

Electronic Word-of-Mouth on Microblogs: A Cross-cultural Content Analysis of Twitter and Weibo

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Abstract: This research studies microblogging as word-of-mouth communication from a cross-cultural perspective. It compares microblogging contents on Twitter in the US and Weibo in China. After coding microblogs on four smart-phone brands in a month period for their content categories, the author computed the relation between the proportional occurrence of each category and Hofstede's cultural dimensions. The results indicate, across cultures, consumers mostly use microblogs to share brand-central information and entertaining messages. However, cultural values, in significant ways, moderate specific types of contents consumers share on microblogs. Implications for application of microblogging in marketing communication and future research into eWOM content are discussed.

Keywords: Microblog, word-of-mouth, content, culture

Word-of-mouth (WOM) has been recognized as one of the most influential resources of information transmission (Breazeale, 2008; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). The influence of WOM on consumer behavior is well established in marketing literature (Steffes & Burgee, 2009). With the rapid development of the internet and information technology, electronic WOM (eWOM) has become an increasingly important way for consumers to share brand-related information (Chen & Xie, 2008). Among various online media, microblog, with its rapid growth and wide spread, has grown to be a key eWOM platform. By December, 2012, Twitter, the most popular microblogging application, had over 500 million users and more than 200 million monthly active users worldwide. As a unique way of communication, microblogging is believed to have the potential to substantially impact WOM branding, which can impact key elements of the company–customer relationship including brand image and brand awareness (Jansen et al., 2009). However, despite the increasing attention microblogging has attracted among marketers and academics, microblogging as eWOM communication is an under-researched phenomenon.

Post content is a decisive factor in the microblogging communication and information transmission process. Unlike traditional Social Networking Services (SNS) such as Facebook and LinkedIn, whose users usually have strong ties in real life, microblog allows its users to connect with anyone, with strong, weak, or no ties, in real as well as virtual life, by choosing to “follow” the person. Content, instead of social relations, thus becomes the most important factor that decides how far and widely a microblog is spread (Yu et al., 2011). Yet, unlike blogs or other content communities, microblog stipulates that users post messages within 140 characters. It is precisely the shortness of microblogs that makes them a very special form of eWOM (Chen, 2012). As a new genre of eWOM, what are the characteristics of microblogging WOM? What do consumers say about brands on microblogs? What types of microblogging posts about products and services are most frequently transmitted? These are important questions if we want to better

apply this new medium to market brands and develop customer relations. This research is to fill the gap in literature and examine the content of microblogging WOM.

Culture is an important factor that affects consumer behavior (Mooij & Hofstede, 2010). It significantly impacts consumers' engagement with WOM. The pattern, type, and target receivers of consumers' WOM activity depend on their cultural values (Lam, Lee & Mizerski, 2009). More and more companies are adopting microblogs to communicate with their international customers. Specifically, this exploratory study tests whether systematic differences in microblogging WOM content types mirror predictable differences in cultural values. Developing an understanding of how cultural factors affect consumer microblogging WOM transmission should aid managers to better apply this new online tool to create more proactive and targeted promotional programs. More effective management of microblogging WOM could improve a product category's or brand's acceptance and preference across consumer populations in various cultures.

1. Background

1.1. Microblogging as a Form of EWOM

Microblogging is a Web 2.0 application for information sharing and communication. It integrates the functions of text message, blog, SNS, and instant messaging (IM)¹, yet distinguishes from all of them as a potentially unique way of eWOM communication. Two key characters make microblogging stand out among various online communication platforms. First, microblogs are short statements with a specific length limit. The shortness of microblogs decides microblogging communication is both instant and constant. Microblogs are instantaneous updates of users' deeds and thoughts. They are usually fragmented messages. As Yu et al. (2011) pointed out, the less structured or complete the message is, the more possible communication is to be instant. In terms of immediacy of eWOM branding, microblogging can occur at any point of the consumption process, before, very near, or right after the purchase decision or even during the purchase process (Barton, 2006). Microblogging also provides constant connectivity among people that is previously unparalleled. As microblogs are easy to write and read, people can post and check microblogging updates anywhere anytime, while getting a cup of coffee, waiting for the traffic lights, or bored by a dull lecture. One paradigm for studying the constant connectivity of modern social networking services in the commercial area is called the attention economy (Davenport & Beck, 2001), where brands constantly compete for the attention of potential customers. In this attention economy, microblogging offers immediate and ubiquitous brand-affecting comments and sentiments, and provides insight into affective reactions toward

¹ Both Text message and Instant messaging are used for transmitting text but the way they send text from one position to other is different. Instant messaging uses some softwares like MSN messenger, Yahoo messenger, AOL or GoogleTalk and uses UDP to send the data packets but for the Text message, the transmission could be done by SIP, Short messaging service, GPRS etc. IM is normally use pc to pc vs cell to cell as in texting.

products at critical junctions of the decision-making and purchasing process (Jansen et al., 2009).

Second, the relation among users in microblogging also distinguishes it from other online eWOM platforms. Traditional eWOM is usually shared among people with strong ties such as in various SNS sites, or with little or no ties such as in public forums and customer review sites. Communication through these eWOM platforms is either limited within comparatively small circles or only effective when customers have interest in the product or the need to seek product information. User relation in microblogging is a combination of both strong and weak ties. Any user, with the people he/she follows and those following him/her, is a “humannode” where information is generated, accumulates, and spreads out (Yu et al., 2011). Each humannode is connected with many other humannodes. They may know each other or not. As such, microblogging communication is also called fissile communication as information can be transmitted in an instant to an unlimited number of people. It can easily achieve the sensational effect of focus (Yuan, 2011). In addition, as microblogging posts are automatically updated, you receive information without having to make the search efforts. These characteristics of microblogging would have great impacts on eWOM branding, particularly when it comes to new product launch and reputation damage control.

