

## *Weibo : The rise of Chinese internet language*

### **Abstract**

Much has been covered with regards to English mediums of social media and communication but often, Chinese based platforms have been left out of the spotlight yet it is at the same time without a doubt an increasing trend with more and more users in the field, making it an interesting topic to study and analyse. This essay gives an overview of a Chinese social media giant, Weibo and the emerging phenomenon that it has become not just in China but globally, focusing on its features and functions as well as how it has affected language and the internet. This essay will also summarise relevant studies of Weibo and its effects. Also covered, will be a breakdown of Weibo as a platform of communication and analysis of Weibo properties and the impact it has on communication as well as content. Next discussed would be an explanation of Weibo's general effects on society and language as a means of communication and how Weibo brought rise and reinforced new and past modes of communication. Finally, Weibo will be compared to the seven features introduced by David Crystal as a medium of communication in terms of text and speech characteristics.

### **1. Introduction**

Hailed as China's version of Twitter, Weibo as its Chinese characters 微博 names it, started as a microblogging platform in August 2009 by the company, Sina, before it exploded into the social media powerhouse it is today with incorporated functional features. On the social media front, Weibo today has greatly evolved from the initial Twitter like interphase, with only 140 character limit in each post with the ability to post up to 2000 characters now and has taken on Facebook like characteristics with the ability to post pictures, like, share, repost as well as tag locations. Also evolving with the times, Weibo recent new features includes the ability to post stories and livestream much like Instagram, as well as Reddit, Youtube features. It even has an in platform gaming centre to make users stay longer on the platform. Add to this also, that Weibo has come up with its own unique features such as "Super Topics", vlogging and fan vote pages. Transforming into a social media hybrid, essentially Weibo has become an all-in-one platform. All this combined with the lack of foreign social media options has made Weibo one of the biggest social media platforms in China and in recent years, with the increasing influence of China and Chinese entertainment, Weibo has also begun to gain traction globally. On the functional end, Weibo has also enabled new features such as ecommerce, bill paying and functional services, even alerts as seen of the recent Covid-19 outbreak, Weibo has been become an important tool of communication and updates amidst massive chaos, city shutdowns and quarantine activities in China.



*Weibo page example*

## 2. Statistics

On Weibo users, an impressive more than 480 million are active monthly users of Weibo as of the second quarter of 2019 and it is estimated that by 2021, there would be a whopping 418.4 million users of Weibo ("China: number of Sina Weibo users 2017-2021 | Statista", 2020). Sina Weibo is one of the most popular social media platforms and it is estimated that nearly 25% of China's population used Weibo in 2018 ("Weibo Now Used by Nearly 25% of Population in China", 2020). Notable, in recent years, the number of Weibo users has in fact even overtaken the number of Twitter users globally. In particular, Weibo has become so popular that has become one of the main advertising platforms for products, celebrities and companies alike. Most Chinese, especially the young generation and even overseas users would use Weibo to discover trends and promotions as well as the latest news on celebrities as well as political figures. About 130 million words and 1.5 million videos and liver streaming are said to be published on Weibo each day and over 70% of 2.11million US dollars generated by Sina came from advertising revenue on Weibo ("China: number of Sina Weibo users 2017-2021 | Statista", 2020), making it one of the most effective and successful advertising and marketing channels.

## 3. Summary of relevant literature on the medium

Due to the niche nature of the platform and the somewhat exclusive audience that it caters to, not many research and analysis of Weibo as a platform of communication has been done unfortunately especially in English based research. Most studies and journals on Weibo as a platform have been done in Chinese. Here, a brief summary of the relevant Chinese studies and journals on Weibo as a platform based on available Chinese literature names Weibo one of the most influential platforms in this day and age, with the ability to shape and change the future (Yan,2011) with just 140 characters (Israel, 2010). Critically, relevant literature also highlighted the community blogging effect that Weibo has which gathers people all over China and the globe on a single issue and Weibo has demonstrated an amazing ability in this area to unify, broadcast and mobilise people of all demographics over just one trending topic or issue (Wu,2013). All this relates to how Weibo platform and in particular how the language of Weibo allows the fostering of such effects and powerful movements online which the paper would delve into below.

