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An exploratory study on content and style as driving factors facilitating dialogic communication between corporations and publics on social media in China

Abstract

Global corporations publicise on social networking sites (SNSs) to foster dialogic communication with publics as a form of building relationships. Yet the link between the content and style of the corporation communication from different cultural backgrounds and publics' responses in the form of likes and retweets is under-researched. This empirical study explored how global corporations from China and Germany employ factors such as useful content topics and culturally-influenced communication styles to cultivate dialogic communication with publics on Sina Weibo, the largest SNS in China. Although both German and Chinese corporations similarly posted a range of content on products/services, corporate appeal and relationship building with no distinct significant differences in their communication styles, publics' response varied noticeably in that they were more receptive to content on products/services disseminated by German corporations yet had greater responses to content on corporate appeal posted by Chinese corporations. In addition, publics were more inclined to react favorably to messages presented in an individualistic style of communication by German companies and messages in a collectivistic style by Chinese companies. The implications of how to effectively use SNS to engage in dialogue with publics are highlighted.

Keywords

Dialogic communication, social media, SNS, global corporations, China, publics' response, engagement

1. Introduction

Globalization, the blurring of national borders, and an increase in products and services available have intensified international competition between corporations. In China, the second largest world economy, many Western corporations rival domestic firms for the attention, preference and affection of Chinese publics. China has a vast consumer market owing to its large population and it provides a good platform for global corporations to establish their businesses. In 2015, 23,778 foreign corporations were operating in China (Huang, Zhong, & Zhang, 2015). The proliferation of Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter and Sina Weibo has meant that the possibilities for relationship building have grown. While technology and the advent of mediated channels on the World Wide Web (WWW) have enabled corporations to commit to dialogue and develop more interaction with online publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998), the unique characteristics of social media have facilitated further progress. Alongside Web 2.0 technologies came enhanced possibilities for participation and interaction that can be applied by brands to develop relationships with their online publics across geographical and cultural boundaries.

Building relationships with publics engenders favourable outcomes in terms of trust, loyalty and positive feelings (e.g., Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002). Dialogue, as a communication process, has assumed an important role in corporations' relationship building efforts (Kent & Taylor, 2016) particularly with the increasing use of social media (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Kent and Taylor (1998) proposed strategies for building dialogic communication on the WWW, which depends on five principles: a dialogic loop, the usefulness of information, the generation of return visits, the ease of interface and the role of conservation of visitors. Through the characteristics of social media, four principles including generation of return visits, dialogic loops, ease of interface and conservation of visitors have been realized to a large extent. An important element underpinning dialogic communication is the provision of useful and trustworthy content to publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Yuki, 2015), but empirical research on how the usefulness of information promotes dialogic communication between corporations and publics on social media is scarce. In addition, the rhetoric used or style of communication warrants further attention as factors influencing dialogic communication. Our empirical study thus seeks to fill this gap.

This study explores and tests the driving factors that facilitate dialogue between corporations and publics and the differences and similarities in domestic and foreign corporations' communication efforts with online Chinese publics on the largest SNS, Sina Weibo, in China (Nielsen, 2016). Weibo is monetized through e-commerce (Shu, 2014) and is the direct interface in relationship management in China (AUTHOR, 2013), especially since Facebook and Twitter are banned in China. Our aim is to analyze Kent and Taylor's (1998) principle (i.e. useful content) in dialogic relationships by extending it to a more in-depth understanding of what other factors (e.g. rhetoric of dialogue) affect domestic and foreign corporations' dialogic communication with their online publics on Weibo, and more importantly, how publics respond to companies' dialogic communication efforts. We analyze communication efforts by a comparable set of large Chinese and German corporations. Germany was selected because it has become China's biggest trading partner and technology exporter in Europe, while China remains the largest trading partner of Germany in Asia (Eurostat 2014; Federal Foreign Office, 2015). These two countries with their distinct cultural backgrounds and preferences in communication styles, have developed close business ties and yielded world-leading corporations in similar industrial sectors. Therefore, companies based in China and Germany, which have operations in China and are actively using Weibo for communicating with their online publics, were included in this study.

This paper begins with a review of the role of social media in dialogic communication with a focus on the importance of useful content and communication style as driving factors. Next, the method, comprising an empirical analysis of real-world data, is elaborated. The paper ends with a discussion of the implications of the findings, limitations and directions for further research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Role of Social Media

Cultivating relationships is pivotal in public relations and brand communication management. The study of public relations has witnessed a shift, from its centrality on management of communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) to communication as a means for negotiating relationships (Botan 1992; Ledingham, 2003). Constructing dialogue between corporations and

publics is one of the main ways to build relationships (Kent & Taylor, 1998) and this can be done via social media. The collaborative nature of social media means that millions of users worldwide can interact with other users and corporations. According to an Accenture (2013) study, 90 percent of Chinese publics use social media including Weibo¹ to learn about companies' products or services; 72 percent read about companies' products and services on social media sites several times a month and 60 percent directly interact with companies on social media. Because social media allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), it is more dialogic, interactive and a faster channel for building relationships between corporations and publics than offline media. Zerfass et al. (2014, p. 83) emphasize that "[t]he key terms on social media are interaction, joint experiences, and feedback." Social media offers a technological doorway for corporations to construct dialogic communication with online publics, to develop relationships and to negotiate (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Even marketers have acknowledged the potential of SNSs in fostering relationships with publics (Kwon, Kim, Sung, & Yoo, 2014). On social media, publics are elevated to the status of communication equals with the corporation (Botan, 1997). To become part of the discussion on a company's SNS, online users must generally take action and register to become a "fan" of the corporation. As such, online publics have the potential to affect the achievement of the company's objectives (Freeman, 1984).

Many corporations make use of SNS to interact with online publics on a more personal level (Kelly, Kerr, & Drennan 2010; Men & Tsai, 2013). These corporations are inclined to use relational messages (Lin & Peña, 2011) to help develop interpersonal interactions (Kwon & Sung, 2011) and to enhance relationships (Lin & Peña, 2011) with their publics. However, Men and Tsai (2013) concluded from a survey of Chinese social media users that the social and communal advantages of SNS have not been fully realized by corporations in China. Similarly, based on a study of corporate communication practitioners in Hong Kong and China, AUTHOR (2013) noted the "underuse of new media and social media to engage stakeholders in this 'direct-interface' age" (p. 577). In order to reach optimum relationship building capability, corporations need a heightened awareness of SNS as communication instruments.