The content length and user relation of microblogging may greatly influence the types of information transmitted on this particular platform. The word limit decides users can not post information as thorough and exhaustive as they do through other media. Tie strength would significantly impact the motives for communication (Brown et al., 2007; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Okazaki, 2009; Sohn, 2009) and thus influence the kinds of things users would like to share and how they do it through different media. Within the limited number of studies on microblogging, Smith, Fischer, and Chen (2012) pointed out brand-related UGC (user generated content) on Twitter was less likely than that on YouTube (the most popular content community) and Facebook (the most popular SNS site) to feature consumer self-promotion, while Twitter hosts more brand-central content than the other two platforms. The study of Jansen et al. (2009) showed Twitter is particularly effective in spreading consumer sentiments. However, so far we don't know what exact kinds of information consumers communicate on microblogs. A dearth of research examines microblogging as eWOM communication, particularly its content types. Knowledge of the types of brand-related information that transmit most frequently on microblogs would help companies choose the appeals to use in microblogging advertising and promotion, more proactively and ‘authentically’ engage with customers, and better handle customer service issues.

1.2. Cultural Values and WOM

It is well documented that culture can have a strong influence on consumers' thoughts and actions (McCort & Malhotra, 1993; Triandis, 1972). Hofstede (2001) defined culture as “the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group from another.” Cultural values provide broad guidelines for acceptable ways of behaving and acting in particular situations (Feather, 1995); they influence how we interact and socialize with other members of society (Rokeach, 1973); they affect the valences we attach to different situations

(Feather, 1995); and they are a powerful force shaping our motivations, lifestyles, and product choices (Tse, Belk & Zhou, 1989). In essence, cultural values represent the most basic and core beliefs of a society, and these beliefs largely influence our communication patterns. Hence culture can potentially have a significant influence on customers' WOM behavior through its influence on individual values and group norms.

Prior studies on the influence of culture on consumer WOM have addressed cross-cultural differences in the general willingness of customers to engage in WOM (Lam, Lee & Mizerski, 2009), WOM referral sources (Money, 2000) and the effect of WOM such as customer choice processes (e.g., Money, Gilly & Graham, 1998), product diffusion (e.g., Dwyer, Mesak & Hsu, 2005), and customer perception (e.g., Schumann et al., 2010). These studies have shown the significant impact cultural values have on customers' WOM behavior. However, no study has addressed the relation between culture and consumer WOM in the online condition, particularly eWOM content. The internet and its recent integration with the mobile technology have greatly changed people's communication patterns. There is urgent need to study the interaction of these changes with culture (Chen, 2012). Would customers' eWOM behavior reflect similar cultural differences as in the off-line condition? How would cultural values affect customers' eWOM content? These questions deserve careful examination. With the huge success and wide spread of microblogging applications such as Twitter and Weibo, microblog has become an important platform for international companies to communicate with their customers in various local markets. They adopt microblogging to promote their brands, provide customer services, and monitor public opinions. Understanding of the influence of culture on customer microblogging WOM content would greatly improve the effectiveness of companies' application of this new marketing tool in different markets.

2. Hypotheses Development

2.1. Microblogging WOM Categories and Their Relationships to Cultural Values

To study the types of WOM content on microblogs and their relationships to culture, two jobs were done first. On the one hand, literature on microblogging and eWOM was consulted. Though no study so far examined microblogging WOM content types, research findings about the characteristics of microblogging and eWOM communications and users' participating intentions could shed light on how and why customers engage in microblogging WOM and thus the possible types of information they would exchange on this platform. Then we extensively read microblogs on Twitter, the most popular microblogging application worldwide, and Weibo, the most popular microblogging application in China, to develop some preliminary understandings of the kinds of brand-related messages customers communicate on microblogs. On the other hand, an extensive review was completed of the major cultural typologies applied in the business literature (Feather, 1995; Hall & Hall, 1990; Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Pollay, 1983; Rokeach, 1973; Triandis, 1972, 1994; Trompenaars, 1994) and how cultural value dimensions have been operationalized and tested (e.g., Albers-Miller & Gelb, 1996; Borden, 1991; Cheng & Schewitzer, 1996; Fock, 2000; Han & Shavitt, 1994; Ju-Pak 1999; Mueller 1987; Tse, Belk & Zhou, 1989; Zandpour et al., 1994). The goal was to

develop a typology of microblogging WOM content in relation to culture.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions were adopted in the end for microblogging WOM category development and analysis. Though there has been criticism of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, mainly focusing on the methodology and the context of his work, they are most appropriate for this study. First, Hofstede's cultural dimensions have been extensively replicated and were stable across populations and time periods (Sondergaard, 1994). Second, there is an overlap among different cultural typologies, and the dimensions commonly used correspond well to Hofstede's typology (Clark, 1990). Third, Hofstede's framework has been found to be a valid basis for analysis of cultural differences in consumer WOM behavior. Previous studies showed that consumer WOM behavior data do correlate significantly with Hofstede's dimensions.

The next step was to develop microblogging WOM content categories based on the four cultural dimensions of Hofstede. To generate effective coding categories reflective of microblogging WOM content, we first analyzed tweets on Twitter over a randomly selected week that mentioned any of a random sample of 10 Millward Brown's BrandZ^[TM] Top 100 Most Valuable Global Brands 2012 (www.millwardbrown.com). A list was created of all of the major types of messages that appeared in the tweets. The list was then evaluated to determine which types are culturally sensitive and the types were juxtaposed with one of the cultural dimensions identified by Hofstede. For example, information request, a type of microblogging WOM content, was evaluated for possible relationship to individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity. Any type that seemed unrelated to any cultural dimension was eliminated from consideration. As each of Hofstede's cultural dimensions is defined and measured against a continuum between two opposite positions, the types of microblogging WOM content were further evaluated to be correlated positively or negatively with their corresponding dimensions. For example, display of self was considered to correlate positively with the individualism dimension while community was considered to correlate negatively with this dimension. To help this conceptualization, we consulted studies that have used and operationalized Hofstede's typology. For example, the work of Albers-Miller and Gelb (1996) was consulted, as they have empirically tested which of the 42 advertising appeals by Pollay (1983) are reflective of each of Hofstede's four cultural dimensions. The works of Singh and Baack (2004) and Singh, Kumar, and Baack (2005) tested the relationship between company web sites content with Hofstede's dimensions. The works of Borden (1991) and Gudykunst (1998) were also consulted to see what societal norms are exhibited by cultures studied by Hofstede (1980). Based on this extensive review, microblogging WOM content categories were developed in relation to Hofstede's four cultural dimensions.

