

Abstract

This paper provides a brief description and exploration of Sina Weibo. In this paper, I will focus on the largest social networking site in China – Sina Weibo. China is a country that has developed rapidly, and this can be seen in many aspects such as the increasing number of Internet users. With an increasing number of Internet users, I think it is essential to conduct some research on the use of language in these mediums. In this paper, I will focus on the largest social networking site in China – Sina Weibo and how Sina Weibo has affected language use by describing some of Sina Weibo's properties and how it has affected language use and society.

1. Introduction

Sina Weibo is a popular Chinese microblogging site. According to official statistics released by the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), China has 854 million Internet users as of June 2019, which is about 25.98 million Internet users more than 2018 (CNNIC, 2019). To put it into perspective, the whole Southeast Asia has about 360 million Internet users in total as of 2019. In 2019, Sina Weibo reported that there are about 486 million active users which meant that over half of China's Internet users are active on this social media giant.

2. Summary of Relevant Literature Review

2.1. Connectivity, Engagement, and Witnessing on China's Weibo (Svensson, 2016)

In a recent paper published by the University of Pennsylvania Press, Svensson explored the use of Sina Weibo in "civic engagement" and looked at different points of view. Svensson noted that people who held more positive views felt that new information and communication techniques (ICTs) such as Sina Weibo encouraged more civic participation such as encouraging China citizens to address issues of public interest online and this made it easier for regular people to bring about attention to societal issues (Svensson, 2016). This brought about huge changes and challenged other communication mediums such as the more traditional way of conveying information like television and radio. On the other hand, people with more pessimistic views found it hard and felt that ICTs such as Sina Weibo did not bring any value and was not effective in communicating the original intention (Svensson, 2016). Some of these pessimists also found that that Sina Weibo even emphasises on the societal divide by advertising privileged actors and *fuerdai* which means "rich second generation" used to describe children of the rich in China. These *fuerdai* are commonly associated with problems relating to privilege and the large income gap in society, and it is a problem that Sina Weibo has become a communication platform to flaunt.

As mentioned earlier, Sina Weibo, which is a communication tool and platform allows the users to engage on social issues and encourages the sharing of views and worries. The content of many of these posts include acts of social justice, opinions on criminal law, and even up to advertisements with famous celebrities (Svensson, 2016). An example can be found below (Figure 1), where a screenshot about COVID-19 has gone viral. Figure 1 shows a post uploaded by a news site regarding a COVID-19 update in Singapore. The post went viral in China, which shows how extensive Sina Weibo has evolved to become such an effective communication tool as information from another country such as Singapore was able to spread and go viral.



Figure 1: Trending post on Sina Weibo regarding COVID-19 (198052 likes, 8632 comments and 1454 shares as of 27 February 2020, 12noon)

2.2. New Media Empowerment and State-Society Relations in China (Shi & Yang, 2016)

The increasing influence of new media like Sina Weibo has resulted to the rise of “imagined micro community”, which means an online community is built on the foundations of Sina Weibo. The spread of information in new media like Sina Weibo is quick and rapid and has the ability of connecting people from different regions (Shi & Yang, 2016). While there is a limit in the number of words that can be posted, Sina Weibo has the quality of empowerment as the common folk are able to have a voice and discussion about topics of public interest can take place. For example, several initiatives such as the “Free Lunch” program also kickstarted due to the impact of Sina Weibo’s empowerment (Shi & Yang, 2016).

3. Properties of Sina Weibo and its effects on communication

An important element of Sina Weibo is similar with Facebook, where it is based on the model of human relations (Porter, 2009). This meant that an individual need not have many friends following them on their account in order to read and comment on their posts. This core property can explain the rapid spread of information on the platform, as many strangers can read and comment on each other’s posts.

3.1. Hashtags

Similar with other forms of social media, Sina Weibo also encourages the use of hashtags. The more the number of hashtags on a specific topic, the higher the topic will be on the list of *re sou*, meaning “hot search” which is then accessible from the front page of the website. The top-ranking hashtags are usually read for billions of times, which shows the reach and influence Sina Weibo has on its users. The idea of vast reach and influence in the nature

of Sina Weibo's communicative methods is also echoed by He, who brought forth an example where a journalist was wanted by a local Chinese Public Security Bureau for being a whistleblower as he reported insider trading of a public company. With the pressure of many Chinese Weibo users, the Bureau eventually withdrew the charges (He, 2017). While this feature brought about positive effects in the example given by He, hashtags in Sina Weibo also resulted in a new industry where this influence can be bought and used for business.