2.2 Cultural Differences in Communication and Relationship Building

The WWW expedites dialogic communication and helps develop relationships with publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Fostering dialogic communication to engage publics means that corporations and publics have to communicate openly and engage in negotiated discussions, with communication serving as the objective of the relationship rather than a means to a marketing end, and such dialogic communication should create lasting relationships with publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Engagement with publics can be further enhanced through the use of SNS that allows participation in an easier way through dialogue and interaction (Kent & Taylor, 2016).

Prior research has corroborated the importance of cultural influence on computer-mediated communication (e.g., Baack & Singh 2007; Singh 2003; Singh & Matsuo 2004). Cooper-Chen and Tanaka (2008) noted that culture affects public relations practices. Similarly, Sriramesh, Kim and Takasaki (1999) found that culture had an impact on public relations practices in India, Japan and Korea while Rhee (2002) applied Hofstede's cultural values in South Korea and found that collectivism and Confucianism reinforced the PR practices in South Korea. As suggested in Minton et al.'s (2012, p. 69) study, since social media "strongly centre on relationships that are influenced by culture", we postulate an impact of culture on corporate-stakeholder communication on SNS, especially regarding relationship building. However, only

a few studies have examined the communication between corporations and their publics on SNS from a cross-cultural perspective (Men & Tsai, 2012; Tsai & Men, 2017). To address this gap, we need to build on validated conceptual frameworks that depict the variation of culture across societies. Particularly important for the present research context are cultural variations with respect to individualism-collectivism (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995) and high- versus low-context communication (Hall & Hall, 1990).

Individualism is conceptualized as a worldview that centralizes the personal - personal goals, personal uniqueness, and personal control - and peripheralizes the social (Hofstede 1980, 2001; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier 2002). Cultures that score high on individualism are those that emphasize personal goals over group goals and stress values that benefit the individual (e.g., Triandis 1995). In an individualist culture, interpersonal relationships are developed and broken quite easily which makes the boundaries between in-groups and out-groups more permeable (Triandis et al., 1988). Individualism has been frequently viewed as typifying the Anglo-American culture (e.g. Hofstede 1980), but countries in Germanic Europe, above all Germany, are also situated on the individualistic end of the continuum of individualism-collectivism (The Hofstede Centre, n.d.). Central to collectivism, on the other hand, is the assumption that groups bind and mutually obligate individuals (Oyserman et al., 2002). Relationships (Hofstede, 1980) and harmony with others (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987; Triandis, 1995) are highly emphasized. Collectivist cultures tend to have strong interpersonal relationships between members; their social structures are difficult to access and members in the out-group stay on the outside (Triandis et al., 1988). Collectivism is considered as one of the key characteristics in Confucian Asian cultures (Hofstede & Bond, 1988) and China is highest on collectivism and lowest on individualism (Oyserman et al., 2002). As a highly collectivistic society, the Chinese value *guanxi*, an intricate and pervasive relationship network (Ju, 1995). *Guanxi* is often viewed as integral to business success in China (Qian, Razaque, & Keng, 2007) where it is cultivated subtly (Luo, 1997).

Aside from individualism-collectivism, Hall and Hall's (1990) differentiation between low-context and high-context communication helps to clarify cultural differences that are relevant in our research context. Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) postulate that low-context communication is used predominantly in individualistic cultures, whereas collectivistic cultures mainly practice high-context communication. High-context communication as is practiced in China means that "most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message", whereas in low-context communication as is practiced in Germany, "the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code" (Hall & Hall, 1990, p. 8). The dissimilar cultural orientations between China and Germany thus are anticipated to determine cross-cultural variations in interaction between the Chinese publics and corporations from different cultural backgrounds on Weibo.

2.3 Differences in Content Topics and Communication Style in Promoting Dialogic Communication and Public Engagement

Through the use of SNS, foreign and domestic corporations can engage publics as SNS allow participation through dialogue and interaction (Kent & Taylor, 2016). Five strategies of how to build dialogic relationships between corporations and publics were outlined by Kent and Taylor (1998). As stated in the introduction, we are interested in the strategy that is concerned with the provision of useful information of value to publics whereby the concerns and interests of publics are met. For relationship-building on social media, corporations need to provide useful content, and show care and empathy to publics by replying to their comments, as well

as focusing on transparency (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent & Taylor, 2016). Engaging with publics through posting content that is useful and meets their needs can also help improve the image of the corporation and encourage further sharing (Gruber, Kaliauer, & Schlegelmilch, 2017; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Yuki, 2015).

It is evident that the emergence of social media has facilitated dialogic communication between corporations and publics involving the dialogic loop, ease of interface, return visits and conservation of visitors, which are the other strategies of how to build dialogic relationships according to Kent and Taylor (1998). However, whether the content topic and thus its usefulness would be one of the determining factors for promoting dialogic communication and public engagement on social media warrants further research using empirical analysis. The perception of usefulness of content can be viewed from two perspectives: the corporation's perspective of what is considered useful versus publics' perspective. From corporations' perspective, the topics communicated and thus considered useful may vary depending on their country of origin or cultural background.

Drawing on the differentiation between high- and low-context communication (Hall & Hall, 1990), corporations from Germany should consider content that directly communicates product and service features and individual benefits more useful. Chinese corporations, on the other hand, may use more indirect communication that focuses more on harmony and relationships, as shaped by their collectivistic culture and tendency for high-context communication. Prior research corroborates these assumptions. Global brands on US-based Twitter sites were found to adopt a task-oriented style, while on China-based Weibo they are more socioemotional-oriented (Zhang, Tao, & Kim, 2014). Similarly, Lee and colleagues (Lee, Geistfeld, & Stoel, 2007) show that American apparel websites provide more product-specific information than Korean ones, who tend to be more relationship-oriented. Men and Tsai (2012), who conducted a notable study on communication practices applied to SNS in the US (Facebook) and in China (Renren), found that Chinese companies on Renren support indirect communication by featuring more product-related educational information or entertainment news, and by communicating messages completely irrelevant to the company or product category. In contrast, the US companies on Facebook are less likely to communicate topics irrelevant to the company but post messages explicitly related to their products, promotions, and corporate achievements. Finally, brands on Chinese SNS are shown to highlight the cultural values of collectivism and exhibit high-context communication while American brands adhere to individualistic values on their SNS (Tsai & Men, 2017). Similarly, Ott and Xiao (2017) noted that culture exerts a stronger impact on shaping publics' CSR expectations in China as opposed to the US.

