

AFFECTING PUBLIC OPINIONS VIA SOCIA MEDIA
— OPINION LEADERS' USE OF WEIBO

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APPROVAL PAGE

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Chapter 1: Introduction

China, as well as the rest of the world, is enthusiastically involved in the trend of integrating social media in every aspect of people's lives. Online BBS, blogs, Renren (the equivalent of facebook), Tencent and Weibo are gradually becoming essential parts of people's daily activities. It is reported that about 54.7 percent of Chinese Internet users own or visit blogs, and 47.3 percent of Internet users in China have at least one account on a social networking site (Fenn, 2011). Over 25 percent post more than 10 pieces of information on social networks everyday, and 92.3 percent of Chinese Internet users claim that they visit social networking pages at least three times a week. In addition, according to the Statistic Report on the Internet Development in China released in January 2012, among the 500 million Internet users in China, half of them own a microblog account, and the participation rate in microblogs has increased by 34.9 percent in 2011 as compared to 2010.

Microblog is an online social network platform that allows users to post short messages to friends and followers. Users receive immediate, aggregated updates on activities, opinions and statuses of the people they followed by logging into their accounts. Twitter is currently the most popular microblog platform worldwide with 145 million users, and it was accessible in China until 2009, when the Chinese government banned it. Sina.com then launched its own microblog platform, known as Sina Weibo in August 2009, and it soon became the dominating microblog platform in China. By the end of March 2012, Weibo had attracted 324 million registered users and the number is consistently growing.

Sina Weibo has many similar features with Twitter, such as sending 140 characters per message, searching topics, trending topics and so on. It also has some distinct features and functions of its own. Weibo aggregates some functions of Facebook, such as uploading videos, playing games, establishing private conversations, the “like” button and so on. In addition, Weibo has launched more than 1,600 applications that allow users to play games, initiate voting, listen to and share music and even share documents. The short messages on Weibo are also more informative than the messages on Twitter, since 140 Chinese characters contain richer content than 140 characters in English. As Ai Weiwei observed, “in Chinese language, 140 characters is a novella”(Ambrozy, 2011:241). The commenting and retweeting functions are also slightly different from Twitter, as Weibo “allows threaded comments on feeds, seen under the original messages and not broadcast to the user’s followers” (Yu L et al., 2011). In addition, various kinds of Weibo “medals” are offered in order to encourage users to post more messages and interact with other users. Sina Weibo also distinguishes itself by enabling verified users, whose profiles are verified with the person’s real social identity. Most of the verified users are elites, professionals and celebrities as well as some governmental accounts or organizational profiles.

With the continuously increasing prevalence of Weibo, it has gradually become an important platform for not only individual expression of opinions, but also a virtual public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002) for various kinds of discussions. Among all these users, there are groups of people who always initiate or lead discussions, and play essential parts in other people’s decision-making process, and we call them opinion

leaders. Opinion leaders on Weibo are extremely active and influential, and their use of Weibo always exerts influence on other people's information consumption and interactive communication on Weibo.

In this research paper, these opinion leaders' use of Weibo is analyzed to see the pattern of their online behaviors, and to see if gender and fields of expertise will affect opinion leaders' use of Weibo. The study will help people to better understand how opinion leaders in China use Weibo for their daily information consumption and communication, and will give us suggestive answers to the question of how to use Weibo to spread information effectively.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Opinion leaders

The concept of opinion leaders is broadly defined as the people who can influence others. In *The People's Choice*, the authors found out that “in every area and for every public issue there are certain people who are most concerned about the issue as well as most articulate about it”, and they defined them as opinion leaders. In their study, they conceptualized “opinion leaders” by asking people “have you tried to convince anyone of your political ideas recently?” and “has anyone asked your advice on a political question recently” (Lazarsfeld, 1944). Katz and Lazarsfeld further refined this concept, by explaining that opinion leaders are not identical to what we thought to be traditional influencers; rather, they are distributed throughout “all occupational groups and on every social and economic level”(Katz, 1955). Weimann (1994) identified opinion leaders from the opposite angle: an opinion leader is not an authoritative, charismatic or leading figure but rather an expert among his or her peers, a source of advice on a particular issue or subject.

How these opinion leaders exert their influence was also discussed, and a “two-step flow of communication” was developed to describe the information flow in interpersonal relations. The “two-step flow of communication” suggested that ideas and information always flow from radio and print to opinion leaders, and opinion leaders then transmit them to a larger population who were less active in information seeking and absorbing (Katz, 1955). The relationship between opinion leaders and the mass population was also clarified, that the give-and-take relationship is an integral part of

people's everyday life, and opinion leaders play a key role in interpersonal relations and potential networks of communication (Katz, 1955).

Katz (1957) further suggested the factors that influence the formation of opinion leadership within certain groups: 1) the personification of certain values (who one is); 2) competence (what one knows) and 3) strategic social location (whom one knows). He also pointed out that opinion leadership is more than an interpersonal channel of communication; it is also a source of social pressure and social support. Katz clearly identified an opinion leader as an informer and a persuader (Rhee et al., 2007).

Weimann (1991) suggested “the identification of the ‘influentials’ should be related to the concept of opinion leaders.” He claimed that identifying influentials, validating the measurement by “external” criteria and pointing to the role of these influentials in the flow of interpersonal communication influence the original idea of opinion leadership.

Weimann also believed that an opinion leader has certain specific characteristics. He believed that opinion leaders possess certain personal traits, such as intelligence superiority, knowledgeable and interests in certain issues, early adoption of innovations and risky preference as well as conformity village norms. Opinion leaders also share similar social attributes. For example, they are always socially active and gregarious. Opinion leaders are also the center of their social networks and are easily accessible, and they are often not only the well informed, but socially recognized by the public. On the social—demographic level, they have dynamic profiles that change along within different domains, cultures, societies and in different times.

Opinion leaders on the Internet/on Weibo

The literature concerning opinion leaders on the Internet is not abundant, but there are some significant articles about the definition and characteristics of opinion leaders in cyberspace. Rhee et al. (2007) adopted Weimann's idea that "influential" is essential in defining opinion leaders, and they asserted that opinion leaders are the people who exert influence on other people's opinions by giving out their personal opinions. This is confirmed by the InfluenceRank test, which shows that opinion leaders online are "those who bring in new information, ideas, and opinions" on their blogs, and those people also carried higher influence in the network. (Song et al., 2007)

Chadwick (2006) suggests that the Internet has made the formation of political opinions more complex: "much of what goes on in cyberspace is talk. Hundreds of thousands of forums have sprung up, in which people in their diverse identities can argue, compete, collaborate, or simply share thoughts". Donatella Campus (2012) agreed, and believed that the focus of attention on the inter-dependence of the formation of political opinions has been redirected by the advent of new media.

Chadwick further introduced a concept that is similar to opinion leaders, that on the Internet, it is "switchers" who control the connecting points in information flow (Arsenault and Castells, 2008). According to them, switchers are the "networks of actors engaging in dynamic interfaces that operate specifically in each particular connection process" and switchers are the ones who facilitate the performance of the programs.

There are contradictory theories about the differences between traditional opinion leaders and online opinion leaders. Some believe that online opinion leaders should not be entirely different from off-line leaders, since they are the people who “share some dispositional characteristics that will lead to active participation in conversation and massive consumption in informational media”; while others say online opinion leaders should be distinctive if “opinion leaders are indeed characterized by the positions in the social networks as well as media patterns”. Therefore, since the Internet is a different social network with different media platforms, online opinion leaders should be distinctive (Rhee et al., 2007).

Rhee et al. elaborated on the characteristics of online opinion leaders: Online opinion leaders are more likely to read other participants’ messages, to write aggressive messages, to participate in Internet discussions and to show the highest communication competence. They also have a greater ability to influence others as well as to be empathetic to others. They are also more politically liberal compared with other Internet users.

In addition to this literature about opinion leaders on the Internet, Chinese scholars and research institutions have also looked into the issue of opinion leaders on the Internet, especially on Weibo. In a research report released in May 2012, the Public Opinion & Communication Center of Fudan University and PubTopic.org published their rankings of top opinion leaders on Weibo specified by gender, age and fields of expertise. According to the report, there are some important and interesting characteristics of opinion leaders on Weibo: 1. Generally males dominate the top 100 opinion leaders, as

males comprise 91 percent of the top 100 opinion leaders; 2. The middle-aged (born between 1960 - 1980) is the main age group, taking 72 percent of the top 100; 3. Businessmen, writers, scholars and media practitioners are the dominant opinion leaders on Weibo, with 17 percent, 20 percent, 26 percent and 33 percent, respectively. This report gives us some primary results about opinion leaders on Weibo, but it fails to provide more detailed research methods and in-depth analysis. However, the findings are still valuable and informative.