#### 4. Properties of Weibo and its effects on communication

In this section, only key functions of Weibo that has an effect on communication would be discussed. Firstly on the publish function, users of Weibo are able to put up content using blogging tools. In terms of communication, Weibo much like Twitter has shaped user content length with their character count limit. This has resulted in a culture of self-censoring and being succinct in communication as users will have to maximise the word count to express their intended meanings. This has also resulted in the language form on Weibo shifting into a more concise form focused on expression rather than detail. The resulting language use is therefore more straightforward and to the point rather than caring about giving details about the beginning and the end in a chronological fashion with context weaved in. Note that this is a major transformation of language use in terms of the Chinese as the Chinese language traditionally prioritises context and elegance hence is more storytelling in the way words are crafted, but Weibo has clearly shifted and changed this tradition, at least on its platform.



*Examples of Weibo posts*

Next, the forwarding function. Users are able to forward their favourite content. This is a step up from Twitter's retweet function as this function not only allows users to keep the original content they wish to repost to their wall, but crucially it allows users to add comments, reflections and thoughts when reposting. In terms of communication, this is an innovation in language expression as it allows users to express themselves even more concisely or react to something without even the need for context as the reposted content contains the context for readers. A phenomenon also of this feature is also the fact that users can choose to repost without adding any comments. This is interesting to note in communication as the repost still conveys something without or without extra comment simply with the fact that it is reposted to someone's wall already communicates something.

Weibo also has the comment function that allows users to publicly comment/like other user's posts. This was a breakthrough function in which Weibo was one of the first few social media platforms to roll out, allowing users to forge communities and exercise freedom of opinion in communication, enabling a different style of communication that carries out like a conversation about a post in particular. This is also the avenue where users would heavily rely on emojis, stickers, gifs and punctuation like the exclamation mark to convey their feelings. Compared to a more formal post, comments section is where users communicate a more personal level of feeling, hence it is usually less uptight and more casual in nature, resulting in banter like, speech like communication in words.



### *Comments section of Weibo posts*

The hashtag function on Weibo works much like how it does on other social media. It allows users to tag their posts to a particular “topic” ie hashtag and this forms a community on the topic. When one clicks on any one of these linked hashtags, one can find even more posts and more information that have been posted under this hashtag. This has shaped communication in the form of community forging as well as information sharing. Users are excited about posting with hashtags to trend these hashtags and this results in even more engagement on the subject. The hashtag function on Weibo especially is interesting whereby users try to come up with the most interesting hashtags they can in order to popularise it so that it can go on “trending topics”. This often presents itself in quirky hashtags, a lot of punned hashtags and really clever double meaning hashtags, becoming a trademark of Weibo communication.

This leads us to the Trending Topics function where exclusively to Weibo, the Trending Topics page acts like a ranking where the top news, gossips of the day are ranked everyday. It is commonplace now to hear about no.1 on “re4 sou1” – Trending Topics. This ranking is followed religiously by users and is created by users. This has resulted in a communication trend where gossip is amplified and clickbait words are used extensively in hyperbole manner in order to gather enough eyeballs to push the intended topic up the rank. Unlike the hashtag function where it is more information sharing, content sharing, the Trending Topics feature is more like a broadcast system.

Weibo also has a unique Super Topic function that acts like a fan page. These super topics are created by fans of a particular topic, for example coffee. These pages then act as an exclusive online club for users to join and contribute or benefit from. This has created a whole new culture in communication as it encourages community but it also has sparked the trend where people just post and verbal vomit about all the things they know, like, are excited about with regards to this topic. People share about their lives and post pictures, videos, some even drawings, specifically creating content for the Super Topic page almost at an insane frequency to spaz over something or someone and is almost shameless in that communication. This avenue encourages a lot of engagement among users and is constantly refreshing, being a communication outlet of passionate users.

Lastly, the private message function allows users to carry on private conversations among each other or with strangers online across Weibo. This mode of communication is usually personal and for the purpose of making friends and knowing somebody else across a relatively safe platform where they can carry on conversations they cannot carry out by posting or commenting but yet not have to risk giving the other party their numbers etc.