Dialogue and rhetoric are intricately related in that dialogue is expressed in corporate rhetoric (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Kent & Taylor, 2018), and cultural differences may also manifest in the style of messages posted by corporations from different countries of origin on Weibo. Research on leadership communication in social media shows that content posted by corporate leaders is often intertwined with leaders' communication style, which helps them to attain their communicative purposes (AUTHOR, 2017). Stylistic variations in communication originate from particular cultural roots. Therefore, Chinese corporations may likely prefer a collectivistic style of communication, which focuses on relating, belonging, harmony and having duties of being a group member, while German corporations may lean towards an individualistic style focusing on independence and goal-orientation (Oyserman et al., 2002).

Apart from the findings on cultural influences on communication topics and style, research has indicated that global corporations go local and adapt to local preferences when communicating specific contents to Chinese publics (Tang & Li, 2009). Waters and Lo (2012) found that the impact of culture of American, Chinese and Turkish non-profit corporations on usage of Facebook was mixed and contend that the global connectivity brought by social media may lead to “blurred cultural boundaries” (p. 297), thereby giving rise to the emergence of a virtual culture which goes beyond geographic, political and cultural boundaries. In their analysis of Internet advertising by Western and Eastern multinationals in China, Li, Li, and Zhao (2009) showed that Eastern multinationals, just as their Western counterparts, predominantly used individualistic appeals that targeted Chinese consumers. From this finding, they conclude that “China is indeed changing in terms of its prevailing cultural values” (p. 140). This is supported by Zhang and Shavitt’s (2003) study which showed that the predominant cultural value in magazine advertising and television commercials targeting younger people in China is individualism.

Because of the mixed findings of cultural influences, we abstain from formulating hypotheses and ask the following two research questions instead regarding cultural differences in communication topics and style between Chinese and German corporations on Weibo.

RQ1: Are there differences in content topics communicated by corporations from China and Germany on Sina Weibo?

RQ2: Are there differences in message style adopted by corporations from China versus Germany on Sina Weibo?

2.4 Publics’ Engagement on SNS

The engagement of online publics on social media is a necessity in public relations (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Yuki, 2015). The level of engagement of publics and their perception of the corporation can be observed through indicators like the number of likes and retweets (shares) in dialogic communication (Yuki, 2015). A “like” denotes one’s perception of what is being communicated while retweeting a post requires more action and consequently demonstrates higher engagement by publics (Yuki, 2015).

Yuki (2015) investigated 2000 of the most commonly shared Facebook posts posted by U.S. brands and observed that the key driver of social media sharing was useful information, a finding further corroborated in other research studies (e.g. Araujo, Neijens & Vliegenthart, 2015; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kent & Taylor, 1998). However, there might be a gap between corporations’ perspective of what is useful content as opposed to what publics perceive as useful. Thus, to test publics’ perspective of usefulness, their responses (e.g. liking and retweeting) to the different culturally-induced content topics need to be considered. While previous research has shown that the communication of companies on SNS in the US and China varied due to their distinct cultural backgrounds (e.g., Men & Tsai, 2012), the impact of culture on publics’ engagement on SNSs in different countries has not been investigated in detail. A notable exception is the study by Tsai and Men (2017) who found that culture played an important role in consumers’ engagement on SNS since collectivistic Chinese were more engaged on social media through posting more messages and likes, as well as creating, maintaining and reinforcing connections with other users, whereas American users were less engaged due to their individualistic orientation. In order to investigate the dialogic potential of

content topics communicated by corporations from distinct cultural backgrounds, we pose the following RQ:

RQ3: Are there differences in the number of likes and retweets on the different content topics communicated by corporations from China and Germany on Weibo?

In addition to the content topics communicated in a post, we assume that Chinese publics will react differently to posts reflecting an individualistic or collectivistic communication style. Considering that the younger Chinese are gravitating towards individualism (Li et al., 2009; Lin, 2001), we may assume that individualistic posts are more appealing and will generate more reactions than collectivistic posts. However, being accustomed to collectivistic communication, they may feel more comfortable with this style of communication, which may in turn lead to more reactions. Thus, the final RQ reads:

RQ4: Are there any differences in the number of likes and retweets on the different communication styles adopted by corporations from China and Germany on Weibo?

In short, due to the scant research on how corporations foster dialogic communication with publics on social media in China, our study aims to characterize the driving factors (i.e. useful content and culturally-induced communication style) that cultivate dialogic communication by comparing the interaction of Chinese and German corporations with online publics on the largest SNS in China (i.e. Weibo).

3. Method

To objectively examine the effects of content and communication style by corporations from different cultural backgrounds on the Chinese SNS Sina Weibo, an empirical communication research approach was employed (Wigston, 1998). Both quantitative and qualitative content analyses were used to provide answers to the research questions. This method is viewed as useful for analyzing the values of a culture from the messages of people and corporations (e.g. Ju-Pak 1999; Li et al., 2009).

3.1 Sampling

Corporations headquartered in China and Germany were purposefully selected for comparison. Based on the Forbes 2000 list of the world's largest public companies (<https://www.forbes.com/global2000/#6a0003b4335d>), we identified 48 Chinese and 11 German companies actively using Sina Weibo to communicate with their online publics. Active use of Sina Weibo was determined when a company had at least one post per day and received at least one response in the post. To establish the highest possible comparability between the Chinese and German sample, companies were selected to match in the business sectors found in the Global Industry Classification Standard (Li & Stacks, 2015) and size. This yielded a sample of 12 matching companies from China and Germany (six from each country) operating in the Industrials and Consumer discretionary sectors. This industry selection was justified as China and Germany are both strong in these sectors. Table 1 provides an overview of the selected companies and the number of original corporate posts collected.