Agenda-setting theory in the digital age

Agenda-setting theory, born in an era when traditional media was the dominant power in content creation and dissemination (Luo, 2012), suggests that the media has the power to set the agenda for social attention and public opinions on key public issues (Zhang et al., 2011; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). After McCombs and Shaw's (1972) study demonstrating the strong correlation between the public's opinions on significant election issues and key political issues reported on local and national levels, a series of studies have focused on the role of media in shaping the public's mind in different settings and around different social issues (McCombs, 2005). Traditionally, the relationship between media agenda and the public agenda was described as unidirectional, meaning the public could only receive information passively without the ability to communicate back to the media (Rosen, 2006, Luo, 2012). However, existing literature has also addressed the factors that may influence media agenda setting. Brousius and Kepplinger (1990) discovered that agenda setting effects were most prominent during intense coverage and when there was a significant difference between media converge and mouth-to-mouth

information (Roberts, Wanta & Dzwo, 2002). Another study also showed that when conversations and media coverage overlapped, interpersonal communication could bolster media agenda setting effects (Wanta & Hu, 1993).

The emergence of new media has dramatically changed the traditional media landscape with the introduction of various channels that allow the public to disseminate their own opinions and ideas to a broader public, while traditional media is no longer the only dominant power or the sole outlet for content creation and distribution (Meraz, 2009). In fact, some scholars predicted that the digital age is the end of agenda setting when “audiences fragment and virtually everyone has a unique external media agenda that is a highly individualized composite constructed from this vast wealth of online news and information” (McCombs, 2005). Such radical change, according to McCombs (2005), assumes a high heterogeneity of media agendas and public attentions, which would be almost the sheer opposite of the past when media agendas and public attentions were highly homogeneous.

Such predictions not only envision the future of agenda setting theory, they also imply the possibility and capability of influential alternative, online channels for setting agenda for public attention, including opinion leaders as discussed in this study. In light of these concerns and predictions, many scholars have investigated how digital media has changed the traditional agenda setting landscape. Roberts, Wanta and Dzwo (2002) looked into the agenda setting and issue salience on electronic bulletin boards and found that in the context of immigration, health care and taxes issues, the media still had apparent agenda setting influence on online discussions, except for abortion issues. Their

study proved that media coverage is still providing information and materials for individuals to discuss on online platform. Lee et al. (2006) also investigated how online bulletin boards impact newspaper coverage in the context of South Korea's general election in 2000. This study found that newspapers could still influence online discussion at the first level of agenda setting, while significant correlation showed that online bulletin boards was influencing newspaper coverage on the second level of agenda setting, though with few reciprocal time spans. These findings have strong implications with respect to the power of the Internet in setting the public agenda and affecting the media agenda. Meraz (2009) also conducted a study to test agenda-setting theory in the context of political blogs. The study questioned the elite, traditional media's agenda setting and social influence on independent political blogs and newsroom blogs, and suggested that traditional media, though still playing a role in influencing the public, has lost its singular position in affecting the public attention; blogs were gaining power in content creation and distribution. More importantly, blogs were giving citizens more power and influence in setting media agendas; instead of letting media set the agenda for the citizens.

The development of online media and the drastic changes it brought to traditional agenda-setting theory may suggest an even more radical and fundamental changes in the media atmosphere in China, where the Communist Party enforces strict censorship over the media for the purpose of controlling the public agenda, or to "guide public opinion" (Dai, 1999). Such governmental control over mass media has effectively served the Party's goal of managing positive propaganda that fits the Party's ideologies and beliefs

(Li, Qin & Kluver, 2003; Luo, 2012).

Researchers in China have investigated agenda-setting theory from a number of different viewpoints. For example, Zhang et al. (2011) conducted a study testing the relationship between the Chinese people's personal agenda setting, social agenda setting and the Chinese media's agenda setting. A telephone survey revealed that Chinese citizens had clearly distinguished important personal issues and important national issues, while there was a positive correlation between the Chinese media's agenda setting and individual feelings regarding important national issues. However, such correlation did not exist with respect to individuals' feelings on personal issues. The researchers concluded that the agenda-setting effects partly-existed in China, and argued that there was a substantial variance between peoples' personal agendas and the social agenda in a socialist nation.

Studies have also looked into the power of the Internet in changing the previous media agenda setting in China. Although the Chinese government tried to enforce strict censorship online, known as the "Great Firewall" (Chung, 2008), the ephemerality and anonymousness of Internet communication made it almost impossible for the government to gain total control (Qiang, 2010).

According to Qiang (2007), the Internet offered a free and fast flow of information for the public to consume, and it also provided a public sphere for Internet users to articulate and amplify their opinions. The situation in China reflects the fact that the public's reliance on traditional media has been reduced by the emergence of the Internet and, consequently, the government's censorship ability, and hence traditional

media's ability to shape the public agenda has diminished (Luo, 2012). The Internet also has a reciprocal effect on traditional media by offering alternative information sources, apprising media message, elaborating, questioning or revising their opinions via interpersonal communication (Sotirovic & Mcleod, 2001).

Scholars in China have also explored how digital media has challenged the traditional mass media landscape in China, and how the Internet could affect the government and traditional media's agenda-setting power among the public. Ou (2004) mentioned that Chinese Internet users had an unprecedented power over public opinion, in that "if all netizens yell together, there would be three earthquakes in China" (cited in Zhou & Moy, 2007, p. 80). An online survey conducted by *People's Daily*, Chinese National School of Administration and Renmin University also showed that 69% of Chinese Internet users believe in enhancing China's democracy via the Internet, and public opinion online serves as an effective representation of the public mood (*People's Daily Online*, 2009). These studies suggest that the overall potential for online public opinions to affect traditional media agenda setting is substantial, and hence, the increasing power of opinion leaders online in impacting the public opinions.

Empirical research has also centered on the interplay between online public opinion and media agenda setting in China. Li and Qin (2001) conducted a study that examined the relationship between online posts and media coverage in the case of the 1999 China-U.S. aircraft collision, and by comparing the coverage of *People's Daily* and *Qiangguo* Forum, a popular BBS in China, the researchers found that there were significant incongruences between what was reported by the media and what was

discussed online. Their findings suggested that the traditional media's role in setting the public attention has been challenged by the Internet, and the Internet could "pose a significant threat to the government-controlled media by revising and reconstructing the agenda set by the Chinese official press" (Li, Qin & Kliver, 2003, p. 143, also see Luo, 2012).

Zhou and Moy (2007) also looked into agenda-setting issues in the context of new media. They found that online public opinion is extremely helpful in amplifying the influence of a local event and escalating it into a national issue. Heated online discussions of a small event can bring new values to the event, gather online and offline attention, and eventually upgrade a small event to a prominent issue and attract the traditional media's attention as well as coverage. This study also found a strong, positive correlation between Internet users' enthusiasm in online discussions and traditional media's coverage intensity, which reveals the power of online public opinions in interacting with traditional media's agenda setting. The researchers also argued that, instead of controlling, the government acted as an intervening force, while at the same time, the government's decision-making could also be altered by the interaction of online public opinion and media agenda setting.

These studies not only demonstrated that the Internet has the ability to interfere with traditional media agenda setting, and hence the government's decision-making, they also implied that public opinions online in China have a very distinctive role to play in challenging the deeply-rooted tradition of governmental censorship in China, and to promote the development of democracy in China. Opinion leaders, consequently, are

critical to online public opinion formation and dissemination.

Gatekeeping process on the Internet

The massive amount of information and unprecedented impact opinion leaders possess on the Internet may also indicate their capability to influence what information is published online. According to Meraz and Papacharissi (2013), the gatekeeping process on the Internet has changed, and the media is no longer the only gatekeeper. A crowdsourced group of elites, instead, gradually assumed the responsibility for information verification and distribution. Thus, opinion leaders' activities and performance on the Internet may also be viewed and understood within gatekeeping theory.

The concept of gatekeeping originated in the food consumption industry when Lewin (1947; also see in Shoemaker et al., 2011) used this concept to illustrate how food items came to the family table after passing through different "gates". Although this concept was not considered in mass communication, Lewin suggested that the process of selecting "items" could also be applied to the field of journalism, as White (1950, also see in Shoemaker et al., 2011) quickly picked up this idea to show how news stories were published by several editorial decisions that acted as the "gates" (Shoemaker et al., 2011).

In mass communication, gatekeeping theory describes the process of how potential information and news are "winnowed, shaped and prodded" into news ready to be published by the media (Shoemaker et al., 2011). It is also broadly seen as "the overall process through which the social reality transmitted by the news media is constructed" with a series of comprehensive decisions (Shoemaker et al., 2011), and this concept was

also expanded to describe not only individuals or groups, those of whom were traditionally defined as gatekeepers, but also to routines, codes of conduct and algorithms (Showmaker et al., 2001; Showmaker, Vos, & Reese, 2009; Coddington & Holton, 2013). For years, there have been fruitful studies centered on applying gatekeeping theory to traditional media, however, the continued validity and relevance of this concept has been challenged in the new media era.

Opinions concerning gatekeeping concept in the new media environment vary. Some argue that gatekeeping still plays a major role in online media production, and that the traditional gatekeeping process is conducted online in a manner similar to that which occurs in the physical newsroom (Boczkowski, 2004; Goode, 2009; Livingston & Bennett, 2003). Others claim that the media's gatekeeping role has been threatened and weakened due to the openness of the Internet (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004). Willaims and DelliCarpini (2000) even suggest that the challenge brought by the digital media environment "undermines the idea that there are discrete gates through which political information passes: if there are no gates, there can be no gatekeeper" (p. 62).