To test the reliability of the categories, three doctoral students in a Chinese business school were asked to assign a random list of category items under the cultural dimension they best represented. All of the three students, who are marketing majors, took a doctoral seminar course on cross-cultural marketing and are well versed in Hofstede's cultural dimensions. An overall inter-judge reliability of 87 percent was achieved. Further, a sample of 1000 tweets about 5 Millward Brown's BrandZ^[TM] Top 100 Most Valuable Global Brands 2012 was used for a pilot study to provide an additional test of the categories. This pilot study found that three coding categories, namely, celebrity endorsement, product return policy, and viral marketing option, were either not present or showed some overlap. Therefore, these three categories were

removed. In the end, a list of 29 operational categories was retained for analyzing the content of microblogging WOM. Table 1 shows the relationships of the categories to Hofstede's Dimensions and the operational definitions of each category.

Table 1. Relationships of Microblogging WOM Categories to Hofstede's Dimensions

Hofstede's Dimension	Microblogging WOM Category	Description
IDV		
+	Distinctiveness	Distinctive brand personality, unique product selling point, to go against the trend, to criticize what's popular, to be special, rare, different, unusual, original, exclusive
+	Independence	To do your own thing, autonomy, unattached, confidence, secure from peer or social pressure, peace of mind, self-sufficiency, self-reliance
+	Display of self	To display photos of self, exhibition of personality, personal life, product personalization (such as personal cell phone accessories, skin covers, cases, bags, ornaments)
-	Community	Relating to community, state, national publics, public spiritedness, group unity, society, civic and community organizations or other social organizations, national identity, patriotism, to support domestic brands or boycott foreign brands
-	In-group	Relating to family, kinship, colleagues, small circles like clubs, to be accepted, liked by peers, to associate or gather with, to be social, to join, unite, or otherwise bond in friendship, fellowship, to conform to social norms
-	Popularity	Popularity of brand, trend, vogue, to be popular, fashionable, well-known, commonplace, normal, standard, typical, activities, events or promotions with the product as prizes
-	Loyalty	Loyalty to brand, repeat customer, recognition and compliment of corporate culture, affiliation to brand, customer loyalty programs
PDI		
+	Status	Social status, boasting, prestige, power, envy, exhibitionism, pride in ownership, wealth, trend-setting, to seek compliments, vanity, company or brand ranking
+	Dear	To be expensive, valuable, highly regarded, costly, extravagant, exorbitant, luxurious, priceless, ornamental
+	Important figures	Stories or news about company senior management, important people in the industry, celebrities, reference groups, high-ranking government officials

-	Cheap	Inexpensive, bargain, discount, cut-rate, at cost, economical, penny-pinching, undervalued, a good value
-	Humility	To be unaffected, unassuming, unobtrusive, plain-folk, down-to-earth, fate-accepting, resigned, meek
-	Plain	To be plain, ordinary, simple, artless, unpretentious, natural, non-ornamental
UAI		
+	Information request	To ask for information concerning price, purchasing channels, how to use the product, applications, technical questions, to ask for brand or product recommendation
+	Customer service	Guarantees, warranties, manufacturers' reassurances, maintenance, repair, technical support, service providers, location of repair shops
+	Security	Stable, reliable product performance, absence of hazards, caution, potential risks, safety, to be durable, hardwearing, long-lasting, strong, product rating, testimonial
+	Tradition theme	Company history, tradition, legacy, cultural tradition of company, brand, community, society or a nation, brand reputation over time, country of origin
-	New product	Information pertaining to newly released products, newly developed functions or applications, new brands, free trials, free service information
-	Switching	Switching from one brand to another, trying, using or purchasing different products or models
-	Excitement	To be exciting, surprising, magic, exploratory, creative, imaginative, mystery, to astonish, fill with wonder, to be adventurous, daring, enterprising
MAS		
+	Effective	To be effective, efficient, handy, useful, pragmatic, functional, helpful, convenient, time-saving, quick, easy, versatile, adaptable, information on product quality, attribute, and robustness and durability, complaints about ineffectiveness, suggestions for improvement or adaptation
+	Successful	References to achievement, accomplishment, ambition, success, careers, self-development, being skilled, proficient, energetic, aspiring, aggressive, contributing, pulling your weight, company success or achievement, competition
+	Explicit comparison	Comparisons with other products or brands, contrasts with other competitor products or brands
+	Hard sell	Discounts, promotions, coupons, free demos, for-sale information, adlets

+	Fun	Fun stuff, games, quizzes, tips and tricks, jokes, gossip
+	Clear Gender Roles	Different products for men and women, depiction of women in nurturance roles, depiction of men as macho
-	Aesthetics	Attention to aesthetic details, references to colors, shapes, design, product accessories, artistic qualities, discussion on advertisement creative strategies
-	Soft sell	Relating to affective and subjective impressions of intangible aspects of a product or service, shopping environment, store decoration, attitude and service of shop assistant
-	Quality of life	References to or photos of nature, the elements, animals, happy moments, vacations, holidays, relaxation, rest, retreat, loaf, health, contentment, be at ease, laid-back, being modest, tender

3. Choice of the US and China

The microblogging WOM contents by US and Chinese consumers were chosen for this research. This was based on three main factors. First, the cultural value orientations between these two cultures differ significantly (Hofstede, 1980, 1991), thus giving us two distinct benchmarks to test our hypotheses. Second, the US and Chinese consumers account for a great proportion of microblogging users in the world. For example, the number of US subscribers of Twitter is over a quarter of the total number of Twitter subscribers worldwide². According to the Internet Society of China, by 2012, China had a population of microblogging users of more than 500 million³. Insights into US and Chinese consumers' use of microblogging WOM can be very valuable for understanding this new marketing platform. Finally, given the size and leading role of these two economies, the US and China represent important trends of the online markets.

3.1. Hypotheses

Individualism (IDV)

The dimension of individualism pertains to the relation between the individual and the group. In individualist societies, the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself/herself and his/her immediate family. Identity in individualist cultures is centered around "I-consciousness", therefore people in individualist cultures place great emphasis on self-reliance, independence, freedom, competition, personal achievement, and individual decision-making (Hofstede, 1980; Gudykunst, 1998). Within the context of microblogging WOM, three content types, i.e., distinctiveness, independence, and display of self, are

² Source: www.semiocast.com

³ Source: www.isc.org.cn

categorized as correlating positively to individualism (Table 1). On the other end of this dimension, collectivism refers to societies in which people are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which provide them with support and protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. In collectivist societies the emphasis is on following group norms, group achievement, strong group-ties, interdependence, and preserving the welfare of others (Cho et al., 1999; Gudykunst, 1998; Han & Shavitt, 1994). The themes of community, in-group, popularity, and loyalty represent these values and are thus categorized as correlating negatively to individualism (Table 1).

Research shows that commercials in individualist cultures emphasize the independence theme in the form of individual determinism, independence, competition, autonomy, and non-conformity (Albers-Miller & Gelb, 1996; Cho et al., 1999; Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996; Mueller, 1987; Zandpour et al., 1994), whereas commercials in collectivist societies emphasize group-consensus appeals, family security, and family ties (Lin, 2001; Han & Shavitt, 1994). The websites of companies from or located in individualist societies have also been shown to depict higher levels of individualism-oriented features such as privacy, independence, and uniqueness, while the websites of companies from or located in collectivist societies depict higher levels of collectivism-oriented features such as community, family, and loyalty (Singh & Baack, 2004; Singh, Kumar & Baack, 2005; Singh, Zhao & Hu, 2005). The United States has the highest score (91) out of all of the countries analyzed on Hofstede's individualism dimension, while China's score is only 20 (See Figure 1). Based on the above, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1a: Microblogging WOM by US consumers will show a higher frequency of contents that correlate positively with individualism than that by Chinese consumers.
 H1b: Microblogging WOM by Chinese consumers will show a higher frequency of contents that correlate negatively with individualism than that by US consumers.

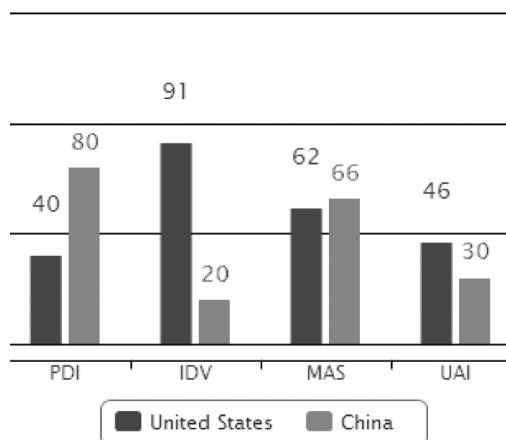


Figure 1. Hofstede's Country Scores

Source: <http://geert-hofstede.com>

Power Distance (PDI)

Power distance explains how different societies treat inequalities in social structure. The emphasis in high power distance societies is on social status, referent power, authority, and legitimacy, while the emphasis in low power distance societies is on egalitarianism, equal rights, and less hierarchy (Hofstede, 1980). In high power distance cultures, people with power are considered to be right and good, and powerful people try to look as powerful as possible. The exercise of power gives satisfaction, and powerful people try to maintain and increase power differences (Hofstede, 2001). In such societies, authority and authority figures are respected. Expensive symbols of status acquired through conspicuous consumption are used to show status, wealth, and elitism (Hofstede, 1980). On the other hand, the societal norm in low power distance cultures is uniformity, in contrast to standing out. Powerful people try to look less powerful than they are and avoid conspicuous displays of wealth and power. People with power believe they should minimize inequalities between themselves and less powerful individuals. Privileges and status symbols are discouraged by society (Hofstede, 1991). Thus the themes of ‘dear’(expensive), ‘status’ and ‘important figures’ in microblogging WOM are categorized as correlating positively to power distance while the themes of ‘cheap’, ‘humility’, and ‘plain’ are categorized as correlating negatively to this dimension (Table 1).

The study by Ji and McNeal (2001) showed Chinese (from a high power distance culture) are highly influenced in their purchasing by opinion of leaders and authority figures. Studies also showed that advertisements in high power distance cultures made extensive use of ornamental, vain, dear, and status appeals (Albers-Miller & Gelb, 1996; Mueller, 1987) whereas advertisements in low power distance cultures used the cheap appeal more (Albers-Miller & Gelb, 1996). Company web sites of high power distance societies showed more frequent occurrence of features relating to status appeals, referent power, and hierarchy than those in low power distance societies (Singh & Baack, 2004; Singh, Zhao & Hu, 2005). The US has a much lower score (40) than China (80) on the power distance dimension. Therefore, the following hypotheses emerge:

- H2a Microblogging WOM by Chinese consumers will show a higher frequency of contents that correlate positively with power distance than that by US consumers.
- H2b: Microblogging WOM by US consumers will show a higher frequency of contents that correlate negatively with power distance than that by Chinese consumers.

Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI)

This dimension pertains to the degree to which societies can tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity (Hofstede, 1980). Societies high on uncertainty avoidance tend to be more risk-averse, avoid ambiguous situations, and value security more than adventure or risk. High uncertainty avoidance cultures are “tight societies” that value conservatism and traditional beliefs (Hofstede, 1980). Individuals in such cultures show preference for clear directions, instruction and rules (Gudykunst, 1998). There is a need for written or unwritten rules and predictability in such cultures (Moore, 1998). Information request, customer service, security, and tradition theme

(Table 1) are categorized as correlating positively to the uncertainty avoidance dimension as they all reflect a quest for certainty and the societal norms of high uncertainty avoidance cultures. Societies low on uncertainty avoidance accept uncertainty. People in such societies tend to be tolerant of the unusual and show a lower level of anxiety and stress. People in low uncertainty avoidance cultures prize initiatives. They are more flexible and adventurous. They are willing to take risks and try new and different things (Hofstede, 1980). Accordingly, ‘new product’, ‘switching’, and ‘excitement’ (Table 1) are categorized as correlating negatively to this dimension.