Table 1. Selected companies and the total number of corporate posts

Business sector	Company	Country	Forbes rank	Original posts (n)	Publics' responses (n)
Industrials (Sub-sector: Transportation)	China Southern Airlines	CN	843	607	33,320
	China Eastern Airlines	CN	703	1,613	16,872
	Deutsche Lufthansa	GER	932	1,098	29,616
Consumer discretionary (Sub-sectors: Automobile and components, Consumer durables and apparel, Retailing)	Chongqing Changan Auto	CN	885	1,648	78,231
	BYD	CN	1037	1,142	232,628
	Volkswagen Group	GER	14	599	11,593
	BMW Group	GER	45	499	41,373
	Porsche Automobile	GER	695	680	9,828
	Sunning Appliances	CN	978	1,362	25,711
	JD.com	CN	898	2,504	164,678
	Siemens (Appliances)	GER	54	548	7,248
	Adidas	GER	684	986	162,536
Total				13,286	813,634

Data collection consisted of posts from June 1, 2015 to May 31, 2016. First, all corporate posts for the one-year time frame were downloaded from Sina Weibo. Then, all posts and responses were counted, and their frequencies recorded for quantitative analysis. Due to the enormous database and the imbalance in the number of corporate posts from different companies (see Table 1: $CN_{total} = 8,876$, $GER_{total} = 4,410$), we adopted the Sample Size Calculator constructed and operated by the National Statistical Service (n.d.) at the Australia Bureau of Statistics for the calculation of the sample size required. To examine RQ1 and 2, we used a systematic random sampling method to sample 720 corporate posts from Chinese (confidence level at 99% and confidence interval at 0.046) and German (confidence level at 99% and confidence interval at 0.044) companies respectively for an in-depth content analysis. A total number of 1,440 corporate posts were examined for the content topic and communication style adopted.

To answer RQ3 and 4, the frequency of publics' likes and retweets to the sampled corporate posts by the Chinese and German companies was recorded. This amounted to a very large number of likes ($N = 137,665$) and retweets ($N = 200,749$). A closer look at the distribution of these responses to corporate posts allowed us to identify the specific content topics and style that had received a large number of likes and retweets. To remove the bias resulting from the extreme number of likes and retweets to these specific posts, we employed SPSS to identify the outer fences of the distribution and removed extreme outliers from the data set. In sum, 123 cases for likes and 77 cases for retweets were removed.

3.2 Coding scheme

To answer RQ1, the selected 1,440 corporate posts (720 for each country) were coded for their dominant content topic. Drawing on previous studies (e.g., Fombrun, Gardberg, & Sever 2000;

Men & Tsai 2012; AUTHOR, 2016a), the following four topic categories were derived (see Table 2): Products and Services (quality, innovation, value, reliability), Corporate Appeal/Promotion (admiration and respect towards company, financial performance, vision and leadership, workplace environment, corporate social responsibility), Caring and Relationship Building (caring and educating publics, tips for relationship building and bonding, valuing rituals, thoughts of life) and others.

Table 2. Content topics communicated by Chinese and German corporations on Sina Weibo

Category	Sub-categories	Description
1. Products and Services (P&S)	Quality, innovation, value, reliability	Perceptions of the quality, innovation, value, reliability of products and services (e.g. new product model, price, delivery, product purchase)
2. Corporate Appeal (CA)	Admiration and respect towards company	Admiration and respect towards the company (e.g. enthusiasm or promotion of brand)
	Financial performance	Perceptions of its profitability, prospects, and risk (e.g. stock price, profit, losses)
	Vision and leadership	Company's vision and strong leadership
	Workplace environment	Perceptions of how well the company is managed, what it is like to work for, and how qualified employees are
	Corporate social responsibility	Perceptions of the company as a good citizen in its dealings with the environment (e.g. reduction of emissions, pollution) and communities (e.g. social community program)
3. Caring and Relationship Building (C&RB)	Caring, educating publics	Caring for the public (e.g. health tips)
	Relationship building, bonding	Relationship building (e.g. proverbs, tips on relationship building and bonding)
	Valuing rituals	Valuing social/ traditional rituals (e.g. enjoying festive season with family)
	Thoughts of life	Thoughts of life (e.g. proverbs on how to enrich life or achieve happiness)
4. Others		News and heated discussion topics

To develop the coding scheme for content analysis of culturally-induced communication styles, we drew on Oyserman et al.'s (2002) meta-analysis of individualism-collectivism measures to identify the following dimensions in the communication styles: individualistic style (independent, goal-oriented, and self-know) and collectivistic style (related, belonging, dutiful, and harmonious) of communication. Table 3 provides an overview of the description of the different communication styles ascribable to the individualistic and collectivistic cultural values. The communication styles were coded on a sentence basis and double coding was allowed as different communication styles could be revealed from the same post.

Table 3. Description of communication styles induced by the individualistic and collectivistic cultural values

Communication styles		Description
Individualistic (IND)	Independent	Freedom, self-sufficiency, and control over one's life.
	Goal oriented	Striving for one's own goals, desires, and achievements
	Self-know	Knowing oneself; having a strong identity
Collectivistic (COL)	Related	Considering close others as an integral part of the self
	Belonging	Wanting to belong to and enjoy being part of a group
	Dutiful	The duties and sacrifices of being a group member (the subject corporation) entails
	Harmonious	Concern for group harmony and that the group can get along

3.3 Coding procedure

Seven coders were comprehensively trained to undertake the content coding of the posts according to the coding scheme. To avoid coding fatigue, three coders were trained to code the content topics while the other four coders were assigned to code the communication styles. To ensure inter-rater reliability (IRR) of the coding of content categories and communication styles, these coders were repeatedly trained on the coding scheme. The measure of inter-coder reliability was based on the co-coding of 150 corporate posts and its related responses by each coder. This generated acceptable reliability coefficients. For all categories, the average pairwise percent of agreement was greater than 0.9 and the average pairwise Cohen's Kappa was greater than 0.884, indicating an almost perfect to perfect agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977; Hallgren, 2012). The average pairwise Cohen's Kappa was adopted as three or more than three coders were involved in the coding process (Hallgren, 2012). Please refer to Table 4 for a summary of IRR statistics of the coding items.