Although the gatekeeping concept remains controversial in the digital age, many studies have begun to apply this concept to the new trends in mass communication and journalism practice. Some scholars have looked into how gatekeeping theory was exercised in the online news production process. Harrison (2009) conducted an observational study to investigate how the BBC dealt with user-generated content (UGC), and identified four different types of UGC. Harrison also found that the traditional gatekeeping process had evolved to adapt to the new media environment, with its original

goal being to maintain the BBC's core news values by routinely moderating the UGC on the BBC hub. He also cited the BBC's guidelines, which indicates how the gatekeeping process was practiced with respect to the audience's online participation: "[e]very online space where user generated content is published must have someone editorially responsible for that content and should have a host to provide a visible and active presence and a moderator who can remove illegal or inappropriate content" (BBC Online Services Guidelines, 2005). Domingo et al. (2008) found that, although citizen journalism has been increasingly popular in cyberspace, UGC is still subject to traditional gatekeeping regimens when this content is picked up by traditional media. Such findings are in line with Karlsson's (2011) study, which theorized that even though traditional journalism is gradually allowing more UGC to be published, such content is also restrained by traditional media's gatekeeping processes, and only the content that fits the news institutions' traditional values will be selected for publication. Through a series of interviews, Hermida and Thurman (2008) concluded that in news institutions, such as *The Times*, editors preferred to include only the UGC that "fit their brand" (p. 350); content that didn't live up to the organization's or the audience's standards and values was filtered out, and this filtering process, also known as the gatekeeping process, also existed in television stations. Singer (2005) also noted that since UGC was largely used by traditional media to improve their coverage, online content was adapted to fit the standards and values of traditional media. Ali and Fahmy (2013) probed into the problem of UGC and gatekeeping theory through three major conflicts in Iran, Egypt and Libya, and found that even though social media helped to reach the hard-to-reach audience, their

influence on these three revolutions was limited, and traditional media's role of gatekeeper was still exercised with respect to citizen journalism, and this gatekeeping function was critical, especially in conflict zones.

Although the prior literature suggests that the traditional gatekeeping process persists even in the digital age, studies also show that new media has brought changes to this filtering process. Traditional media is experiencing a loss in its power to control what to publish, and is adapting a new gatekeeping process because the online environment permits little interference with respect to what people can publish online (Stromer-Galley, 2004; Williams et al., 2005). Cassidy (2006) also conducted a survey to see how the Internet affected journalism, and found that even though 89 percent of online editors believed that online and offline journalism should share the same journalistic ethics and standards, the reality was that almost half (47%) of them admitted that they actually spent less time on fact-checking and verification before publishing a story online, because online journalism requires fast speed when publishing a story. 30 percent of the online editors who participated in the survey reported that it is not likely that an online newspaper will follow the same standards and ethics as print journalism.

Such discussions were expanded to j-blogs, and Singer (2006) suggested that the role of journalists has changed in the new media environment. Instead of being the gatekeepers, journalists are the sense-makers, promoting the journalistic values and ethics they follow. Bruns (2008) hence argued that journalists have become the gate-watchers who observe the gate, rather than keeping the gate, in the online news industry. Few studies have specifically investigated j-blogs to see how that help shaped the new

gatekeeping process. Yu (2011) concluded that j-blogging “represents an experiment of amateur journalism by professional journalists in the blogosphere”, and “the creativity in gate-watching, gate-poking and gate-mocking” is practiced through the feedback loop of the blogosphere. Yu argued that the mediated loop, in which ideas, visions, emotions and beliefs can be tested, was crucial. Yetaai (2007) suggested that even though censorship still existed in China, blogs and j-blogs could still provide a more transparent and communicative platform for the Chinese (Gao & Martin-Kratzer, 2011). It has also been suggested that blogs offer a public sphere that can enlarge and evolve public discourse, thus blogs can stimulate media and social evolution in China (MacKinnon, 2008). Gao and Martin-Kratzer (2011) also explored j-blogs in China, and found that in the digital age, journalists were no longer the sole gatekeeper; Internet users could also perform the role of gatekeeper, and J-blogs as an innovative new media product can help Internet users gain more knowledge of gatekeeping by enabling direct communication between readers and journalists, and training readers to be proactive, and even news co-producers. Singer (2014) agreed, and even argued that, as to online content, Internet users, rather than passively consuming information, have become the secondary gatekeepers. According to Singer, this role includes “assessment of contributions by other users; communication of the perceived value or quality of user-and journalist- produced content, and selective re-dissemination of that content”. Thus, the previous one-way, top-down gatekeeping process (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009) has been replaced by a two-step process, and initial editorial decisions can be mediated by users’ decisions when selecting what news to report, and how visible the news should be.

The existing literature concerning the gatekeeping concept in the new media environment has also expanded to discuss how the Internet changed the mechanisms for gatekeeping from a different angle. Bastos et al. (2013) argued that the concept of gatekeeping is built upon the mechanism that prevented information sharing on a larger network. The scarce and expensive resources and high cost of production and distribution in the traditional media era also helped keep information in a centered network, so that editorial decisions were made in small groups. However, in the digital age, this communication infrastructure has changed. The traditional sender-to-receiver distribution process has been challenged, and even information once filtered out by gatekeepers could later be disseminated, or even skip the gates entirely to be published online. Bastos and colleagues (2013) then concluded that the previous gatekeeping concept based on source-destination was insufficient to describe the new mechanism.

Literatures have also discussed how the gatekeeping process was practiced in the context of social media, specifically on Twitter, the platform adopted by Weibo. According to Suh et al. (2010), a profile's number of followers is significantly related to the number of retweets the profile could receive, which also implies opinion leaders' massive influence on social media. Based on this conclusion, it was argued that social media, for example Twitter, challenged the traditional gatekeeping concept, because instead of receiving information from the professional, traditional media, people consume information from "a plethora of distinct sources", and a study has shown that tweets directly from mass media channels only comprise 15% of the tweets ordinary Internet users receive (Wu et al., 2011). What makes the gatekeeping process appear even more

insufficient is the data suggesting that almost 50% of all attention on Twitter is generated by less than 0.05% of users (Wu et al., 2011), and Bastors et al. (2013) concluded that those elites online now have assumed the role of gatekeeper. Bastors et al. also suggested that gatekeeping online is “shaped by a number of actions and channeling routines that are reliant not only upon network connectivity, but also upon message fitness”. Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) also investigated the gatekeeping concept in Twitter, and found that a crowdsourced group of elites are the new gatekeepers on Twitter, and influential, central figures not only promoted, but also spread elite influence through vast numbers of retweets and mentions, and these crowdsourced groups of elites filter, collaborate, share, and spread information on social media. Meraz and Papacharissi thus concluded that there is a new, symbiotic interrelationship between the online elites and the ordinary, such that the crowdsourced nonelites can also be active participants in deciding what can be viral online.

However, very few studies have looked into how opinion leaders utilize the Internet, and to be specific, Weibo, one of the most popular social networks in China, and their potential agenda-setting effects and the possible role of gatekeepers on Weibo remain unknown. Thus, this research first focuses on the general picture of opinion leaders use of Weibo with the following questions:

RQ1: In what ways do opinion leaders receive and spread information on Weibo.

RQ2. What kind of information do they prefer to receive and spread on Weibo.

Gender Differences and Internet Use

Online gender difference refers to the differences between women and men with

respect to Internet use, (Fountain, 2000, Fullerm 2004, Haro and Tremayne, 2006) and there were many researches about different Internet usage between males and females. Although reports show that men still dominate the online world (Gavin et al., 2007), it is undeniable that the Internet provides an advantageous platform for females. Furthermore, the gap between female and male Internet use is narrowing. Schumacher and Morahan-Martin (2001) found that females have gained more experience with the Internet, and that there was more content that catered to women's interests online. The Internet is especially helpful for those women who are considered inferior to men in traditional life. For example, Mitra (2004) contended that the Internet made it possible for women in South Asia to be heard worldwide, and Harcourt (2000) believed that the Internet helped Arabic women express themselves in an open platform.

It has been demonstrated that there are some different patterns in Internet usage between men and women. Jackson found that women used the Internet more as a tool for communication, while men used it more for information seeking (Jackson et al., 2001). And Lim and Meier (2011) found that in Korea, boys typically spent time on the Internet to play games and meet friends, while girls were more likely to spend their time managing social relationships and updating their own sites in the virtual world. Thompson et al. studied the gender difference in Facebook use, and discovered that females reported more emotional factors in their use of Facebook, while that percentage was 5% less in male users (Thompson et al., 2012).

These findings are consistent with the conclusion that female Internet use is centered around their private lives, such as home, family, private relations and so on, and

women are more likely to bring up topics that lead to gossip about themselves on Facebook (Walker, Cohen, Sibbald, 2008), while males focused more on external life, such as politics, the government and commercial establishments (Fuller, 2004; Witte and Frank, 2005). Female users were proven to be milder than male users, as they exhibit more conformity than men (Rosander, Michael, Eriksson, Oskar, 2012, Bond & Smith, 1996). Similarly, as Ogan et al. found, women were less inclined to express political opinions, and had a less authoritative manner in their online conversations (Ogan et al., 2005). They are more likely to agree with others, and show support, while men are more likely to respond negatively than women (Guiller, Durndell, 2007). Zhang et al. (2011) researched the gender difference in language use on web forums, and found out that females are more likely to talk about family members, God, peace, marriage and good will, while males are more interested in discussing extremism, holy men and beliefs.