### **5. Modes of (new) communication Weibo has enforced/enabled**

One new way of communicating Weibo has enabled is the Super Topic. As mentioned, it enables users a space to spaz and ramble on about the particular topic and go on and on and on, be it a celebrity, a love for coffee, what they had for breakfast etc. This is a notable trend as it brings internet communication to an intimate level where users are sharing from their lives, from their hearts and not just from a public image. On certain levels, it has encouraged openness in communication and freedom where users are able to communicate comfortably and carry out very niche conversations with people who understand them.

One mode of communication Weibo has enforced is the hashtag function. The hashtag function is so prevalent on Weibo, that every post has at least one hashtag or several hashtags. Weibo has become a breeding ground for hashtags even to a point where users hashtag everything whether it is meaningful or not. In this sense, Weibo has built the hashtag culture and encouraged usage of it. It is worthy to note that rather than a picture speaking a thousand words, now a hashtag speaks a thousand words. One hashtag could mean so many things from encapsulating an event to an emotion. This is partly given rise by the character limit of Weibo's post that led to people coming up with ways to shorten their posts yet still express themselves adequately and hashtags fill in the gap of communication here, becoming a landmark of microblogging and something that occurs naturally in a Weibo post.

### **6. General effects of Weibo on society**

In general, Weibo has largely infiltrated the Chinese community and everyone who has something to say or something to find out goes on Weibo. This has led to a huge lifestyle shift where most become heavily reliant on Weibo for news, updates and entertainment. For example, the COVID-19 outbreak in China is being closely monitored and reported on on Weibo by both officials and citizens alike. Weibo has shown itself to be a big crisis relief in terms of communication in this critical period with live updates and information being pushed about COVID-19, areas of emergency, where to look for help, the next steps and even gathering donations online for victims. This has shown Weibo as a reliable form of communication, almost acting like a safety net that has the Chinese believing in the system and being able to access information and communicate through Weibo.

Another social phenomenon is the above mentioned Trending Topics. This ranking has done so well for itself in China that it has become the ranking to look out for. As a method of communication, being on Trending Topics automatically signals importance and headliner, immediately directing eyeballs from all over the country. This effect has been groomed

through Weibo in users overtime and has unconsciously shaped the way information is transmitted. This therefore also led to cases where people or organisations create targeted content for Trending Topics, because it is effective in leading the opinion of the Chinese community. Most Chinese will scroll through the Trending Topics page to look for the latest gossip and news whether celebrity wise, politics wise or other quirky tales. Anybody or anything that ends up on Trending Topics is a big deal and more emphasis as well as priority is deemed to it. This shows the influence Weibo has on society where it is indispensable as a platform of news and information, showing also that the Trending Topics page communicates what is in the hearts of users and what they are most concerned about.

### **7. General effects of Weibo on language**

In general, Weibo has affected language in such a way that it has mainly taken context out of the form of writing. With its eclectic mix of features such as comments, repost, hashtags and word character count, Weibo has shaped a culture of reaction in communication where it prompts users to react and enables them to miss out on the context, the story telling and other cumbersome issues, keeping their experience in communication short yet efficient. Weibo affects the language style of users as a whole, where grammar is of no importance and generally emotive and personal feelings are conveyed. Sentence length is usually short and sweet with the tone being highly informal and more relaxed. However, on the other hand, due to the geographic nature of Weibo, which China is infamous for, much censorship is still applied and this also affects the language style and culture of Weibo. Most would shy away from expressing anything negative about the government or the system. If anyone does use Weibo for these purposes, it usually is also quickly censored and the person promptly dealt with, usually ending up with a public apology. This therefore also shaped a style of communication whereby users focus on the frivolous and tend not to make too much comments especially negative ones about serious issues, showing their awareness of the censorship on Weibo.