Table 4. Summary of inter-rater reliability statistics

	Average pairwise percent agreement	Average pairwise Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha
Content topics			
Topic of original posts	92.222%	0.884	0.886
Communication styles			
1. Independent	100%	1	1
2. Goal oriented	100%	1	1
3. Self-know	100%	1	1
4. Related	98.333%	0.891	0.901
5. Belonging	98.333%	0.944	0.947
6. Dutiful	100%	1	1
7. Harmonious	100%	1	1

3.4 Statistical analyses

For RQ1 and 2, Chi-square test was employed to examine if there was a significant difference between the content topics and communication styles employed by companies from China and Germany. Two-way ANOVA was employed to test if 1) the interaction of company's origin and content topics had an effect on publics' likes and retweets (RQ3) and 2) the interaction of company's origin and communication style had an effect on publics' likes and retweets (RQ4).

4. Results

4.1 High similarity on the content topics and communication style adopted by corporations from different cultural backgrounds

In RQ1 and 2, we inquired if there were any differences between the content topics and communication styles employed by corporations from China and Germany when communicating with Chinese publics on Weibo. Results from Chi-square tests indicate that there were no significant differences, neither on content topics nor on communication styles adopted.

4.2 Interaction between country and content topics on the number of publics' likes and retweets

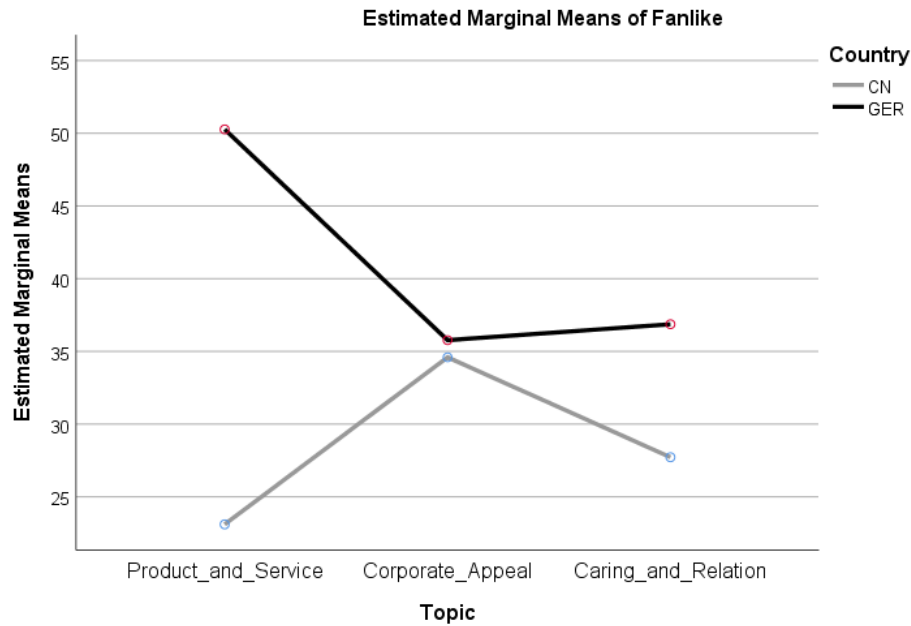
Although there was no significant difference regarding the frequency of content topics communicated by companies from China and Germany (RQ1), results for RQ3 revealed a significant interaction of company's origin and content topics communicated with respect to the number of likes and retweets generated by these topics.

Results showed that German companies received a higher total number of likes than Chinese companies ($F(1,1269)=33.901, p<0.0001$). Yet, more interestingly, a two-way ANOVA showed a significant interaction between country and content topic on the number of likes ($F(2,1269)= 16.312, p<0.0001$). Please see Table 5 for the summary of ANOVA results and Figure 1 for the interaction between country and content topics on the number of publics' likes.

Table 5. Summary of ANOVA results

Source	<i>df</i>	MS	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Country	1	41568.359	33.901	<.0001****
Topic	2	1956.865	1.596	ns
Country x Topic	2	20001.150	16.312	<.0001****
Error	1269	1226.160		

Figure 1. Interaction between country and content topics on the number of publics' likes



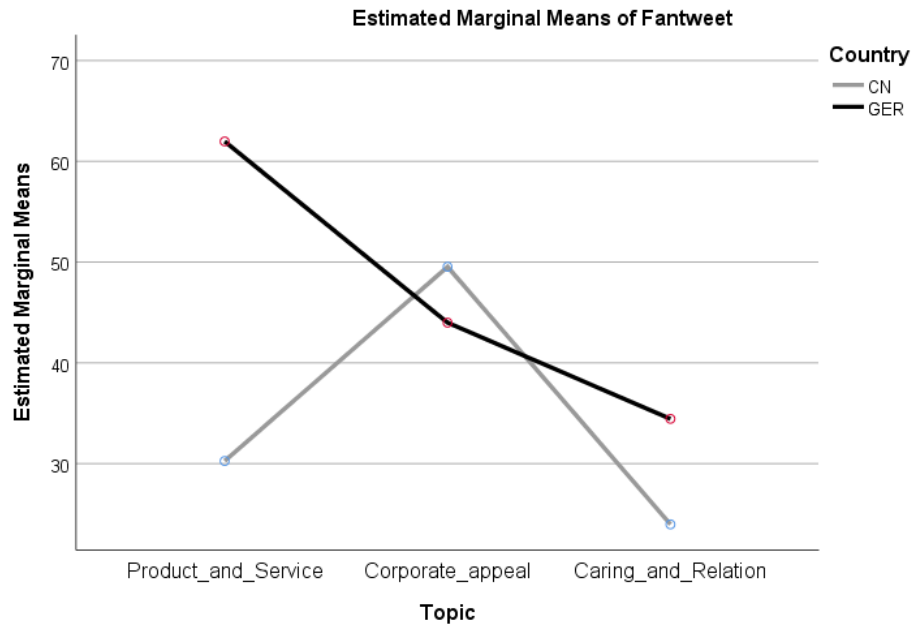
Simple main effects analyses for the different content topics showed that German companies received a significantly higher number of likes than Chinese companies on Products and Services (P&S: GER=50.265 vs CN=23.108; $F(1,1269)=103.391$, $p<0.0001$) and Caring and Relationship Building (C&RB: GER=36.868 vs CN=27.721; $F(1,1269)=4.887$, $p=0.027$), but there was no difference between the number of likes with respect to posts focusing on Corporate Appeal topics (CA: GER=35.773 vs CN=34.596). Additionally, results show that Chinese companies received a significantly higher number of likes on CA and P&S (P&S=23.108 vs CA=34.596, $p=0.001$) while German companies had a significantly higher number of likes on P&S in comparison to CA and C&RB topics (P&S=50.265 vs CA=35.773 vs C&RB=36.868, $p<0.0001$).