Previous researches give us clear hints about the gender disparity on the Internet, but literature about the gender difference in Chinese microblogs is limited, and there are very few researches about the gender disparity in Chinese opinion leaders on the Internet. Thus, one of the purposes of this research is to look for possible opinion leaders' gender differences in their usage of Weibo. Specifically, the research is going to seek potential answers regarding whether:

H1: There are gender disparities in the externality of the issues posted by opinion leaders.

H2: There are gender disparities in the aggressiveness of the tweets posted by opinion leaders.

Fields of expertise and Internet use

In addition, it has been proven that in persuasive communication, the source's expertise is one of the positive determining factors for how influential the information may be. According to Petty and Cacioppo (1986), source expertise refers to a source's ability to provide professional information on a specific field to an information receiver, and a higher level of expertise confers higher trustworthiness. Liu et al. further proved this theory, and contended that source expertise has a positive effect on information retweeting, and information provided by high expert users is more likely to be retweeted (Liu et al., 2012). This research paper is also going to test how applicable this theory is with respect to opinion leaders' use of Weibo by attempting to determine whether:

H3: Information and opinions within their field of expertise are more popular than information and opinions outside of their field of expertise

H4: Opinion leaders are more likely to interact with followers about topics within their field of expertise

Chapter 3: Methodology

This research used both qualitative and quantitative methods. The samples for the qualitative and quantitative part are the same, and two constructed weeks in January 2013 are chosen as the time length to minimize the possibility of distorted tweet contents caused by major events, such as breaking news, holidays or other extreme situations.

Six profiles are chosen as samples for analysis, three females and three males. The criteria for selecting opinion leaders on Weibo, based on their characteristics mentioned above, is mainly focused on how influential they are (the influentials). The samples are selected based on considerations of: 1. The expertise field they belong to; 2. The Rank of Influence data provided by Sina.com; and 3. The Top 100 Opinion Leader List provided by the Public Opinion & Communication Center of Fudan University and PubTopic.org in their Statistic Report (2011) and Report on Active Opinion Leaders on Weibo (2011) provided by Wuhan University. The sample consists three male and three female profiles for gender balance consideration. Also, all the profiles were verified profiles, which means the profile holders' real identities and fields of expertise were all verified and displayed on their profiles.

Sina.com publishes their Weibo data called Rank of Influence, which collects data about people's Weibo profiles. Weibo data also provides the equation for how they calculate the influence of a Weibo account:

$$\text{Influence} = a \times \text{Activeness} + b \times \text{Vagility} + c \times \text{Coverage}$$

In this equation, a, b and c are the coefficients, but Weibo doesn't publish the values of the coefficients. Weibo data also published the explanation of each factor in the

equation:

Activeness is how actively the user generates his/ her Weibo contents, which is determined by how many valid tweets, retweets and comments the user generates everyday.

Vagility is how popular the information is, which is determined by how many valid times the tweets or retweets are being retweeted and commented on by valid users.

Coverage is how far the information can reach, which is determined by how many active followers the Weibo account has.

The Rank of Influence is calculated on a daily, weekly and monthly basis, in which the weekly and monthly Rank of Influence is based on the average value of the account's daily Rank of Influence. On the website, the previous data could be traced up to four weeks/six months.

The Top 100 Opinion Leader List is released in the 2011 Research Report of Opinion Leaders on Weibo, and the Public Opinion & Communication Center of Fudan University and PubTopic.org explained that they utilized the Palas Public Opinion Monitoring System to determine the list; however, they didn't provide much information about the details of the selecting process.

The Report on Active Opinion Leaders on Weibo released by Wuhan University provide in-depth analysis based on 27 major online events during 2011, and listed the active profiles that took part in these events with considerations of the number of followers, how many events these profiles participated and the profiles' number of tweets.

With the comprehensive consideration of the characteristics of opinion leaders on the Internet and current data and research reports, the samples information are listed below (data collected on 27 Nov. 2012):

Name on Weibo/ gender	Expertise Field	Followers	Tweets
Yao Chen (姚晨)/female	Actress	26,368,030	6292 tweets
Zhang Xin (张欣)/female	CEO of SOHO China (real estate)	7,220,614	3308 tweets
Lv Qiu Lu Wei (闾丘露薇)/ female	Reporter; anchor for Phoenix Satellite Television	3,039,154	11505 tweets
Li Kaifu (李开复)/male	IT venture capitalist (the Innovation Works); computer scientist; high tech professional	51,546,071	13796 tweets
Zheng Yuanjie (郑渊洁)/ male	Fairy tale author; sole writer for magazine <i>King of Fairy Tales</i>	5,774,798	23406 tweets
Qiuyi Taiwan (邱毅台湾)/male	Political commentator	1,421,309	3369 tweets

Table 1

To balance the numbers of sampled tweets for each profile, 10 tweets were randomly selected each day from each profile. If a profile published less than 10 tweets a day, these tweets were all selected without randomization. Based on the abovementioned standard, 297 tweets were generated for online observation and content analysis.

Online Observation

To answer RQ1 and RQ2, an online, non-participant observation will be

conducted. Online ethnography is often utilized in platforms such as blogs, chat rooms, forums, etc., (Carter, 2004; Hine, 2000; Lysloff, 2003) and microblog is also an applicable platform. Although there have been debates about researchers' physical absence of online ethnography, which is thought to hamper the careful and informed interaction between researchers and the subjects, Beneito-Moutagut (2011) contended that ethnography on the Internet has the advantage of centering on the subjects, and suggested that it's a more fruitful methodology for exploring interpersonal relationships online.

There will be no access problems for online observation, because their tweets are open to everyone on Weibo, as are their retweets and comments.

Observing opinion leaders' activities online gives us primary answers about their activity patterns and habits. This observation mainly focuses on: 1) in what ways do they receive and spread information on Weibo, and 2) what are these opinion leaders talking about on Weibo (i.e.: do they retweet from others? Or write original posts? Do they tag people? Do they make comments when they retweet?). The general patterns of their behaviors on Weibo are very important for us to gather a holistic view of how opinion leaders use Weibo on a daily basis.

Content Analysis

Every text-based tweet, including retweets and comments are considered eligible for analysis. When other forms of content, such as pictures, videos, gifs and links, the users descriptions were counted as eligible to be analyzed.

Externally centered issue is operationalized as issues that are about a broader

sphere instead of directly self-related. For example, topics about politics, public issues, economic and business and national and international affairs are considered externally centered. While not externally centered issue is operationalized as more self-related issues, for example, one's personal life, jobs, daily errands and activities, family, friends, relationships, emotions etc.

The aggressiveness of the information is defined as the information that is negative, critical, sarcastic, or appealing for changes (even in subtle ways). While non-aggressive information is coded as supportive, neutral and/or non-radical, complimentary, sympathetic or non-critical and non-sarcastic.

The popularity of a tweet on Weibo is defined: 1. By the number of comments a tweet generates; 2. By the number of times the tweet is retweeted; 3. By the times a tweet is "liked" by other people. The more comments, retweets, "likes" and "collects" a tweet receives refers to higher popularity.

A user's expertise is defined by the field(s) the user's current and previous occupancy is in. In this research, the fields of expertise we look into are entertainment, finance and business, communication and media, high-tech and investment and literature. The field of expertise refers to career-based information, so tweets unrelated to jobs, careers and professions are considered outside of their fields of expertise.

Interaction of the profile holders is operationalized as the times the holders reply their followers' comments, and involve their followers into conversations. By counting the times they reply or @ (tag) their followers on their webpage.

The researcher developed the codebook and the code sheet, and the researcher and

another bilingual graduate student acted as coders. Coding categories and questions were developed by the researcher to address specific questions. Intercoder reliability was performed on 30 tweets randomly extracted from the sample, which is more than 10% of the whole sample. The overall intercoder agreement between the two coders was 96.6% calculated by using Cohen's kappa method. Disagreements were resolved by discussions and were used to refine and finalize the codebook and code sheet, and intercoder agreement data were added to the final database. Each coder did 50% of the remaining tweets.

A series of t-test were conducted to see if there were significant differences between male and female.

Chapter 4: Results

RQ1 and RQ2 focused on opinion leaders' general communication patterns as well as the content of the information they prefer to communicate on Weibo. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the results for online observation as to the opinion leaders' usage behaviors on Weibo.