Studies have found that cultures with low levels of uncertainty avoidance tended to experience higher adoption rates for new products (Van Everdingen & Waarts, 2003; Yenyurt & Townsend, 2003) and innovative product diffusion (Yaveroglu & Donthu, 2002). There is also evidence for a negative relationship between uncertainty avoidance and advertising appeals such as the ‘untamed’, ‘magic’, ‘youth’ (Albers-Miller & Gelb, 1996). China has a relatively lower score (30) than the US (46) on the uncertainty avoidance dimension. Thus the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H3a: Microblogging WOM by US consumers will show a higher frequency of contents that correlate positively with uncertainty avoidance than that by Chinese consumers.
- H3b: Microblogging WOM by Chinese consumers will show a higher frequency of contents that correlate negatively with uncertainty avoidance than that by US consumers.

Masculinity (MAS)

The masculinity dimension indicates the degree to which traditional male values, such as assertiveness, performance, ambition, achievement, and materialism, are important to a society (Hofstede, 1980). The opposite end of this continuum has been labeled femininity. The societal norm in a culture with a high score on the masculinity dimension is to have an achievement ideal, to have a “machismo” ideal, to value productivity, and to try to be the best. Masculine societies favor competition and survival of the fittest. In these societies, big and fast are considered beautiful (Hofstede, 1980). The societal norm in a culture with a low score on the masculinity dimension is to value beauty, nature, nurturance, and quality of life. In such cultures, small and slow are considered beautiful. People are sympathetic toward the unfortunate. Whereas masculine societies emphasize clear gender roles, in feminine cultures gender roles are blurred. Thus the themes of ‘effective’, ‘successful’, ‘explicit comparison’, ‘hard sell’, ‘fun’, and ‘clear gender roles’ are categorized as correlating positively to masculinity while the themes of ‘aesthetics’, ‘soft sell’, and ‘quality of life’ are categorized as correlating negatively to this dimension (Table 1).

Past research showed appeals emphasizing a product’s superior performance and capacity to accomplish goals are common in masculine cultures (Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996). The websites of companies in masculine societies have more frequent occurrence of items such as hard sell approach, product effectiveness, and clear gender roles than those in feminine

societies (Singh & Baack, 2004; Singh, Zhao & Hu, 2005). China (66) has a slightly higher score than the US (62) on the masculinity dimension. Based on these, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4a: Microblogging WOM by Chinese consumers will show a higher frequency of contents that correlate positively with masculinity than that by US consumers.

H4b: Microblogging WOM by US consumers will show a higher frequency of contents that correlate negatively with masculinity than that by Chinese consumers.

4. Method

4.1. Content Analysis

Content analysis is a reputable and widely used tool for conducting objective, systematic, and quantitative analysis of communication content (Berelson, 1952; Kassirjian, 1977). This method has been widely used in the fields of marketing research, consumer behavior, advertising and international marketing to understand the characteristics and behavior of the target market. Content analysis procedures have also been extensively used to study cultural value appeals in traditional print and broadcast media (e.g., Albers-Miller & Gelb, 1996; Cutler & Javalgi, 1992; Mueller, 1987; Tse, Belk, & Zhou, 1989). Studies have also used content analysis to understand communication phenomena on the web (e.g., Rafaeli & Sudweek, 1997; Ju-Pak, 1999; Singh & Baack, 2004; Singh, Zhao & Hu, 2005). Since content analysis is regarded as an appropriate technique for analyzing the values, norms of behavior, and other elements of a culture as represented in the verbal material produced by people (Berelson, 1952), we use it to analyze cultural differences in US and Chinese consumers' WOM contents on microblogs.

4.2. Data Collection

To study the WOM contents by US and Chinese consumers, Twitter, the most popular microblogging application in the US (which has the largest number of subscribers of 140 million in the US⁴), and Weibo, the most popular microblogging application in China (which has the largest number of subscribers of 500 in China⁵), were used respectively to collect data from these two countries. The possibility that product category itself may be culturally bound (Caillat & Mueller, 1996) suggested a need to limit the number of product categories to be examined so that observed differences could be attributed to cultural differences rather than to product differences. The product category of cell-phone was chosen as cell-phone is considered to be a "technological product" with high consumer involvement (Poiescz & deBont, 1995). As such, it is likely to be a product category where consumers are likely to share and search for opinions about it on microblogs and, as a consequence, eWOM is likely to take place and to be

⁴ Source: www.semiocast.com

⁵ Source: www.sina.com

influential. Four smart-phone brands, namely, iPhone, Samsung, HTC, and Nokia, which had the biggest sales worldwide in 2012, were selected for the research⁶.

The data were collected from a four-week period. The random dates from September 2, 2012 to September 29, 2012 were used as in this month no special events in the smart-phone industry happened that would significantly influence eWOM behavior. For the US section of the sample, we used the Twitter search service to download tweets. The four brand names were used as key search words separately. Each search was filtered by specifying “English” in the “language” category and “New York City” in the “near this place” category. This gave us 16 search results episodes (4 one-week periods×4 brands). 400 tweets including original tweets and retweets were randomly selected from each episode and altogether 6400 tweets were collected for analysis. For the Chinese section of the sample, we used the Weibo search service to download microblogs. Weibo only displays the first 50 pages of the search results. Yet hundreds of thousands of microblogs are posted on Weibo each day. The Weibo search service allows time specification to the hour. Therefore, 32 hours were randomly selected from the four-week period. Each search was filtered by specifying “Beijing” in the “place” category. This gave us 128 search results episodes (32 one-hour periods×4 brands). 50 microblogs were randomly selected from each episode, except for 7 episodes where there were fewer than 50 microblogs displayed in the search results. Altogether 6312 microblogs were collected on the Chinese side for analysis.

4.3. Reliability

Two coders were trained in the coding scheme through a series of intensive sessions. These two coders were different from the students discussed above who were used to test the reliability of the cultural categories. They were fluent in both English and Chinese. One coder was a Chinese graduate student from a Chinese business school. She had a bachelor’s degree in English. The other coder was born in China but grew up and got most of his education in the US. He was studying as an international exchange student at a Chinese business school for an academic year during the time of the research. A random sample of 25 percent of the tweets and microblogs was examined for rater reliability. Both of the coders analyzed all the Twitter tweets and Weibo microblogs to count the occurrence or non-occurrence of each of the 29 items under each of the categories. When disagreements occurred the items were reviewed and discussed together by the two coders to determine the coding. Inter-judge reliability was then calculated by using a per-item agreement method suggested in the literature (Kassarjian, 1977). Overall reliabilities for the Twitter tweets and Weibo microblogs were 86 percent and 89 percent respectively. This is an acceptable level of reliability (Kassarjian, 1977). To check the intra-judge reliability a random sample of 25 percent the tweets and microblogs was coded again after a month. An intra-judge reliability score of 91 percent was achieved for the Chinese student. For the international student, intra-judge reliability was 93 percent.