Regarding retweets, results indicated that German companies also received more retweets than their Chinese counterparts ($F(1,1315)=18.996$, $p<0.0001$). Again, a two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the effect of country and content on the number of retweets. There was a significant interaction between country and content topics on the number of retweets ($F(2,1315)=18.321$, $p<0.0001$). Please refer to Table 6 for the summary of ANOVA results and Figure 2 for the interaction between country and content topics on the number of publics' retweets.

Table 6. Summary of ANOVA results

Source	<i>df</i>	MS	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Country	1	39602.230	18.996	<.0001****
Topic	2	33120.043	15.887	<.0001****
Country x Topic	2	38196.040	18.321	<.0001****
Error	1315	2084.773		

Figure 2. Interaction between country and content topics on the number of publics' retweets



Simple main effects analyses indicated that German companies received a significantly larger number of retweets than their Chinese counterparts on P&S (GER=61.974 vs CN=30.261; $F(1,1315)=91.538, p<0.0001$), but there were no differences between the number of retweets on CA (GER=43.986 vs CN=49.532) and C&RB (GER=34.442 vs CN=23.974). Additionally, Chinese companies received a significantly higher number of retweets on CA than P&S (P&S=30.261 vs CA=49.532, $p<0.0001$) and C&RB topics (C&RB=23.974, $p<0.0001$), whereas German companies had a significantly higher number of retweets on content relating to P&S as opposed to CA and C&RB (P&S=61.974 vs CA=43.986 vs C&RB=34.442, $p<0.0001$).

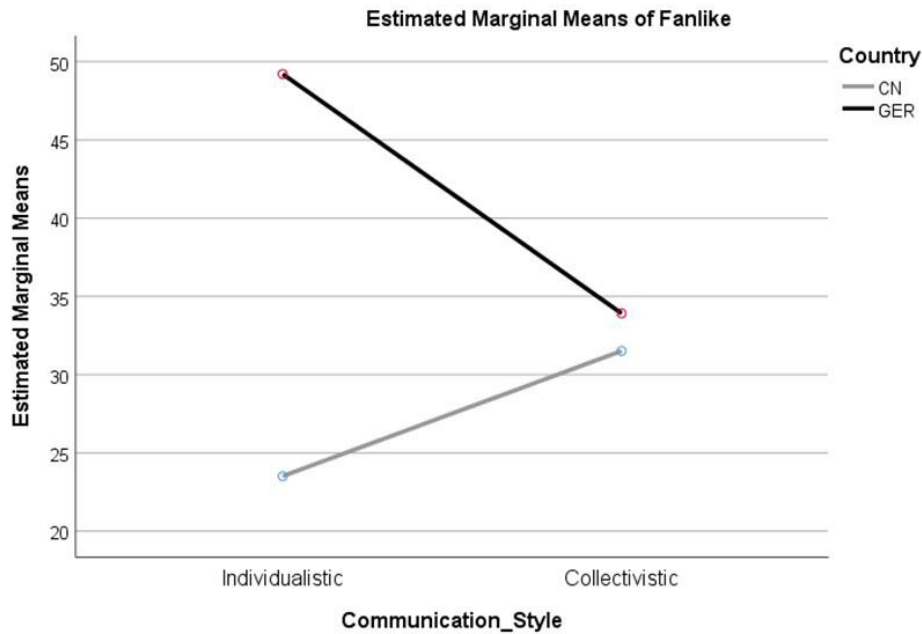
4.3 Interaction between country and communication style on the number of publics' likes and retweets

Although there was no significant difference between companies from China and Germany regarding the frequency of adopting an individualistic or collectivistic communication style (RQ2), our results for RQ4 showed an interaction of country of origin and message style on the number of publics' likes $F(1,1271)=32.630, p<0.0001$). Table 7 displays the summary of ANOVA results while Figure 3 shows the interaction between country and communication style on the number of publics' likes.

Table 7. Summary of ANOVA results

Source	<i>df</i>	MS	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Country	1	58106.051	47.459	<.0001****
Communication Style	1	3919.585	3.201	ns
Country x Communication Style	1	39950.286	32.630	<.0001****
Error	1271	1224.348		

Figure 3. Interaction between country and communication style on the number of publics' likes



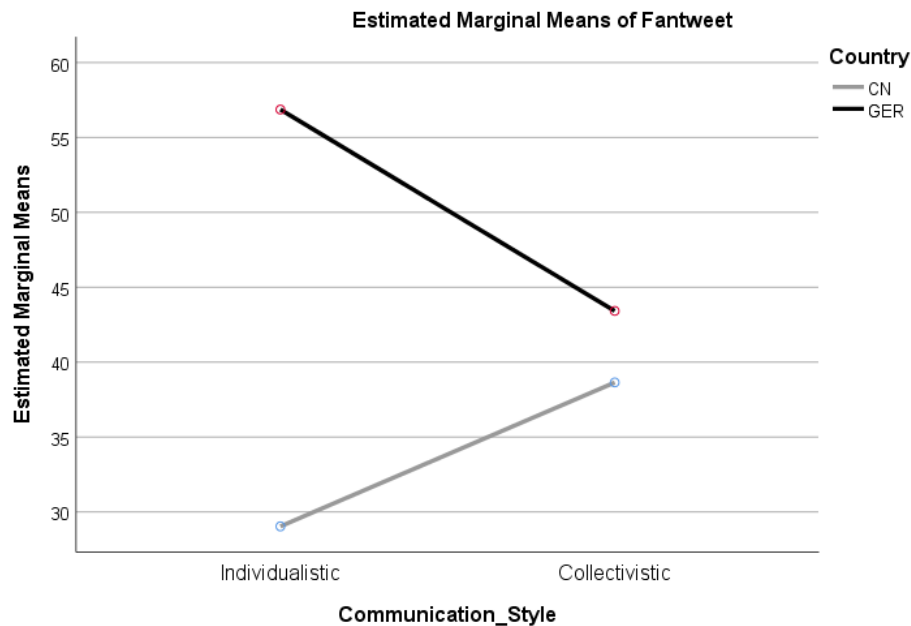
Simple main effects analyses indicated that German companies received a significantly higher number of likes on posts presented in an individualistic style than Chinese companies (GER=49.207 vs CN=23.516; $F(1,1271)=107.872, p<0.0001$), but there were no differences between the number of likes in response to Chinese and German companies' posts presented in a collectivistic style (GER=33.913 vs CN=31.514). In addition, Chinese companies attracted a significantly higher number of likes on posts presented in a collectivistic style than in an individualistic style (COL=31.514 vs IND=23.516; $F(1,1271)=8.308, p=0.004$), whereas German companies had a significantly higher number of likes on posts presented in an individualistic style in comparison to a collectivistic style (IND=49.207 vs COL=33.913; $F(1,1271)=26.202, p<0.0001$).