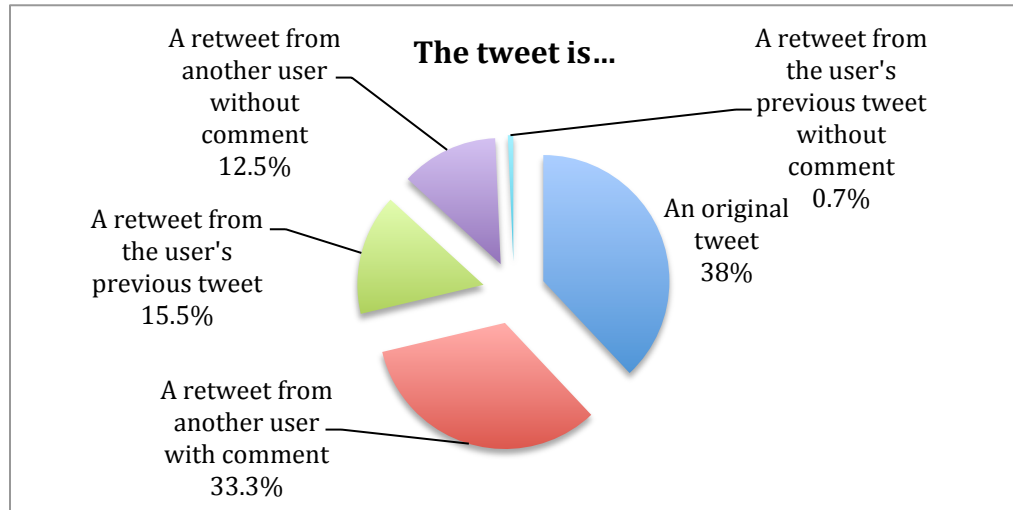


Figure 1

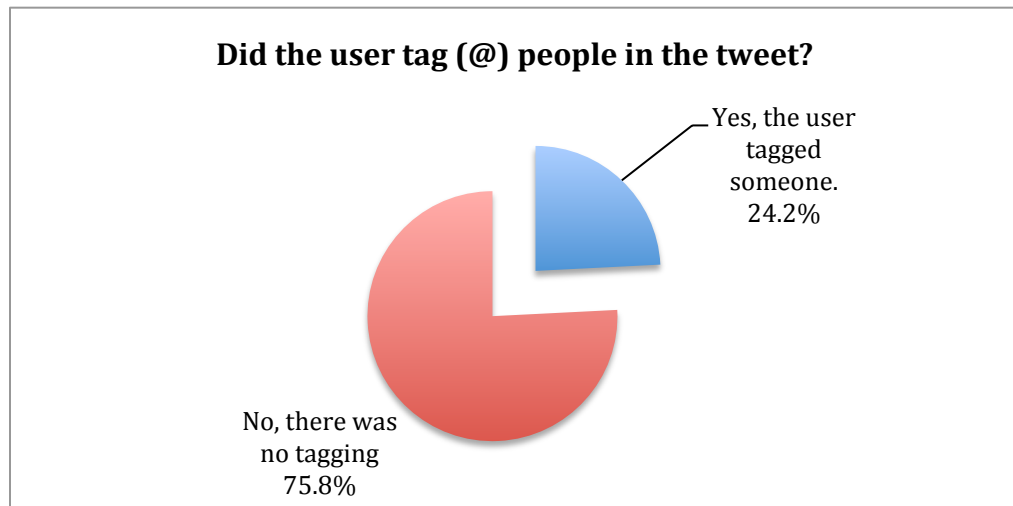


Figure 2

According to the data, most of the posted tweets were original, while opinion leaders also liked to retweet other users' information and add their own opinions.

Tagging people in the tweet was not very prevalent based on the online observation.

As to the question of what kind of information opinion leaders disseminated on Weibo (Figure 3), the observation revealed that the most popular category was public affairs and social issues, which comprised 39.7% of the whole sample. The second most popular category was the users' jobs, work and daily errands (23.6%).

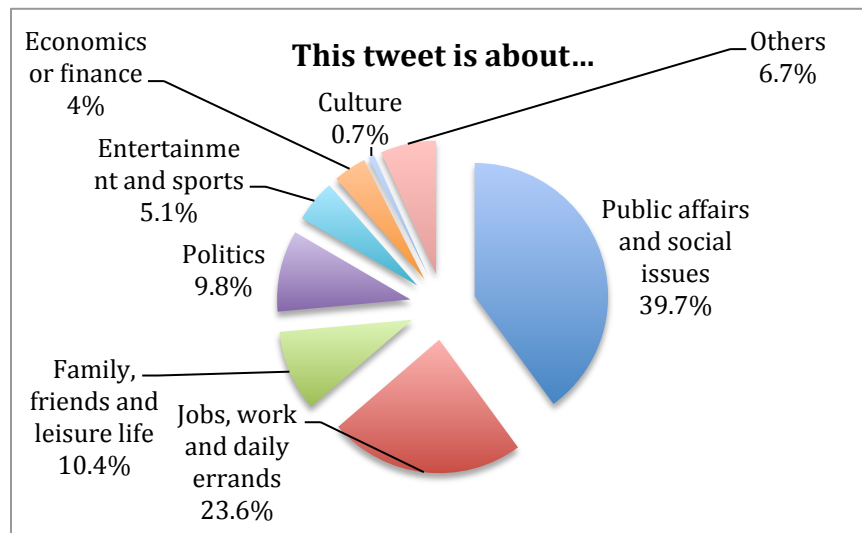


Figure 3

H1 predicted that there would be gender disparities in the externality of the issues raised by opinion leaders on Weibo. An independent-samples *t* test comparing the mean scores of male and female users on the externality of the tweets found a significant difference between males and females ($t(295) = -3.68, p < .05$). The mean for males was significantly lower ($m=2.0859, sd=1.77$) than the mean for females ($m=3.91, sd=2.90$).

This confirms that male opinion leaders put much more emphasis on externally centered

issues than female opinion leaders, while female opinion leaders are more likely to tweet/retweet non-external contents.

H2 predicted that there would be gender disparities in the aggressiveness of the tweets posted by opinion leaders. The independent t test found a strong difference between male and female opinion leaders on the aggressiveness of their tweets ($t(295) = -3.32, p < .05$). The mean for males was significantly lower ($m=9.34, sd=1.77$) than the mean for females ($m=9.98, sd=1.31$). This data reflects that male opinion leaders are significantly more aggressive than female opinion leaders on Weibo.

H3 predicted that tweets within the users' fields of expertise would be more popular than tweets on matters outside of the users' fields of expertise. However, the data revealed a significant, opposite result ($t(295)=-2.70, p < .05$). 133 tweets were categorized as within the users' fields of expertise, and 164 fell outside of the users' fields of expertise. The mean for tweets within the fields of expertise was much lower ($m=1916.74, sd=3407.93$) than the mean for tweets outside of the fields of expertise ($m=3712, sd=7028.58$).

H4 concerned the relationship between fields of expertise and interactions. However, this hypothesis can neither be proven nor disapproved due to scarce data. It was found that the users rarely reply to followers' comments on their accounts, regardless of the content of the tweets. The data on Mondays and Tuesdays showed that in 96 tweets, 6 users only replied 13 times in total, while these tweets gained more than 90,000 comments. The extremely low response rate provided inadequate data to examine the relationship between fields of expertise and interactions.

Chapter 5: Discussion and conclusion

This study fills the knowledge gap by identifying the opinion leaders' ways of communication and generalizing the topics opinion leaders paid special attention to on a specific social media platform in China. The study also contributes to the literature by investigating how gender is correlated with how external the content of the tweets are and how aggressive the tweets are as well as how fields of expertise is related to the popularity of tweets.

The study gathered data on 6 opinion leaders from 6 different fields of expertise, and analyzed 297 tweets during two constructed weeks in January 2013. The researcher indicted the different ways opinion leaders use Weibo to communicate, and categorized 8 different general areas of topics. This study found that 38% of the tweets were original, meaning opinion leaders mainly treated Weibo as a platform to express their original thoughts and feelings directly. Retweeting other people's tweets and added their own comment was also a very popular way of using Weibo, and 33% of the tweets were posted in this form. The prevalence of this online behavior suggested that aside from purely original tweets, opinion leaders also consumed large flow of information on Weibo, and information consumption on Weibo is also a major factor that triggered them to not only retweet, but also digest and make comments.

This study also categorized the general topics the opinion leaders talk about on Weibo. Public affairs and social issues is the most popular topic, while users' jobs, work and daily errands is the second. However, politics only consisted 9.8% percent of the tweets. Opinion leaders, traditionally defined based on their authority and articulation in

politics (Lazarsfeld, 1944), expanded their ability to influence different groups on “every social and economic level” (Katz, 1955). Campus (2012) also believed that the advent of new media redirected the focus of attention on political opinions, and this study proved that opinion leaders in China did spend most of their time focusing on public affairs and social issues. Moreover, this paper found that opinion leaders in China not only treated Weibo as a place to influence others, but also a platform to write about their own life.

Gender difference was also proven as a factor that may affect opinion leaders’ information consumption and communication on Weibo. This study shows a strong difference in the externality of the content of the tweets posted by male opinion leaders and female opinion leaders. Male opinion leaders, according to the data, were much more likely to discuss external issues. They are more likely to post information and news less related to their personal life, things that are influential on international, national or regional levels. However, female opinion leaders prefer to post things that are closer to their personal life, such as their work, daily errands, friends and family, pets, movies, travels, and even emotions and feelings, etc. This finding is in line with Fuller (2004) that male Internet users centered more on external life, including politics, the government or commercial and financial information, while women report their opinions in politics, economy, foreign relations or taxes less frequently. Walker, Cohen and Sibbald’s study (2008) also proved that females are more willing to expose their private life on the Internet. The finding also supports Guiller and Durndell’s (2007) claims that females were more likely to integrate emotional forms of languages with high level of self-disclosure than males online. By proving that there is a gender disparity in the externality

of the tweets, this study implies that gender disparity in Internet use discussed in the previous literature is also applicable to the platform of microblog and Weibo, to be specific, and such gender disparity is also notable on Chinese opinion leaders.