Figure 2: Example of the hot search page (Current no.1 on 27 February 2020 on the page has about 3.7 billion views)

It is a known secret that “hot search” can be bought, which companies make use of when they want to market a new product, or when a celebrity wants to gain more influence which can increase his/her market value. In Figure 3, which is a spreadsheet of official data released by Sina Weibo in 2017 Q4, the price of “hot search” appearing on the main page twice a day and the price of “hot search” appearing on the search bar six times a day is ¥600,000 (approx. SGD119,464.80) (Sina Weibo, 2017).

PC/移动	PC首页&移动发现页	热门搜索包	2轮播/天	¥600,000
PC/移动	搜索榜单页&搜索结果页	微博热搜榜单套装	6轮播/天	¥600,000

Figure 3: Price list released by Sina Weibo in 2017 Q4 for the purchase of hot search

Information collected by a Chinese netizen even showed a list of celebrities who were on “hot search”, and the amount of web traffic each celebrity obtained from the purchase of “hot search”. The traffic obtained by each celebrity can reach up to over 3 billion hits, which can be translated to better business opportunities and better sponsorships. Based on the model of human relations aided by hashtags, this has allowed for a greater reach and faster distribution of content. Overall, we can conclude that Sina Weibo has a very high probability of becoming a main communication tool for “reputation management and community engagement” as stated by Jiang in 2017.

3.2. The Great Firewall of China

The Great Firewall of China is used to regulate information domestically. This meant that not only other sites like Google and Yahoo! are inaccessible, but information on media platforms like Sina Weibo can also be censored should the government find that the content may harm social stability (Roberts, 2018). One of the ways content is regulated on Sina Weibo is through “keyword filtering”, where users are not able to upload content with certain words.

Some users on Sina Weibo have gotten around this by shortening some words or using alphabets to replace these sensitive words. For example, posts talking about the government were abbreviated to “zf”, which is the first two letter of the *pinyin* that makes “government” in Mandarin Chinese. Following Kim Jong Un’s visit to China in 2018, censors also blocked nicknames that were deemed an insulting nature, but users got past these censors by coming up with different variations of the nickname (Wade, 2018). This shows that that posts and comments on Sina Weibo are not just made up of lexical words, but also consists of short forms and abbreviations of different variations.

4. Ways on how Sina Weibo affected society

While Sina Weibo functions as a media outlet and is used for regular communication, in this section we can see how Sina Weibo distributes important information and even plays a role in diplomacy and politics. Sina Weibo provides a platform which allows people to forge connections and share opinions.

4.1. Sina Weibo in Diplomacy

There are about 165 foreign governmental organisations in China that are currently using Sina Weibo (Jiang, 2017). A term called “e-diplomacy” was coined to describe new methods of engaging in diplomacy and international relations with the use of ICTs (Jiang, 2017).

Canada has the largest number of followers on Sina Weibo out of all foreign embassies, while US, Cuba, UK and Korea are also highly ranked (Figure 3).

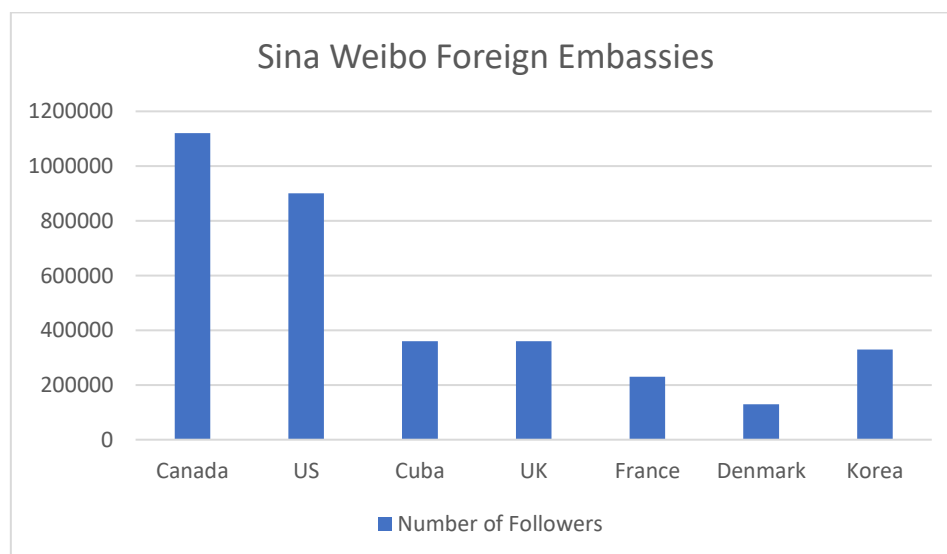


Figure 3: Number of followers for top ranking embassies (Jiang, 2017)