Furthermore, we found an interaction of country of origin and message style on the number of publics' retweets ($F(1,1317)=18.458, p<0.0001$). Table 8 displays the summary of ANOVA results while Figure 4 shows the interaction between country and communication style on the number of publics' retweets.

Table 8. Summary of ANOVA results

Source	<i>df</i>	MS	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Country	1	79619.704	36.925	<.0001****
Communication Style	1	1102.789	0.511	ns
Country x Communication Style	1	39800.620	18.458	<.0001****
Error	1317	2156.266		

Figure 4. Interaction between country and communication style on the number of publics' retweets



Regarding retweets, simple main effects analyses found that German companies had a significantly higher number of retweets on posts presented in an individualistic style than Chinese companies (GER=56.863 vs CN=29.038; $F(1,1317)=77.270$, $p<0.0001$), but there were no differences between the number of retweets found in response to Chinese and German companies' posts presented in a collectivistic style (GER=43.42 vs CN=38.644). Additionally, results indicated that Chinese companies received a significantly higher number of retweets on posts presented in a collectivistic than in an individualistic style (COL=38.644 vs IND=29.038; $F(1,1317)=6.489$, $p=0.011$). Yet, German companies had a significantly higher number of retweets on posts presented in an individualistic style as opposed to a collectivistic style ($M_{IND}=56.863$ vs $M_{COL}=43.42$; $F(1,1317)=12.411$, $p<0.0001$).

5. Discussion

Our study explored the use of content and communication style in corporate posts as driving factors in cultivating dialogic communication between global German and Chinese corporations and Chinese publics on Weibo in China. Notably, we did not find any significant differences regarding topics and communication style between Chinese and German companies. Our results are consistent with Tsai and Men (2017) who similarly found that both Chinese and American respondents on Renren, Weibo and Facebook were engaged by product, promotional and company information. As stated on Weibo's Investor Relations website, Weibo provides the Enterprise page for corporations on which they can perform marketing functions, promote events and conduct sales activities (Weibo Investor Relations, 2018). The Weibo Enterprise Page Report 2016 released by the Weibo Data Center (2017) confirmed that 13 million corporations registered for a corporate account on Weibo (i.e. a 35% increase compared to 2015) and employed Weibo mainly for marketing, advertising and customer relation management purposes. Since Weibo is mainly used as a channel to communicate marketing-related information with consumer publics, it is not surprising that companies from both countries focus on content relating to their products and services.

The lack of cultural differences found regarding the topics and communication style between

Chinese and German companies suggests that German companies might have culturally adapted their communication style to most of the cultural values of their Chinese stakeholders. German companies communicated topics unrelated to their products or corporate strategy such as caring messages, traditional Chinese rituals and thoughts of life that are rarely communicated by Western companies on Facebook (Men & Tsai, 2012). This suggests that German companies are keen to adapt to local preferences to a certain extent (Tang & Li 2009). This is consistent with Singh et al.'s (2003) study, which found that the web is not a culturally neutral platform since American companies also tend to customize to a certain extent their marketing messages to the cultural values of their Chinese audience on their Chinese websites. It is likely that German companies may be disinclined to impose their cultural values of individualism onto their collectivistic Chinese-speaking stakeholders, thereby leading them to downplay individualistic values on Weibo. As corroborated in previous studies (e.g. Waters & Lo, 2012; Pfister & Soliz, 2011), corporations might also be adopting a virtual culture on social media that transcends cultural, geographic and social boundaries.

Both German and Chinese companies try to develop dialogic communication by providing content of value to Chinese publics, one of the key principles suggested by Kent and Taylor (1998). Their interaction with publics also involves replying to posts and providing interactive information (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Kent & Taylor, 1998) that encourages publics to respond via likes and retweets.

However, as our study reveals, the usefulness of the content posted by corporations is perceived differently by publics depending on a company's country of origin. Publics are more responsive to content posted by German corporations on their products and services indicating that they perceive this information as more useful than the same type of content communicated by Chinese companies. This is possibly due to the Chinese publics' confidence in the quality and their favorable perception of German corporations, especially in the consumer discretionary sector where most German brands rank higher than their Chinese counterparts. As found in Li and Stacks' (2015) study, the number of "likes" as an indicator of reputation and "retweets" as an indicator of trust yielded on Facebook and Twitter are positively correlated to the company's financial performance. Therefore, it is not surprising for Chinese publics to respond more favorably to content messages posted by German corporations.

This finding is congruent with a prior study in marketing where Chinese publics exhibited a higher level of curiosity for foreign goods and companies (Oh & Zhang, 2010). The Chinese publics' perception of products and services made in China might have been negatively affected by past crises, and because of scandals regarding product safety (Tang, 2012), more Chinese publics buy products from foreign companies to avoid unsafe products (Dong, 2014). Such scandals have undermined the public's confidence in Chinese companies' consumer goods and to a certain extent damaged the image of Chinese brands (Custance, Walley, & Jiang, 2012). On the other hand, German companies have always upheld high standards in ensuring that their products and services comply with safety standards. As Muntinga, Moorman and Smit (2011) note, a company's image and reputation are heavily influenced by the 'likes' and 'posts' of users on social media, and therefore, companies focus on ensuring that their products meet their customers' needs. German companies might also be strategically emphasizing their responsibility to Chinese publics amid increasing competition, social and economic changes and transparency, risk notions and globalization (Falkheimer, 2014).

Another noteworthy finding is concerned with the responsiveness of Chinese publics to posts on corporate appeal from Chinese corporations. A likely explanation is that this type of content

is intricately linked to identifying oneself with the Chinese culture and having a sense of pride in it. Likewise, in Tsai, Lee, and Song's study (2013) Chinese publics were found to be more "motivated by patriotic sentiments of loyalty" (p. 90) and like to bond and identify with brand users that think in the same way as them (Chu & Choi, 2011). Due to collectivistic characteristics, the Chinese may view the achievements of a Chinese company as achievements of the whole community (Hofstede, 1980). Meadows (2017) noted that Chinese companies' websites in China exhibited collectivistic features including a stronger presence of the vision statement, leadership, harmony, and collaboration in comparison to U.S. companies. The focus on content such as financial performance, vision and leadership, CSR and admiration for the company indicates that Chinese corporations are eager to show their economic strength, leadership and CSR duties to Chinese publics, while Chinese publics are eagerly responding to these posts since this generates a sense of pride in them. Furthermore, CSR which is subsumed under corporate appeal, is viewed as important by online publics since Chinese corporations have been criticized for providing unsatisfactory working conditions (e.g. Chan & Ross, 2003; Yu, 2008), bringing about food and safety issues (Huang, et al., 2015; Lu, 2009; Tang & Li, 2009) and environmental pollution due to industrialization (Kahn & Yardley, 2007). In 2006, the National Bureau of Statistics and the State Environmental Protection Administration of China noted that environmental pollution brought a loss of 64 billion yuan in 2004, making up 3.05% of the GDP of that year (Reuters, 2007; Tang & Li, 2009). Ott and Xiao (2017) found that publics in China favorably viewed the amount of CSR information that is presented and Chinese corporations' commitment to CSR initiatives. The sponsorship of education and alleviation of poverty subsumed under CSR are other important areas that need to be handled in China. These findings coincide with Kolk et al.'s (2015) and Ramasamy and Yeung's (2009) research since CSR in China is tied more to economic responsibilities according to Chinese publics rather than ethical and philanthropic responsibilities, and publics expect local Chinese companies to take on more responsibility for economic responsibilities than foreign companies (Kolk et al., 2015).

Significant differences were found with regards to publics' responses to the styles adopted by companies from distinct cultural backgrounds. Publics posted more likes and retweets in response to the collectivistic posts by Chinese companies whereas publics responded more actively to the individualistic posts of German companies. This supports the notion that Chinese Weibo users seem to hold world-view expectations about the way different cultures should act which correspond to findings from cultural research (e.g., Hofstede, 1980) in which the Chinese should embrace collectivistic values and the Germans should adhere to individualistic values. Cultural values indeed offer guidelines as to what one should expect and how one should communicate (Gudykunst et al., 1996). This view echoes the findings of Gevorgyan and Manucharova (2009) who found that Chinese Internet users prefer collectivistic features on websites and lends support to the notion that corporations that embrace their local cultures rather than adopt the global approach are more likely to capitalize on the benefits of social media (Stelzner, 2011).

6. Conclusion, Limitations and Implications

This study contributes to the literature on fostering dialogic communication between corporations and publics with respect to the finding that provision of useful content topic(s) that meets the expectations of publics in the cultural context in which corporations operate and the interactive nature of posts are likely to engage publics on social media. A notable contribution of this study is that in the dialogic communication process, the perspective of

recipients or publics needs to be considered in that their responses to companies posting similar content topics and adopting a similar culturally-induced communication style may still vary greatly. Chinese publics are more responsive to posts on products and services from German corporations particularly in the consumer discretionary sector, so publics' perception should be considered heavily by public relations practitioners in advising their clients what kind of content to focus on so as to better harness the power of social media to engage publics. The immense criticism from publics towards corporations that have not upheld their CSR in recent years may have led Chinese corporations to address publics' needs by engaging them through the provision of important CSR information that meets their expectations subsumed under corporate appeal (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kent & Taylor, 1998). This research is consistent with AUTHOR's (2017) study as both show that in the corporate public relations arena, the cultural background of corporations does not solely influence their communication styles. Rather, publics' responses are influenced by both the content posted and corporations' cultural background. As reported in previous studies (Luo, AUTHOR, 2016b; Tsai & Men, 2017), Chinese online publics are active users of social media and often respond to posts, while the posts can in turn affect corporate image, so corporations should capitalize on the huge, untapped power of social media to construct dialogue and create positive attitudes among publics.

The present study informs academia and practitioners about the importance of mobilizing the power contained in disseminating useful content and adhering to prescribed notions of culturally-induced communication styles as well as interactivity embedded in social media to engage publics through dialogic communication. Dialogic communication requires a long-term view to understand online publics and to serve the corporation and publics' needs and interests (Kent & Taylor, 2018). Importantly, public relations practitioners need to be receptive to publics' perceptions and preferences and advise their corporate clients accordingly. While adapting to local preferences to a certain extent may be useful, global corporations are well advised to build on their reputation and remain true to their cultural values. Chinese companies, on the other hand, could sharpen corporate appeal that instils pride in Chinese publics and practice a more collectivistic communication style in order to develop dialogic communication with Chinese publics.

Despite the key findings discussed, this study has limitations. First, although they are global corporations active on social media, only 12 large corporations from China and Germany were included, so our findings cannot be generalized to all corporations and their dialogic communication practices. The sample size was constrained by the fact that not all global corporations employ Weibo to communicate with Chinese publics. Further studies could be done by including more countries and conducting detailed analyses of different social media platforms to generate more fruitful results. Second, we only analyzed dialogic communication between corporations and publics by focusing on useful communication content and culturally-induced communication styles. Future research should extend the scope to examine other communication styles such as high and low-context communication. Furthermore, our framework needs to be tested and validated with companies from other countries. It will be interesting to investigate online publics' perception of companies' posts from different countries and how that in turn affects their perception of and relationship with the companies and their brands.

Notes

1. Sina Weibo is a Chinese social media platform provided by Sina Corporation akin to a hybrid of Facebook and Twitter. It is available in simplified Chinese, traditional Chinese, and English without a complete English interface. With a utilization ratio of 37 percent at the end of 2016 Sina Weibo is one of the most used social media platforms in China (CNNIC, 2017).

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