Gender is also associated with the aggressiveness of opinion leaders' posts. The data confirms strong difference between the aggressiveness of male opinion leaders and female opinion leaders. Male opinion leaders are more likely to express aggressively, such as showing disagreement and argument, cursing, swearing, scolding, condemning, using indecent words, or being sarcastic. They also post more negative information on Weibo, and showed more negative or aggressive feelings and emotions, such sadness, depress, hate, anger and indignation. Female opinion leaders, on the contrary, are comparatively milder and gentler. They are more inclined to post less negative information, and are less likely to curse, swear and use extreme words. Although female opinion leaders also express their emotions and feelings, they tend to be more complimentary, encouraging and supportive, and they are more likely to offer advices than male opinion leaders. This finding supports Guiller and Gurdell's (2007) study in gender patterns in online language use that females tended to use languages containing empathic utterances and express agreement and support, while men are more likely to express negatively with challenging and disagreeing information. This finding is also in line with studies in gender and linguistics. Tannen(1991) and Coates(1993) both argued that the male language use is built on competitiveness style while female is built on cooperativeness. It is also claimed that gender difference in learning process proved females prefer to learn connectively and cooperatively, however, males learns more

independently and argumentatively (Belenky, et al., 1997), which may explain why male opinion leaders in this study expressed more aggressive and negative information than female opinion leaders.

One of the interesting finding is that instead of showing growing popularity, tweets within the opinion leaders' fields of expertise are actually less popular than fields outside of the opinion leaders' fields of expertise. The data shows that tweets outside of the users' fields of expertise attract much more comments, retweets and "likes" than those within the users' fields of expertise, which conflicts with the previous literature claiming that source expertise can positively affect information retweeting (Liu, 2012). However, this might be the result of the objectives of this study. This study investigates the overall relationship between opinion leaders' fields of expertise and tweet's with random sampling that covers random topics ranging from various areas and fields. There might not be any extremely significant, or eye-catching event happened during the sampled period within the opinion leaders' fields of expertise, while other issues or problems fall out of the chosen fields of expertise occurred and caught the opinion leaders' and the followers' attention. It may also because that since the sample is highly randomized; followers during the sample period were not looking for specific news or information that urgently need experts' advice (for example, earthquake, disease, etc.). Opinion leaders' long-term authority and trustworthiness in other occupational groups and issues may also contribute to the popularity of their tweets outside of their fields of expertise. Or, it is also possible that opinion leaders' fields of expertise is in fact not significantly correlated with the popularity of their tweets in general.

This study also implies that not only opinion leaders have the ability to act as the “switchers” to control the information flow (Chadwick, 2008), they might also have the power and the influence to overturn the traditional agenda setting theory. According to Zhu (2014), microblog used to be a platform where the citizens (the grassroots group) dominates the formation of online public opinion, while the media did not have their privilege in setting up the agenda online. Such process de-centralized the information creation and dissemination online, and provided the grassroots group a comparatively “democratic” and “fair” public sphere to discuss public issues. However, such de-centralized communication is gradually re-centralized again, especially with opinion leaders’ online participation, due to the competitive market where the ones with rich information resources gathers the more attentions online. Such phenomenon became extremely prevalent, Zhu argued, that in the era when information was no longer an exclusive product on the Internet, the effectiveness of information communication online became the key. Therefore, those opinion leaders who have large number of followers and have already built the authority and trust among their followers has the ability to gather attentions, and affect large numbers of Internet users turned out to be the centers of public opinion online. This suggests that by effectively affecting public opinion online, opinion leaders may have the ability to affect media agenda. This implication is in line with studies claiming that there was evidence suggesting the pluralistic trend in public agenda setting, and that traditional media was no longer the universal source of information, while blogs and other online platforms began to influence media agenda setting, especially in the realm of politics and public issues (Lee et al., 2006; Meraz,

2009). Literature centered on Chinese media agenda setting situation also found traditional media's agenda setting influence was declining, while the Internet start to play a role in setting up the public agenda (Qiang, 2007; Luo, 2012). Zhou and Moy's (2007) study even found how online discussion could affect agenda setting: by escalating a small, local event into a big, national issue.

This study, however, addresses the media agenda setting issue from a different angle, and provides some suggestions and implications on how opinion leaders use the Internet, especially social media, to affect the online public discussion and potentially influence the public agenda, and even traditional media's agenda setting. The ways opinion leaders communicate on Weibo reveals the possible means that they use to affect public opinion. The two most popular forms of tweets they posted were original tweets and retweets from other users with their own commentary. These results indicate that, to influence public opinion, and potentially affect media agenda setting, the two primary means used by opinion leaders are expressing their original thoughts, and adding new values (comments) to other people's thoughts. By initiating discussions in these ways, opinion leaders might be able to introduce new ideas and values to existing events, and affect public opinion as well as media agenda setting (Zhou & Moy, 2007). In addition, opinion leaders online are most likely to affect online public agenda in public affairs and social issues, since these comprise the largest amount (39.7%) of their total tweets. At the same time, opinion leaders might also influence the public opinion in issues about their own professions, since jobs, work and daily errands comprise 23.6% of their total tweets. This study also found some gender disparities in opinion leaders' use of Weibo, which

may imply that there are gender differences in how opinion leaders can affect the public agenda, and even media agenda setting. Male opinion leaders in this study were found to be more likely to focus on external issues, issues that are less relevant on a personal level, but are more influential on international or national levels. However, female opinion leaders were found to be more likely to tweet about non-external issues, issues that are more concerned with personal life. Such findings may suggest a gender disparity in how opinion leaders affect the public agenda. Several possible indications include that male opinion leaders have more impact on political issues, public affairs, social issues, or other topics such as pollution, social injustice, poverty, wars and so on. Therefore, male opinion leaders are probably more likely to affect the public agenda as well as media agenda in such fields. By contrast, female opinion leaders spend more time discussing personally relevant topics, such as their family, friends, pets, entertainment, or their own occupations and daily work, which suggests that female opinion leaders may have more power in affecting the public agenda on topics such as family relationship, children and parenting, animal treatment and rights, popular culture and so on.

Gender difference is also correlated with the aggressiveness of the tweets, as male opinion leaders showed much more aggressiveness than female opinion leaders. This finding not only tells the level of aggressiveness in their tweets, it may also suggest a difference in how, and in what directions male and female opinion leaders could affect public opinion and media agenda. The study found that male opinion leaders tend to be more negative, critical and sarcastic and express more disagreement, while female opinion leaders are more likely to express support, compliments and encouragement. This

finding may also specify how male and female opinion leaders “guide” the public agenda differently, as male opinion leaders may affect the public agenda by presenting negative news and critical information, and possibly upsetting, thus leading online discussion to a more extreme end. Female opinion leaders, on the other hand, may exert more positive and optimistic influence on their followers, and may balance the public agenda by leading people to also express support, confidence and encouragement.

Aside from gender disparities in opinion leaders, the negative correlation between opinion leaders’ fields of expertise and their tweets’ popularity also have valuable implications on agenda setting theory. The findings suggest that, in general, the online public showed limited preference for opinion leaders’ fields of expertise; information that does not belong to opinion leaders’ fields of expertise are equally as popular, or even more popular than, the other. Opinion leaders’ fields of expertise might only be significant when the online public is seeking very specific information, or needs highly professional, profound knowledge, such as seismology, astronautics, anthropology, etc. Therefore, this negative correlation implies that, as a general matter, opinion leaders might participate in public agenda setting and media agenda setting no matter what their fields of expertise are. Their realm of influence exceeds their fields of expertise, and the online public showed great trustworthiness with respect to their opinions even though they may lack professional knowledge in the related fields.

With existing literature showing that the Internet might also affect the public agenda and media agenda, findings in this study have several implications for how opinion leaders may affect the public agenda, and possibly media agenda. The study also

has some interesting findings as to opinion leaders' interactions with their followers. Although microblog served as a notable platform for online interaction, only 24% of the tweets showed obvious interaction (tag, known as “@”) between the opinion leaders and other users. This fact is also supported by opinion leaders' extremely low response rate to the comments on their webpages as identified in H6. The sampled 297 tweets generated 213,160 comments, 606,359 retweets and 44,175 “likes” during two weeks, while the chance of interaction was found to be very small.

Such obvious one-sided interaction may be explained by the concept of para-social interaction. According to Horton and Wohl (1956), para-social interaction is an illusionary, one-way relationship between the audience and the performer where the audience anticipates an intimate relationship in their private life and interacts with the formers as close friends. Para-social interaction is “fictional”, “nondialectical” and “controlled by the performer” without susceptibility of mutual development. The concept of para-social interaction has been widely investigated on different media platforms, such as television and radio, and literature also expanded to see how such relationship exists among different groups. For example, the para-social relationship between citizens and political figures, readers and fictional characters, viewers and television hosts, soap opera stars and eve celebrities (Rubin & Perse, 1987, Stever, 2009). In this study, the interaction between followers and opinion leaders on Weibo fits within the concept of para-social relationship that the followers showed great interests and efforts to interact with opinion leaders, while such interaction lacks the input from opinion leaders. In fact, the existing literature had already touched the concept of para-social interaction within

the realm of opinion leader. Levy (1979) in his study found that more than 80% percent of respondents compared their own opinions to those raised by the commentators, which implies that sometimes performers on television may act like opinion leaders in such para-social interaction.