⁶ Source: www.krusell.se

5. Results

To test the hypotheses regarding country differences in microblogging WOM contents with relation to culture, cross-tabulation tables for each of the 29 categories listed under cultural dimensions were analyzed for between-country differences using a chi-square test (see Table 2).

Individualism

The frequency count from cross-tabulations of microblogging WOM on Twitter and Weibo about the four smart-phone brands, iPhone, Samsung, HTC, and Nokia, revealed that US consumers, as compared to Chinese consumers, referred more frequently to topics that correlate positively with individualism in their WOM discussion on microblogs (US: 5.3% vs. China: 2.0%). This difference is significant (chi-square=50.259, $p=.000$). For two categories, namely distinctiveness (US: 13.0% vs. China: 3.8%, chi-square=55.762, $p=.000$) and independence (US: 1.2% vs. China: .3%, chi-square=5.432, $p=.020$), the WOM contents by US and Chinese consumers significantly differed. Thus hypothesis 1a is supported.

As for contents that correlate negatively with individualism, the result also showed a significant difference between the US and Chinese consumers (US: 3.3% vs. China: 8.8%, chi-square=108.026, $p=.000$). Except for the category of loyalty, which was also in the predicted direction, on all the three other categories of community (US: 0.8% vs. China: 3.2%, chi-square=14.716, $p=.000$), in-group (US: 2.4% vs. China: 5.2%, chi-square=10.749, $p=.001$), and popularity (US: 5.3% vs. China: 21.6%, chi-square=116.261, $p=.000$), Chinese consumers had significantly higher frequency counts than their US counterparts. Thus hypothesis 1b is also supported.

Power Distance

Microblogging WOM contents by Chinese consumers showed significantly higher levels of the occurrence of themes that correlate positively with power distance (US: 2.7% vs. China: 9.3%, chi-square=111.671, $p=.000$). Cross-tabulations revealed significant differences between the U.S and Chinese sides on all the three categories of status (US: 4.4% vs. China: 13.2%, chi-square=49.158, $p=.000$), dear (US: 2.1% vs. China: 7.9%, chi-square=36.346, $p=.000$), and important figures (US: 1.9% vs. China: 6.9%, chi-square=29.758, $p=.000$). Thus hypothesis 2a is supported.

On the other hand, the frequency of the occurrence of WOM contents that correlate negatively with power distance was much higher among US consumers than among Chinese consumers (US: 2.0% vs. China: 1.0%) and this difference was significant (chi-square=15.385, $p=.002$). For one category, namely cheap (US: 3.7% vs. China: 1.3%, chi-square=11.789, $p=.001$), the difference between the US and Chinese consumers was significant. However, for the category of humility (US: .9% vs. China: .6%), there was no significant difference revealed. And for the category of plain (US: 4.3% vs. China: 4.9%), the WOM contents by Chinese consumers even presented a higher frequency of this theme than those by US consumers. Thus hypothesis 2b is partially supported.

Uncertainty Avoidance

The frequency of the occurrence of WOM contents that correlate positively with uncertainty avoidance was slightly higher among US consumers than among Chinese consumers (US: 3.5% vs. China: 2.8%). This difference was not significant. Only the category of security was more frequently showed in WOM by US consumers than by Chinese consumers (US: 6.3% vs. China: 3.0%, chi-square=12.864, $p=.000$). The two categories of information request (US: 3.5% vs. China: 2.6%) and customer service (US: 3.1% vs. China: 2.5%) were in the predicted direction. But the differences were not significant. Interestingly, the category of tradition theme was shown to be in the reverse direction. Chinese consumers referred to this theme much more frequently than US consumers (US: 1.4% vs. China: 3.4%, chi-square=8.557, $p=.003$). This is possibly due to the long-term orientation of the Chinese cultural tradition. Thus hypothesis 3a is not supported.

The comparison of microblogging WOM by US and Chinese consumers revealed that contents that correlate negatively with uncertainty avoidance were more prominent on Twitter than on Weibo (US: 13.3% vs. China: 11.3%, chi-square=21.802, $p=.000$). All the three categories of new product (US: 29.3% vs. China: 27.9%), switching (US: 3.5% vs. China: 3.2%), and excitement (US: 6.9% vs. China: 3.4%) were in the reverse direction. And the difference on excitement was significant (chi-square=13.102, $p=.000$). Thus hypothesis 3b is not supported.

Masculinity

Microblogging WOM by Chinese consumers showed higher levels of the occurrence of contents that correlate positively with masculinity as compared to their US counterparts (US: 12.0% vs. China: 14.3%). The chi-square analysis found this difference to be significant (chi-square=55.533, $p=.000$). Five of the six categories were in the predicted direction, among which the four categories of successful (US: 17.4% vs. China: 23.9%, chi-square=13.278, $p=.000$), explicit comparison (US: 15.3% vs. China: 20.7%, chi-square=9.885, $p=.002$), fun (US: 9.5% vs. China: 14.0%, chi-square=9.734, $p=.002$) and clear gender roles (US: .0% vs. China: 1.0%, chi-square=10.060, $p=.002$) showed significant differences. Only for the category of hard sell, the frequency count of US consumers was much higher than that of Chinese consumers (US: 11.5% vs. China: 5.9%, chi-square=20.270, $p=.000$). Thus hypothesis 4a is supported.

US consumers mentioned slightly more frequently matters that correlate negatively with masculinity than Chinese consumers (US: 5.0% vs. China: 4.3%). But the difference was not significant. Only for the category of aesthetics, the difference was significant (US: 12.9% vs. China: 9.7%, chi-square=5.029, $p=.025$). The category of quality of life was shown to be in the reverse direction. Thus hypothesis 4b is not supported.

In total, four of the hypotheses (H1a, H1b, H2a, H4a) are strongly supported, one (H2b) is partially supported, and three (H3a, H3b, H4b) are not supported. On the two dimensions of individualism and power distance, the findings highlighted that consumers' WOM on microblogs reflects the cultural value orientation of the societies the consumers are from. Given

the relatively small difference between the US and China in their cultural value orientation scores on the two dimensions of uncertainty avoidance and masculinity and the characteristics of the microblogging platform, the results on these two dimensions were mixed. In the following part, some theoretical and managerial implications of the findings are discussed.

Table 2. Frequency of Microblogging WOM Contents under Cultural Dimension Categories: A Comparison of Twitter in the US and Weibo in China

Items		US (%)	China (%)	Chi-sq	P-Value
IDV					
+	Composite score	5.3	2.0	50.295	.000
	Distinctiveness	13.0	3.8	55.762	.000
	Independence	1.2	.3	5.432	.020
	Display of self	1.6	1.8	ns	
-	Composite score	3.3	8.8	108.026	.000
	Community	.8	3.2	14.716	.000
	In-group	2.4	5.2	10.749	.001
	Popularity	5.3	21.6	116.261	.000
	Loyalty	4.3	4.9	ns	
PDI					
+	Composite score	2.7	9.3	111.671	.000
	Status	4.4	13.2	49.158	.000
	Dear	2.1	7.9	36.346	.000
	Important figures	1.9	6.9	29.758	.000
-	Composite score	2.0	1.0	15.385	.002
	Cheap	3.7	1.3	11.789	.001
	Humility	.9	.6	ns	
	Plain	1.0	1.4	ns	
UAI					
+	Composite score	3.5	2.8	ns	
	Information request	3.5	2.6	ns	
	Customer service	3.1	2.5	ns	
	Security	6.3	3.0	12.864	.000
	Tradition theme	1.4	3.4	8.557	.003
-	Composite score	13.3	11.3	21.802	.000
	New product	29.3	27.9	ns	
	Switching	3.5	3.2	ns	
	Excitement	6.9	3.4	13.102	.000

MAS

+	Composite score	12.0	14.3	55.533	.000
	Effective	18.7	20.7	ns	
	Successful	17.4	23.9	13.278	.000
	Explicit comparison	15.3	20.7	9.885	.002
	Hard sell	11.5	5.9	20.270	.000
	Fun	9.5	14.0	9.734	.002
	Clear Gender Roles	.0	1.0	10.060	.002
-	Composite score	5.0	4.3	ns	
	Aesthetics	12.9	9.7	5.029	.025
	Soft sell	.9	.8	ns	
	Quality of life	1.1	2.8	7.574	.006

ns: non-significant at $p < .05$

6. Discussion

6.1. Theoretical Implications

This research is the first to study the content types of microblogging WOM. The findings showed that microblog is an important platform for consumers to share brand-related information and their opinions and feelings. Consumers discuss a great variety of things about brands on microblogs, including product features, attributes, performance, and benefits. They share user experiences and openly voice their opinions and attitudes. They poke fun at brands and demonstrate great interest in company-related news. Microblogs are also used to publish and exchange trading information. Among the various matters consumers talk about, on both the US and Chinese sides, topics like information on newly launched or to-be-launched products, product features and performance, and comparison between brands are most frequently posted on microblogs. This corroborates Smith, Fischer, and Chen's (2012) finding that brand-related UGC (user generated content) on microblogs features more brand-central content than other online platforms like YouTube (content community) and Facebook (SNS), which, comparatively host more consumer self-promotion content. This is very much due to the shortness of microblogs, which doesn't allow as much space for detailed demonstrations or elaborately designed self-displays. The shortness of microblogs also decides that the brand-related messages are very much focused, usually on one feature or aspect of the product. These messages are simple and direct, often with open judgments or clearly stated user attitudes, unlike in brand review sites or other content communities where consumers share comparatively complete information of various features of a product with detailed descriptions and comparisons and thus are able to obtain more informed knowledge of the product. Such characteristics of microblogging WOM can be very influential in consumer behavior, especially when it comes to point-of-purchase decision making and low-involvement products choices. One microblog received at the moment of consumption may have critical impact on consumers' final decision.

Another important component of microblogging WOM content is the "fun" stuff. There is

a pretty high level of frequency of the occurrence of such things as brand-related quizzes and games, product tips and tricks, and jokes and gossip about brand, company, or brand-users. That is, apart from being a platform for brand information sharing, entertainment is also an important function of microblogs. Entertaining messages have much higher transmission and acceptance rates than hard-sell messages in eWOM communication (Chen, 2012). Well designed entertaining messages can create strong and positive association with the brand. Similar to the finding above, the “fun” stuff in microblogging WOM is very much brand-centered and thus can be used as an important tool for brand image building. The research also showed that, given its scalable and constant communication characteristics, microblog is very effective in spreading brand news and consumer sentiment. Retweets, or passed-on microblogs in the case of Weibo, are a very important element that affected the frequency count. A prominent phenomenon is that a piece of ‘hot’ brand news, a shared consumer experience, or an interesting joke can spread instantly to a huge number of consumers in a fissile style. Thus microblogging WOM can easily achieve the sensational effect of focus.

A major contribution of the research is to investigate the relation between culture and consumer microblogging WOM behavior. The findings revealed that culture is an important variable that affects what consumers say about brands on microblogs. The cultural value orientation of the society greatly influences consumer’s individual values, which, in turn, decide the importance and attention they place on the different aspects of brand. For example, as from a typical individualist culture, US consumers showed significantly greater concern about unique product selling propositions and distinctive brand personalities. There was also a higher frequency of contents among US consumers that displayed their defiance against general trends. They talked more about what is different, special, and original. On the other hand, Chinese consumers, as from a typical collectivist culture, demonstrated great interest in what’s popular and in vogue. Their microblogging WOM focused more on common practices. They cared very much about being accepted by peers and mentioned frequently family and in-group members. The cultural difference was also represented on the power distance dimension. While Chinese consumers paid more attention to status features, had a more positive tone on luxury and high price, and talked more often about prestigious figures, US consumers showed more interest in good deals and were more ready and open to accept and show humility.

In general, the microblogging WOM contents by Chinese consumers demonstrated a higher emotional involvement with the brand. Chinese consumers talked about brands, be it product features or companies news, in more personal tones, with a personal touch between the self and the brand. On the other hand, the US consumers seemed to be more rational. Their mentioning of brands was more objective and detached. Closely related to the cultural dimension of individualism is the idea of self-construal, which is conceptualized in psychology as a constellation of thoughts, feelings, and actions concerning the relationship of the self to others and the self as distance from others (Singelis, 1994). Markus and Kitayama (1991) proposed two types of self-construal in relation to culture: independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal which are representative of individualistic and collectivist cultures respectively. The essential aspect of the independent self-construal involves a conception of the self as an autonomous, independent person. By contrast, essential to the interdependent self-construal is the understanding of one’s autonomy as secondary to, and constrained by, the primary task

of interdependence. This difference in self-construal can explain why the WOM contents by Chinese consumers were more personal and involved while those by US consumers seemed to be more impersonal and detached. From the above, we can see cultural values, in important ways, shape the group norms and communication patterns in microblogging WOM. Cultural values affect consumers' product preferences and provide guidelines for acceptable things to share on microblogs and influence the way how WOM content is composed and spread.

With reference to intercultural theory, the research showed Hofstede's cultural value dimensions are as valid for explaining cultural differences in consumer online WOM behavior as in the off-line condition. Five of the eight hypotheses were either strongly or partially supported and two were in the predicted direction. This to some extent answers the question about the validity of intercultural theories in virtual communities. As the findings demonstrated, different cultural value orientations and the corresponding behavioral patterns as found in real-life societies also guide people's thoughts and behaviors in the on-line environment. As Mooij and Hofstede (2010) pointed out, culture changes, but the core values of a culture stay. With its nature of a combination of real-life social networking and virtual content community, microblog maps cultural traditions onto a new environment. But we have to be careful. The findings on the two dimensions of uncertainty avoidance and masculinity were mixed. Particularly, the result on contents that negatively correlate to uncertainty avoidance showed significant difference in the reverse direction. The mixed results may possibly be because of the comparatively slight difference between the US and China's scores on these two dimensions. The fact that consumers' UGC on microblogs are more brand-central, given the communication characteristics of microblogging, may also explain why US and Chinese consumers displayed a similarly high interest in sharing information about new products. However, further research is needed to test these two cultural dimensions and check their validity in both off-line and on-line conditions.

6.2. Managerial Implications

Some managerial implications may be drawn from the research. First, consumers actively use microblogs to share brand information and consumer experience. This means marketers can fully apply this medium to communicate with their (potential) customers either by directly opening a company account or indirectly by generating 'hot' tweets or 'hot' humannode among consumers themselves on microblogs. Good content strategy is critical to the success in using this medium for marketing communication. Microblog can be an ideal platform to introduce new products and product features. Given the shortness of microblogs, it is important to accurately position and define the one or few points about the brand for sharing. The next step is to find the proper way to execute these points on microblogs so that they are more relevant and interesting to consumers. Clear hard facts can be effective in microblogging WOM communication. At the same time, content creativity can greatly increase the transmission rate of microblogging WOM messages. Teasers, parodies, games, thrills, and adventures are well-received content types by consumers.

Second, as scalable communication, microblogging can easily achieve the sensational effect. If used properly, it can help raise brand awareness, spread brand knowledge, and create

positive consumer valence in a short period of time on a large scale. At the same time, companies should also have close surveillance on negative brand information and sentiment on microblogs and deal with it in the first place before it can spread out and cause brand image damage.

Third, microblogs are important sources of consumer information. They provide useful knowledge about consumers' needs and wants, their interests and complaints, what they care about most, and what they dislike. Thus companies should follow microblogs closely for consumer insights. On the other hand, as a way of convenient, instant, and constant communication, microblogs can be useful in providing information for consumers. Especially for not so high-involvement products, consumers do not normally need that much information for purchase decision making. Unlike brand review sites or other content communities where the brand information is usually long and detailed, brand information on microblogs is short. How can companies develop short but useful and influential information is an important issue to be considered. For example, when it comes to point-of-purchase decision making, how consumers can easily find, or how companies can effectively push tweets on such critical points, remains still to be discovered.

Last but not least, the research provides some insights into the differences in microblogging contents between consumers from different cultural backgrounds. These differences give us important kinds of information on the importance international consumers attach to different aspects of brands, what benefits they expect from products, and what values they seek in brands. These are important kinds of information in international marketing strategy development. When applying microblogging to communicate with international consumers in various markets, companies have to be very careful about the cultural differences and make proper local adaptations in the contents they use. For example, in China, information on prestigious figures can attract more attention than in the US. Also in China, discussion on popularity and status-related matters about brands may lead to greater consumer acceptance, while in the US, to be distinctive is a more important brand attribute that consumers care about.

7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The study is limited in several respects and thus provides directions for future research. First, to have a better understanding of microblogging WOM content, it can be very helpful to compare this particular platform with other online WOM platforms such as SNS and content communities. Thus the characteristics of microblogging WOM can be more specific and we can have better ideas of how to apply these various media with better targets and more effectively. For example, the strength of ties among users is a very important factor that distinguishes different online platforms. SNS and wechat have comparatively strong ties; microblogs have comparatively weak ties; whereas ties among consumers using review sites are even weaker. The tie strength can have great impact on what kind of things consumers share with each other in various platforms as well as how they talk about brands (Yu et al., 2011). Content forms, such as length of messages, visual and audio executions that are allowed in various online platforms may also affect the content types of WOM.

Second, as a first study of its kind, this research only focused on two cultures, namely the US and China, to examine the impact of culture on consumers' microblogging WOM

behavior. To find out about the cultural differences between international consumers' use of microblogging WOM, more countries should be compared, so that we can see whether there is systematic correlation between culture and microblogging WOM with more evidence. Further, the influence of culture on consumer WOM behavior can be compared between media. It is interesting to find out the interaction of the variables of media and culture and their effects on online WOM content. That is, are cultural differences consistent among various online platforms or they are particular to certain media? Or, is medium a more important factor than culture in deciding the content types of consumer online WOM?

Thirdly, to avoid the interference of product category variance on consumer microblogging WOM contents, this research only looked at one product category. Product types, such as high vs. low involvement products, daily consumables and luxury products, may influence what consumers say about brands in online WOM. Future study could examine more different product categories and more brands to see if the findings of this research hold water generally.

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