navies are out there in China spreading false news. It's unrealistic to even engage them. As an industry, we need to educate people that it's not an ethical thing to manipulate public opinion with lies". According to this managing director, in March 2011 about 50 major international and local public relations firms pledged to abide by ethical guidelines in public relations at a conference held in Shanghai, China. The CEO of a foreign-owned independent public relations firm agreed that education and self-regulation are the key solutions to the problem. This CEO with over 10 years of public relations consulting experience in China explained that Chinese culture might have played a role in this phenomenon: "In China pseudonym is something cool and necessary given that their self-expression has been restricted in the past. It takes time and education for people here to understand the importance of transparency and full disclosure".

Connecting to Fragmented Online Users

Unlike the clear dominant player in each category of social media (e.g., Facebook in SNS), multiple players compete in each category of social media landscape in China. As a result of this

fragmentation, participants voiced the challenge of managing communication with online publics scattered around different social media sites. The deputy general manager from a large public relations agency reasoned that the "unique fragmentation in China's social media landscape multiplied drastically the number of channels used to communicate with publics". The difficulty of communicating with fragmented online users was evidenced in the following comment by the account manager from a local public relations agency: "Most people in the U.S. log in Facebook. In China, each demographic group has their own Facebook-like sites.[3] Each site has its unique culture and language, which complicates campaign development, implementation, and evaluation".

Two strategies emerged from interview responses to deal with the much-scattered nature of the social media landscape in China, which involved: 1) creating a focal community; and 2) relying on online advocates. The first strategy aimed at "establishing an interactive community where it pulls together different groups of publics", as defined by an account manager from a global public relations agency. Hence, whenever some online users needed to seek certain information or join a dialogue, they would cluster in a particular community. To achieve this goal, developing highly relevant, interesting messages or activities was key to attracting target groups to a specific hub. For example, the founder and strategy director of a domestic public relations agency mentioned developing a social gaming site for a client to "draw various customer groups into one focal point for interaction, which successfully avoided developing different campaigns for different groups at different sites". The managing director from a global public relations agency mirrored that it would be more effective to build one central place accommodating all key publics than alternating among different platforms. The second strategy focused on using online advocates as intermediary between an organization and its strategic publics. As one account manager from a large local public relations firm explained, "These online advocates are linked with so many like-minded users. They [advocates] can quickly spread information to other relevant groups, thus targeting communication with them is more focused and cost-effective".

Dealing with Rumour-Driven Behaviour

Participants acknowledged the value of monitoring conversations on various social media sites for collecting information about a company's external environment such as detecting potential issues that may plague a company. Nevertheless, nearly all participants cautioned about a problem unique among Chinese social media users, namely the "rumour-driven" behaviour. Online users in various social media communities tended to trust more what they read online than information published from official sources. The explanation shared by most participants could be evidenced in the following observation by a participant: "There is a trust issue with Chinese government or official news. People don't believe official news, so they look for other sources of news from a blog or BBS post". The general manager and vice president from a large global public relations firm warned that online users' propensity for "following the crowd" made it imperative for an involved organization to make timely responses. A recent example came in May 2011, right after the leakage of radioactive materials as a result of Japan's devastating earthquake. Rumours started spilling over major social networks (e.g., microblogging) in China that consuming iodized salt can prevent radiation poisoning. Within a week, many grocery stores in major cities ran out iodized salt as a result of people's frenzy to stock the salt. This panic situation could have been avoided if the involved federal and local agencies could have

responded swiftly to disclose accurate information about preventing radiation poisoning, as one participant (who chose to remain anonymous) commented.

To deal with such rumour-driven crowd behaviour, participants suggested the following remedies. First, it is crucial to locate the "causes" or "sources" of these rumoured reactions from netizens. Boundary spanners should learn to identify the key information pieces that have driven the blatant behaviour (e.g., boycotting or denouncing) endorsed in those online discussions. Second, a company involved in those rumoured discussions need to identify the online opinion leaders and engage them into dialogue while simultaneously dispelling the rumour through accurate information disclosure. A key goal of engaging those online opinion leaders aimed at inviting them as the company's advocate. Third, a company needs to cultivate credibility and trust with its online publics through ongoing dialogues with its publics on various social media platforms. These two-way dialogues could foster a "personal" relationship between a company and its online publics to counter against the deeply enriched distrust of official sources, as the managing director from a global public relations agency concluded.

Conclusion

Findings indicated that participants in this study use both conventional and advanced methods to evaluate social media in campaigns. Consistent with what previous literature discussed (e.g., Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008; Lariscy et al., 2009; Waters et al., 2009), practitioners in this study have *counted* the number of followers, visits, re-tweets, and comments to evaluate outcomes. Meanwhile, an increasing emphasis has been placed on advanced means to assess the effectiveness of social media campaigns. Scholars have called for more research to evaluate how social media have contributed to engaging multiple stakeholders in dialogues and interaction (Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008; Smith, 2010; Waters & Jamal, 2011), building and advancing relationships (Yang & Lim, 2009), and enhancing publics' awareness of and supportive behaviours toward organizations (McCorkindale, 2010; Waters et al., 2009). The present study apparently fills the gap. As revealed in the data, interview participants have utilized sophisticated cognitive and behavioural measurement such as 1) brand or product awareness, 2) online advocacy, and 3) dialogic communication and interactivity.

Given the distinct social media landscape in China (e.g., Kan, 2011; Lukoff, 2011; Luo, 2012; Reisinger, 2010, December 9; Sha, 2007), interview participants encountered the following challenges in carrying out social media campaigns: 1) lack of clear goals for social media use on the clients' side; 2) dealing with lack of transparency, disclosure, and responsibility on the sites as reflected in the power of "network navies"; 3) cultivating relationships with fragmented and scattered online publics groups; 4) difficulty of selecting appropriate measurement outcomes due to the diverse range of objectives (such as raising awareness for products or rallying support for a social cause) in launching social media campaigns; and finally 5) proactive environmental scanning to detect "rumour-driven" online behaviours that may plague an organization. Through strategic endeavours, these challenges can possibly turn into opportunities so as to nurture the continuous advancement of the public relations profession in China. First of all, public relations practitioners ought to assume their managerial role in guiding their clients or employers to make strategic plans for social media use in campaigns. Through active self-learning and mentoring decision makers, practitioners can develop their expertise, demonstrate the value of public relations, and leverage its professional status through setting appropriate measurement outcomes and choosing proper measurement methods. Second, the

unique existence of "network navies" and "rumour-driven" online publics actually exhibits a fertile ground for practitioners to initiate grassroots campaigns if they can proactively scan, monitor, guide, and ultimately lead netizens' behaviours toward goal accomplishment for both parties. Finally, cultivating relationships with multiple fragmented and scattered online publics groups can be challenging yet rewarding. Organizations can be greatly successful once their social media outreach efforts turn out to be organized, focused, effective, and ethical.

The role of social media in public relations campaigns remains as a critical topic worthy of continuous research endeavours to explore. The present study represents an initial attempt to examine the topic. Based on the findings of the research, we generated several key tenets that may contribute to theory building on social media and Chinese public relations. These tenets need to be further examined and refined in future academic discussion: 1) Combine traditional quantitative methods of social media production and message exposure with more advanced measures to assess awareness, understanding, dialogue, interaction, and desirable attitudinal and behavioural changes in alignment with the accomplishment of organizational objectives; 2) Establish theoretical rationales for social media use and measurement. Systematically establish a body of knowledge about all available social media tools on the market of ideas and their defining characteristics, and; 3) Profile online publics' groups. Analyze their cognitive and behavioural intentions and the reasons driving their intentions and prospective behaviours.

This study has limitations in its scope due to its exploratory nature. First, the limited number of participants presents a limited interpretation of measuring social media measurement in China. Findings of this study thus cannot be generalized to all public relations agencies in China. Second, most public relations firms in this study were leading global multinational public relations firms. Only a few local firms were examined. The question of measuring social media campaigns by local public relations firms was not adequately addressed. Third, self-reported data presents a limited picture. To strengthen the analysis, we would recommend researchers spend time in some of the firms. Such an ethnographic approach can provide additional insight into firm practices related to social media.

Notes

1   Based on this broad definition, Internet technologies such as campaign Web sites, blogging, and social networking sites that allow content generation and facilitate dialogues among users are social media.

2   According to a latest report by *The Economist* (Monitoring the monitors, 2012), content with the goal of rallying people to potentially protest is usually closely monitored and regulated on social media.

3   For example, Taomee (a social networking and gaming site), is popular among Chinese children. Douban, a combination of social networking, blog, and discussion forums, is favored by young urban Chinese.

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