This obvious para-social phenomenon raises some interesting suggestions and implications for the concept of gatekeeping in the new media era. The data in this study shows that massive numbers of followers not only pay close attention to opinion leaders' behavior online, but also spend much time conducting one-way interactions with opinion leaders. This phenomenon may provide some hints about the gatekeeping process in the digital age. The previous gatekeeping process, as defined by Shoemaker et al. (2011), described how information is "winnowed, shaped and prodded" into published news by going through many editorial decisions, referred to as the "gates". However, this old definition has been significantly challenged by the emergence of the Internet. Previous studies have shown that the traditional media's gatekeeper role has been threatened and weakened in the online platform (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004), and many empirical studies have suggested that journalists and editors are accepting that they might not be the only gatekeepers anymore. For example, Cassidy (2006) found that almost half of the surveyed editors said they were spending less time on information verification when editing online. And studies centered on j-blogs also suggest that the role of journalists is changing; they are becoming more like gate watchers, sense-makers who accentuate journalistic values and ethics online, rather than traditional gatekeepers (Bruns, 2008; Singer, 2006). Internet users have been theorized to be alternative, or even

secondary gatekeepers online (Gao & Martin-Kratzer, 2011; Singer, 2013), and these Internet users, along with professional journalists and editors, together exercise the role of gatekeeper on the online platform. Such changes, according to many scholars, could bring advantageous changes. Yu (2011) argued that such changes offer a platform where ideas, visions, emotions and beliefs can be tested and applied in the online gatekeeping process. Some other scholars saw the value of the changing gatekeeping process especially in China, and argued that this changing gatekeeping process could lead to a more transparent and communicative platform for China, and increase public disclosure and enhance discussions to promote potential media and social changes (Yetaai, 2007; Gao & Martin-Kratzer, 2011; MacKinnon, 2008).

Studies also suggest that opinion leaders, or similar online figures, have a great impact on the current gatekeeping process. Wu et al.'s (2011) study provided data suggesting less than 0.05% of users have control of almost 50% of all attention on Twitter, while Twitter users receive information from various of sources, of which mass media channels comprise only 15%. Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) also suggest that crowdsourced elites are the new gatekeepers who filter, collaborate, share and spread information on social media. Such findings all imply that opinion leaders online could exert great influence on what their followers would read, and how the information was tailored as news to be published and consumed by their followers.

The findings in this study show that opinion leaders have enormous power to impact the public by simply publishing information online. The data shows that 297 tweets studied in this research attracted 213,160 comments, 606,359 retweets and 44,175

“likes”, and each tweet gains 712 comments, 2042 retweets and 149 “likes” on average, while the numbers would be even larger if there were major events or issues that may affect the public, and if the subsequent commenting, retweeting and “likes” were calculated, expanding opinion leaders’ influence to an even larger audience. According to the findings, opinion leaders exercise their potential gatekeeper role in two major ways: publishing original content, or retweeting tweets they think are important while adding their own opinions. Among all these tweets, opinion leaders were most likely to gate keep information about public affairs and social issues, and of particular note, in the case of opinion leaders, the “gates” a piece of information needs to go through were more personal than professional; decisions were made individually, which differs from in the newsroom where a group of editors could discuss and decide. Besides, when they exercise their role of gatekeeper, they seldom communicate with their followers, too, based on their extreme low frequency of “tagging” people and replying to comments on their homepage. Thus, the gatekeeping process online for opinion leaders is more likely to be a one-sided process, where the decisions of how a piece of information should be shaped and tailored to meet the online community is almost solely based on opinion leaders’ personal decisions. Opinion leaders’ influence on public affairs and social issues could be much more amplified, not only because of the massive amount of followers who add these opinion leaders as their virtual “friends”, but also because they almost have total control over what information their followers will read, when their followers will read it and how the information will be packaged to be seen in the online community.

This potential gatekeeping process on Weibo could also be further examined by

reference to gender differences. The gender differences in the externality of the issues and aggressiveness of the tweets implies that there may also be gender disparities in the possible gatekeeping process. This study found that male opinion leaders are more likely to mention external issues, issues that are less related to their personal lives and are more influential on international, national or regional levels. Female opinion leaders, on the other hand, are more inclined to post tweets about their personal life, issues that are centered on an individual level. This finding may present new implications for the concept of gatekeeping in the new media age, in that male and female gatekeepers might act differently when filtering and tailoring information. Male opinion leaders might be more likely to control information that is related to external issues, such as politics, environment, economy and finance, while female opinion leaders may be more likely to exercise their gatekeeper role when it comes to more personal topics, such as work, leisure life, entertainment, friends and family and so on. In addition, this study found that male opinion leaders were more aggressive than female opinion leaders; male opinion leaders are more likely to show disagreement and be argumentative or negative. Female opinion leaders, however, are more inclined to show agreement, support and encouragement, and be complimentary and optimistic. These differences in their tweets suggest that when practicing the role of gatekeeper, male and female opinion leaders have different preferences when winnowing, shaping and prodding information on the Internet (Shoemaker et al., 2011). Male opinion leaders prefer to shape the information into a more aggressive form, while females may prefer to shape messages with a more gentle tone. Therefore, followers who receive male opinion leaders' information may develop a

more aggressive attitude toward the issues mentioned in the message, while those who consume messages disseminated by female opinion leaders may adopt a more positive and supportive stance towards the mentioned issues. Both the externality of the issues and the aggressiveness of the tweets that correlate with opinion leaders' gender differences could potentially exert great impact on online public agenda. Male and female opinion leaders exercise their gatekeeper role differently, contributing different messages to the online community, and setting different public agendas online. Such disparities in the ways opinion leaders practice the gatekeeping process online could be advantageous in helping to build a healthy, democratic and pluralist online community. When opinion leaders take on the gatekeeper role, it might suggest a much healthier, democratic and pluralistic online community, in that opinion leaders could bring their own opinions, standards, values and ethics when deciding what to report and when to publish the information, rather than letting traditional media, who is under strict governmental censorship with unified values, ethics and codes of conduct, to filter the information. Such diversity makes the Internet, specifically social media, an extremely significant platform for media pluralism, in that it allows the public a comparatively free platform to consume diversified news and information, and discuss important social issues in a less controlled environment, which is hard to accomplish via traditional media. On Weibo, opinion leaders' role as a gatekeeper has been different from the traditional gatekeeper; they have become the sense-makers of social events and issues with an open mind, the catalysts that incubate and encourage new ideas, values and controversies, and the propellers that accelerate the development of a more transparent media environment, and

more importantly, a more democratic society.

The findings in this study also raise another interesting issue in the context of the Internet: who to listen to on the Internet, and why people trust these peoples' agendas rather than other agendas. Opinion leaders, apparently, were popular sources people chose to pay attention to on Weibo, and the large numbers of comments, retweets and "likes" opinion leaders' tweets gathered suggest that opinion leaders' agendas were effectively communicated to large groups of people on the Internet, and more importantly, these agendas were transmitted to an even boarder audience by retweeting behaviors. Such selective process and agenda preferences might be explained by the concept of agenda melding (Shaw et al., 1999). The concept of agenda melding is based on the concept of cognitive dissonance. According to Leon Festinger (1957), cognitive dissonance is a drive inherent in human beings to avoid information that is against their attitudes and beliefs, and to seek information that is congruent with their views (also see Shaw et al., 1999). Building on this theory, Shaw et al. (1999) argued that the concept of cognitive dissonance implies that individuals have a driving force to seek the appropriate groups to belong to by "reducing dissonance between the agendas of these groups and the individual". Shaw et al. (1999) accordingly investigated the agenda setting process from a cognitive dissonance perspective, and argued that in the context of social science, agenda setting could be described as a "social process of matching layers of priorities, issues and values in order to avoid the dissonance of being alone", and this ongoing process is called agenda melding. In this vein, agenda setting is more like "an intervening part of the ways that individuals learn, in the broader social process of agenda melding". This process,

they claimed, is more important than how information is filtered and adopted, because it suggests a collective process for how individuals with similar attitudes and values automatically join the same group to “remove the dissonance of living in an environment of uninterested events”, and by joining a group, “one joins a way of interpreting events”. Agenda melding is necessary for individuals to reduce social dissonance, and to find the agendas that fit each other.

The concept of agenda melding could provide some interesting insights on this study. The process that large groups of Internet users decided to follow an opinion leader, listen to them, and initiate para-social interactions with the opinion leader could be viewed as joining a group where the Internet users can share similar attitudes and values and avoid dissonance by omitting the information with which they disagree. Based on this concept, Internet users are probably not simply looking for news and information online, they are also seeking out those who share the same attitudes and values; they are not simply passively receiving information that is tailored by different media agendas online, they are actually actively seeking the online agendas that fit their views to “achieve a position or acceptance within social organizations”, and to avoid conflicting or inconsistent information (Shaw et al., 1999).