### **8. Seven features introduced by Crystal (Ch 3-6)**

For a start, when evaluating the features of Weibo as a medium of communication in terms of speech-like and text like characteristics – is Weibo space bound or time bound in nature (Bond,2014)? With regards to Weibo, I would argue that it has both space bound and time bound features. Space bound wise, similar to Twitter, the micro-blogging posts including comments and reposts are restricted in word count and much like writing is relatively permanent and stays on the page unless the user should decide to delete it. These functions exist above and beyond the control of time and is not affected by the time factor. Weibo posts and comments are also space bound in the sense that there is restricted space it is posted to, whether be it a directed address or comment reply with the @ function, or just a post directed at no one in particular but within the space of the user's wall or within a fanpage, it is still confined to a space. However, functions on Weibo like live vlogging and stories function is very much like Instagram stories, time bound as they only exist for a limited period of time before it disappears from one's account and page. This is the reason Weibo is successful as it

effectively combines the myriad of features offered on other platforms, making it comprehensive yet efficient for users with only one platform.

Next, on spontaneity (Bond, 2014), again Weibo demonstrates a range of spontaneity. For instance with the posts and comments, even with stories, much like traditional text writing, there is a gap between posting and people reading it, demonstrating less spontaneous. However with the current technology advancements and how quickly people are accessing information online with notifications and reminders, this could be debatable. As for the live vlogging, it exhibits great spontaneity as it runs live and things happen and are being watched on the go, very much speech like, simulating a real time ongoing conversation between users.

Thirdly, while traditionally much like Twitter, Weibo tends to gravitate towards being more visually decontextualized due to the text like nature of posts, recent years and new functions have gradually moved it towards being face to face, for example, the most direct form would be in terms of videos and live vlogging. As well as with the introduction of pictures, emojis, stickers and gifs, one could argue that the extralinguistic cues portrayed and that could be derived from these features are face to face occurrences as they may project speech like characteristics such as facial expressions and internal feelings.

Also, Weibo communication is very loosely structured in the sense that the language is very informal and in fact kind of messy if an unfamiliar individual were to read the posts filled with an array of tags and hashtags. It exemplifies a freedom to post however way you like in terms of style. The Weibo posting style is very casual and other than being restricted to a word count, fairly eclectic, allowing all kinds of language styles, conjunctions, recursions, reduplication, slang, obscenity etc like speech conversations or even formal tone, language and style if the user chooses to be.

On the socially interactive part, Weibo is definitely at the forefront of being socially interactive. Specifically, Weibo exhibits speech like qualities in maintaining social interactivity on the front of building social relationships and networks. Weibo is also particularly strong on the community forging part with its extensive fan pages, super topics, topics and trending topic features, showcasing the strong imprint of Asian values ingrained from the core culture even on a social media platform in communication.

Moreover, one interesting fact on revisability of Weibo posts is that it is a locked function available only to paying VIPs. For paying VIP users, posts are immediately revisable and repeatedly revisable, however it is not so for non-VIP users. Non VIP users are only allowed the option of deleting the post and then reposting it manually. This highlights a commercial strategy of Weibo to capitalise on the trend of human communication online in this day and age where the almost compulsive need to revise errors and remove errors in communication is high priority for users that they would be willing to pay for the function.

Lastly, Weibo is definitely graphically rich with its abundance of images, videos, gifs, stickers and even games available in the various features. One could also argue that Weibo is

also rich in prosody in the sense that voice such as loudness in capital letters and feelings like excitement etc can be illustrated with text and hashtags, or stickers. Sounds such as “oof” could also be mimicked and enunciated in words, giving rise to speech like qualities in Weibo.

## 9. Conclusion

All in all, as a means of communication, Weibo offers a comprehensive and efficient avenue to access and broadcast information as well as content, making waves in advertising dollars. Weibo also presents an all in one solution for users of every kind and to satisfy every need. It seeks to be both the informal entertainment as well as the serious news source, official source that is trustworthy and Weibo has achieved considerable success on this front easily transiting between styles of communication and information sharing. Weibo thus offers a glimpse of what communication could be like on the internet in the future beyond China. In fact, Weibo is expanding beyond China with global users increasing every day and the presence of foreign celebrities on Weibo and the uptake of Weibo slang a testimony of its social media presence and prowess. Weibo just might be the future - a trendsetter and model of communication on the internet.

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