However, the high number of followers and engagement does not equate to a high success in e-diplomacy, as there are many Sina Weibo users who leave negative comments under the posts of some foreign embassies, such as the US embassy's page. Many of these comments have nationalistic sentiment and mainly criticises these foreign countries. Despite that, we can see that with the large number of followers and engagement, Sina Weibo is effective in reaching out to the common folk and is more convenient and cost-efficient than the usual diplomacy efforts. We can note that there is an effort made and some progress seen in e-diplomacy, but further research must be done in the future to see if this effort made will be effective in the long run.

4.2. Sina Weibo in times of need

Sina Weibo users in China were the first group of people to break the news about the Wenchuan Earthquake in May 2008 (Shi & Yang, 2016). Shi and Yang noted that during this national disaster, both new media like Sina Weibo and old media like the state television worked together during relief efforts, and that this natural disaster was significant as it marked the upcoming prominence of new media such as Sina Weibo (Shi & Yang, 2016).

One prominent example of how Sina Weibo affected society can be seen in the case of "ice boy". In 2018, a picture went viral on Sina Weibo (Figure 4), of a nine-year-old boy Wang Fuman who hiked 3 miles to school every day. His teacher uploaded a picture online to commend him for his tenacity, it went viral and Sina Weibo users nicknamed the boy "ice boy". Wang's circumstances caught the attention of many, and help came pouring in the form of donations and free education (Yan, 2018).



Figure 4: Picture of ice boy which went viral (Yan, 2018)

5. Seven Features introduced by Crystal (2006, Ch 3-6)

Speech-like	Text-like
Time bound	Space bound
Spontaneous	Contrived
Face-to-face	Visually decontextualized
Loosely structured	Elaborately structured
Socially interactive	Factually communicative
Immediately revisable	Repeatedly revisable
Prosodically rich	Graphically rich

Figure 5: Seven Features introduced by Crystal (2006)

As mentioned in the section discussing the Great Firewall of China, Sina Weibo show text-like characteristics in being visually decontextualized, as information and content dispensed via Sina Weibo are mostly made up of text and typed words. However, we can observe that due to its limitation of being only able to post a maximum number of 140 words per post (He, 2017), many users enlisted the use of emojis and *biao qing bao* meaning “sticker pack” to be able to convey their emotions and ideas a lot more clearly and succinctly. This limitation then causes Sina Weibo to reflect some characteristics of speech, where facial cues are given.

Also, Sina Weibo is also text-like as it can repeatedly revisable unlike speech-like which is immediately revisable. The user can delete posts and comments and proceed to upload different multiple times. An individual is also able to edit and revise their content before they post it, which is different from speech where a person cannot “edit” their words after voicing it.

In the seven features introduced by Crystal, it is also stated that speech-like is prosodically rich and text-like is graphically rich. It is true that Sina Weibo has the text-like characteristic as the user can portray emotions and ideas through stickers and pictures, which fulfils the graphically rich criteria. However, it is seen that Sina Weibo also has the speech-like characteristics of being prosodically rich as a user can use literary devices such as onomatopoeia such as *weng weng* which means “buzz”, translating to the sound of bees, and the user can also *haha* and *hehe* to imitate sounds of laughter and scorn respectively. This shows that Sina Weibo can have the traits of being speech-like as well.

Public awareness was also raised for darker topics such as human trafficking with a movement *weibo daguai* literally meaning “weibo beat monsters”, going viral due to a successful rescue of a child by a well-known journalist in 2011. Many Chinese local district police stations started posting information about human trafficking, and there was a crackdown on criminal groups where more than 8000 children were rescued. It is noted that the use of photography was the key point in this case, as an influential public figure, Yu Jianrong advocated the movement of “take a photo, save a child”. Users on Sina Weibo took pictures of child beggars and uploaded them on the platform for other users to identify these children (Shi & Yang, 2016). This can also support the argument where Sina Weibo is prosodically rich, as images are enlisted to be used as communication.

6. Conclusion

All in all, Sina Weibo amplifies the speed of travel of information and content, and is extremely influential, encouraging communication and is even involved in matters of politics and business. Looking at the seven features by Crystal (2006), we can conclude that Sina Weibo

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has the characteristics of both speech-like and text-like but leans more to being text-like than speech-like.

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