Opinion leaders, in this study, may represent some very popular “groups” that attract individuals who share the same attitudes and values. Those followers appreciate opinion leaders’ agendas because these are the agendas they feel consonant with, and following opinion leaders and staying in the groups can help them to omit the information and the agendas they disagree with. Such a sense of belonging is very powerful and

protective, and people in the groups were trying to convince newcomers to share the same values and beliefs (Krech et al., 1962; Shaw et al., 1999). Followers' commentary, retweeting and "like"-ing behavior, in the same context, could be explained as ways for them to convince their friends on Weibo. By commenting on tweets, retweeting and clicking "like", followers are not only trying to interact with opinion leaders, they are trying to expand the agendas they believe in, and to enlarge the groups they are in.

The findings in this study suggest that there may be diverse groups among opinion leaders too. The gender differences found in this study imply male and female opinion leaders have different groups concerned with different issues (external issues vs. non-external issues), attitudes (aggressive vs. not aggressive) and values. The negative correlation found between fields of expertise and popularity may suggest that these possible agenda groups are not necessarily built on opinion leaders' fields of expertise, but on the overall agendas these opinion leaders exhibit. Internet users were looking for overall agreement with their views and values, rather than specific topics related or unrelated to opinion leaders' fields of expertise. One Internet user may find the sense of belonging in many different groups to fit his/ her different values and attitudes, and some groups may even overlap on some specific issues. Opinion leaders on Weibo act like the group leader, or group identifier who are authoritative and influential enough to set the agendas in the groups with their own attitudes and values, and attract enough group members to share these attitudes and values.

Although this study suggests that opinion leaders are exercising the roles of agenda setter and gatekeeper, it is tricky to define them as the agenda setter and

gatekeeper. In fact, it is very tricky even to call them the opinion leaders. These influential profiles studied in this research are surely very powerful in affecting other online individuals due to their large amount of followers and the numbers of comments, retweets and “likes” their tweets gathered. However, affecting others is not necessarily “advising” other people, and the realm of topics they mentioned on Weibo is far more than just politics. The online public pays attention to them, consumes the information they disseminate, however, not necessarily agree with them in many cases. The online public isn’t even seeking for advice in certain cases, but they take these profiles’ opinions seriously. Those profiles bring up issues, add their own opinions, publish them online, and people read them and generate their own opinions. Under such circumstance, they are more likely to be the “catalyst” rather than opinion leaders, agenda setters and gatekeepers. They help setting up the agenda by bringing up issues and opinions that the public cares and values, but the online public doesn’t rely on them to know what to think about since there are so many alternative ways to receive the information, and oftentimes, based on observation, their followers may disagree with the profiles on many issues. They are part of the agenda setting process in that they bring about the possible topics and agendas, but without the online public’s attention, there is no way that their agendas will be powerful enough to set the public agenda, and hence, traditional media’s agenda. Moreover, these influential profiles are not trying to They are also partly the gatekeepers in the sense that they filter and tailor the information their followers can read, but they are also not the solely part of the gatekeeping process; they are just the gatekeeper of their own, personal accounts instead of journalistic institutions, the online media or even

j-blogs. Their role of gatekeeper is exercised based on personal values and choices, and more importantly, they are not in completely control to decide what to report and how to report the information; when they retweet, they are re-tailoring the information that is winnowed by someone (or some journalistic or non-journalistic institutions) else already. They are probably not the opinion leaders according to the traditional definition; they are also not the agenda setters as well as gatekeepers by traditional means. However, they do partly exercise these roles by giving out information and affecting their followers on Weibo. Very few existing literature looked into these influential profiles on Weibo, and studies focused on their roles on social media are very limited, and this study implicates that these influential profiles on social media in China may have a unique role in affecting the public that is different from, but related to opinion leaders, agenda setters and gatekeepers.

This study identified several patterns opinion leaders always use to communicate on Weibo, and significant correlations were found between gender, the externality of the issues mentioned and the aggressiveness of the tweets. Fields of expertise were found to be negatively correlated with the popularity of the tweets, and the sample provided scarce data to identify the relationship between fields of expertise and opinion leaders' interaction frequency. The study has several implications. It investigated how previous and current theories on opinion leaders work in the new media environment, especially on social media. It also provides implications on agenda setting theory and the concept of gatekeeping as well as agenda melding in the digital age from a different perspective. It also provides some practical implications on how to understand opinion leaders'

influence on social media as well as how they direct public agendas and opinions online.

The study also gives rise to many possible future studies. Researchers may further explore how opinion leaders' use Weibo, and seek more specific details about their usage patterns as well as potential correlations. For example, studies could look into how topics were related to opinion leaders' gender and the popularity of tweets. Studies can also look into more aspects of tweeting style correlated with opinion leaders' gender. For example, more studies can be done to see how gender is correlated with their behavior on certain topics, such as disasters, government corruption, human rights and so on, or how male and female opinion leaders' online behaviors differ from each other when discussing the same topics. Scholars can also explore the reasons why field of expertise is negatively correlated with the popularity of the tweets, or explore how fields of expertise can affect opinion leaders' communication efficacy on Weibo. Researchers can also expand the research on fitting opinion leaders into different theories and models, and investigate how opinion leaders are changing the traditional agenda setting model, how opinion leaders and traditional media set the agendas differently, or even how opinion leaders and traditional media interact together to set the media agendas and affect public agendas. Studies can also probe how opinion leaders are changing the traditional gatekeeping concept, and see how opinion leaders are challenging the traditional gatekeeping concept on the Internet, or how opinion leaders are performing their gatekeeper role differently from traditional media and how this could affect the online public. Research can also look into how opinion leaders and the online public together affect the traditional gatekeeping process, or investigate how and why the online public

chooses to trust opinion leaders from a cognitive aspect. The potential para-social relationship discussed in this study also may merit further investigation, and scholars can explore how this para-social relationship is different from the para-social relationship found between television anchors, announcers, celebrities and their fans. Studies can also research the potential implicit interactions between opinion leaders and their followers online, or offline, and see how opinion leaders are listening to their followers in different ways. Studies can even investigate some specific situations where the public ceases to trust opinion leaders, and see how the relationship between opinion leaders and their followers change under different circumstances. In addition, these influential profiles unique role on social media in China is also an important topic for future research.

This study identified several opinion leaders' usage patterns on Weibo, and identified the popular topics in their tweets. By investigating how gender and field of expertise can affect opinion leaders' microblog usage behavior and the popularity of their tweets, this study found that opinion leaders are active in writing their original tweets, and retweeting from other people with their own comments. Public affairs and social issues is the most popular topic on their webpages, while they also like to use Weibo for information about their jobs, work and daily errands. However, despite the fact that Weibo is featured for its interactivity, opinion leaders showed very few interactions with their followers. Field of expertise is also negatively related to the popularity of opinion leaders' tweets. The study contributes to the current literatures by bringing new understanding to agenda setting theory, the concept of gatekeeping and agenda melding in the digital age, and the findings may help us better understand how opinion leaders in

China consume and communicate information on Weibo, from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives, and shed light on the influence of opinion leaders' gender and fields of expertise on their communication behavior on Weibo.

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Appendix

I. Codebook

1. User's Name:

2. The gender of the user:

a. Male

b. Female

RQ1&2:

3. This tweet is:

a. An original tweet

b. A retweet only (from other people)

c. A retweet with comments (from other people)

d. A retweet from user's previous tweet

e. A retweet from user's previous tweet with additional comments or information

4. This tweet is about:

a. News (both international & national)

b. Public affairs, heated topics and issues

c. Entertainment / sports

d. Personal life and issues (work, family, friends, etc.)

e. Others

5. Does the user "@" (tag) anyone in his/ her tweet?

a. Yes

b. No

H1:

6. The post mentioned:

- a. International issues, national issues or public related issues or news
- b. The users' personal life or issues, news and information
- c. Both a and b
- d. Others

7. The post mentioned:

- a. Thing(s) that is (are) influential on international, national, provincial or regional levels
- b. Thing(s) that is (are) influential on the user's personal level
- c. Both a and b
- d. Others

8. Does the post mention anything about the user's emotions, feelings, moods or psychological conditions?

- a. Yes
- b. No

H2:

9. Does the user express or retweet criticism or negative information?

- a. Yes
- b. No

10. Does the user express, or retweet sarcastic information?

a. Yes

b. No

11. Does the user use aggressive words in his/ her post, or retweet any post with aggressive words?

a. Yes

b. No

12. Does the user express any negative, depressing feelings, emotions or unsatisfactory psychological conditions in his/ her tweet or retweet?

a. Yes

b. No

13. Does the user express any positive, complimentary information?

a. Yes

b. No

14. Does the user offer any suggestions, advice and help?

a. Yes

b. No

H3:

15. Does the post content related to user's field of expertise?

a. Yes

b. No

16. How many comments the tweet has?

The number of the comments is:

17. How many times the tweet is retweeted?

The number of the times is:

18. How many times the tweet is “liked”?

The number of the times is:

19. How many times the tweet is “collected (收藏)”?

The number of the times is:

H4:

20. Does the post content belong to the user’s field of expertise or not?

a. Yes

b. No

21. How many times does the user reply their tweet’s comments:

The number of the times is:

22. How many times the user @ “tagged” people in his replies or the original post?

The number of the times is: