Zhihu – China's Social Q&A Platform

1. Introduction

Zhihu is an essentially useful social platform in China, usually used for social questions and answer sessions, often called Community Question Answering Sites (CQA). Zhihu was established in 2011, January. The slogan of the website carries a message to its users to share their knowledge, put forward their ideas, and talk about their experiences in life. The users on Zhihu are largely promoted to exchange their queries so that the provision of knowledge becomes easier. The platform has always protected the freedom of expression and freedom of speech of people. Considering this, it is not a wonder that 160 Million users were registered online till the 2nd quarter of 2018. In the past two years, a significant increase of 96.5% has been observed in the number of users. Additionally, the platform has diversified its services and now includes a Zhihu column, roundtable, live chat, and Zhihu bookstore. The image below shows the features of the website.


Source: (Dudarenok, 2018)

2. Literature Review Summary

Zhihu officially started undertaking the registrations for business accounts in 2016. It was observed in May of 2018 that over 15,000 business accounts were operable on the website (Dudarenok, 2018). These facts and figures point towards the frequency of use of Zhihu among its users. when Zhihu started registering business profiles in 2018, it was on its way to becoming one of the largest marketing platforms in China. This can be attributed to two main reasons. Firstly, the platform ranks high on Baidu - China's best and most advanced search engine (Wei, 2017). Due to this factor, marketers, and businesses specifically chose to attract customers on Zhihu because they understand the importance of SEO and the platform ranking on the top search results. It allows them to find new customers and engage with people who do not even belong to the Zhihu community themselves (Cai, et al., 2018). Secondly, most of the users on Zhihu belong to educational, wealthy, and strong backgrounds. Businesses usually seek such individuals with great purchasing powers to market their products. Consequently, several businesses register themselves on Zhihu and embark on a journey to

maximize their profits (Dudarenok, 2018). Jin, et al. concluded that the user behavior on Zhihu is associated with the provision of knowledge. Self-presentation, peer recognition, and social learning capabilities display a positive association with the prospect of knowledge.
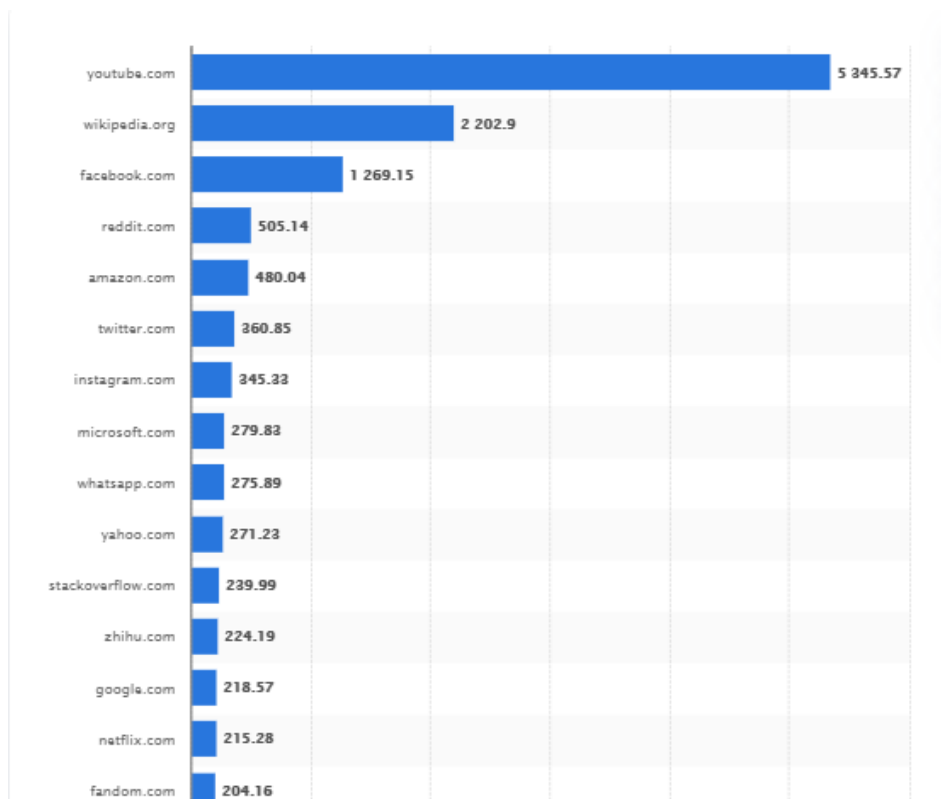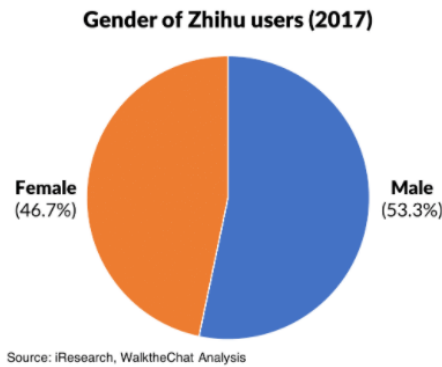

Source: (Johnson, 2021)

The image above shows that Zhihu generated over 224.9 billion global visits.

3. Properties of Medium and its Effect on Language
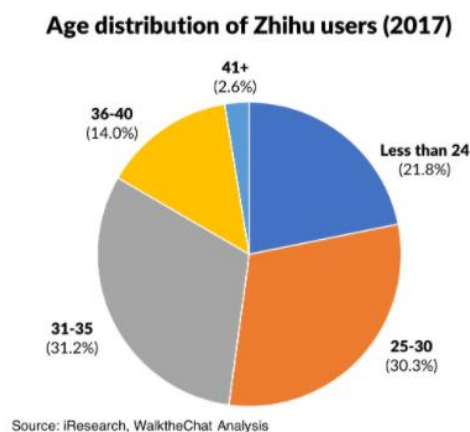
3.1. The Wide Range of Topics at Zhihu:

When Zhihu was introduced in 2011, it was limited to a specific audience. However, as the platform grew, it attracted several users from all sorts of educational backgrounds and cultures (Guana, et al., 2018). People from backgrounds of business, law, sociology, medicine, fields of science, and technology came together on one platform not only to ask questions and seek answers but also to exchange their opinions, experiences, and thoughts. The platform benefited each user directly or indirectly (Gao, et al., 2020). People on Zhihu, since then, tend to engage in formal writing on the website, engage in hot topics related to business, management, and law, and often conduct live chats to further the exchange of information (Denga, et al., 2020). All in all, the social platform has been a medium of transmission of knowledge among the people belonging to China. It is also surprising to notice that Zhihu has a larger user profile owned by males (Graziani, 2018). Almost 53% of users are males as shown in the figure below.

Gender of Zhihu users (2017)

Female
(46.7%)

Male
(53.3%)

Source: iResearch, WalktheChat Analysis

Source: (Graziani, 2018)

Wang, et al. (2019) conducted empirical research to understand the topics of knowledge that will further gain popularity on Zhihu in the upcoming future. The researchers concluded that the topics of Business, Science, and Technology will be the most discussed on the platform in the upcoming years and will gain network attention from other platforms as well. The evidence suggests that Zhihu, as a social media platform gaining excessive popularity throughout China, should focus on these topics of potential to increase the provision of knowledge and stay true to the slogan. Firstly, Zhihu should introduce well-known celebrities or personalities from industries to the platform, keeping under consideration each potential hot topic. Moreover, Zhihu should also provide recognition to the answerers who engage frequently in replying to the queries of other people and formal writing. Both of these measures, as dictated by the researchers, will allow the provision of high-quality content – the type of content Zhihu has committed itself to.

Age distribution of Zhihu users (2017)

41+
(2.6%)

36-40
(14.0%)

Less than 24
(21.8%)

31-35
(31.2%)

25-30
(30.3%)

Source: iResearch, WalktheChat Analysis

Source: (Graziani, 2018)

The image shows that the most engaging community of Zhihu is between the age of 31-35, which is a plus point for marketers as people of these ages usually have great decision-making abilities and show positive buying behavior.

3.2. The Use of Images at Zhihu – The Discussion-seeking Behavior of the Users:

Deng, et al. (2019) researched the use of images on two separate platforms, Zhihu and Baidu Zhidao. The findings of the literature concluded several key factors about the audience present at Zhihu. It revealed that the users at Zhihu tend to engage in a discussion-seeking behavior through the use of images, rather than a simple information-seeking behavior. This serves to imply that the users mostly look for multiple opinions, experiences, and thoughts on one specific topic. The research also suggested that users often engage in putting forth their questions and queries in a 'horizontal manner'. This defines that users not only seek to find factual information through their use of appropriate questions; they also seek to explore all dimensions of the factual data through their use of images and graphics.

3.3. The Anonymity at Zhihu:

One major factor about Zhihu is that the identity of users is often privatized and kept anonymous unless the users choose otherwise. In this regard, the community of Zhihu is allowed to put forward their ideas and experiences without revealing their personal and private information. In this way, the community establishes a culture of continuous freedom of thoughts, speech, and actions. No member of the platform is judged or disregarded. Therefore, it is not a surprise that the number of users is increasing and Zhihu now displays vast information regarding all topics and many experiences from the members about all departments of life. All in all, the platform has built a loving, interactive, and confident community (Chen & Deng, 2014).
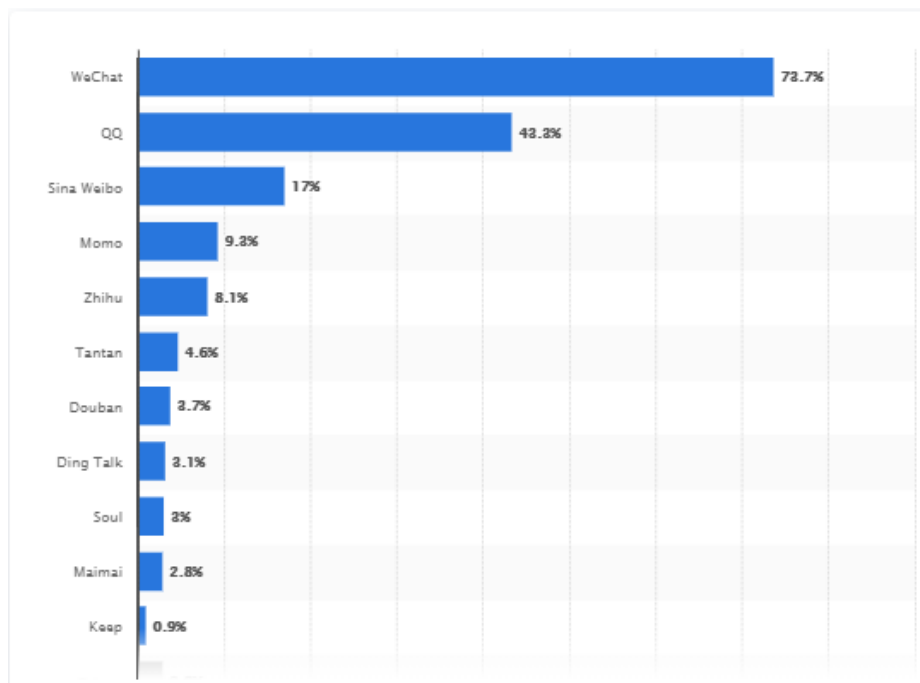
Source: (Thomala, 2019).
The image above shows that Zhihu is the 5th most used app by mobile phone users in China. 8.1% of people engage in continuous interactions on the platform.

4. Zhihu's New Communication Medium – The Live Chat Feature

Zhihu has already established a Roundtable feature where experts gather to talk about potential subjects. Furthermore, Zhihu's Column feature allows users to post longer articles. Besides that, the platform also has a Live feature. The feature is used by tutors mostly for educational purposes. The implication is of the one-to-many form. The tutors can often conduct elongated sessions and cover a wide range of topics and concepts. In this way, the provision of knowledge is enhanced by the Live Feature of Zhihu, and more concepts are covered in lesser durations (Wang, et al., 2019).

What are users on Zhihu for?

Reason	Percentage
New knowledge and self improvement	71%
Follow topics that are of interest	68%
Professional expertise	66%
Interact with like-minded people	44%
Sharing own experience and knowledge	43%
Entertainment	33%
Pre-purchase information search	31%
Read trending news	28%
As a pastime	27%
To build relationships with power users	20%

Source: (Graziani, 2018)

The image above shows the reasons users tend to choose to be on Zhihu.

5. Zhihu's General Effects on Language

The effects of Zhihu on the Chinese language have not been adverse. Instead, the social platform has increased the ability of people to engage in conversational tones and formal language tones. In this manner, the users have engaged in language-enhancing skills. They have developed significant vocabulary and proceed to engage in formal conversation styles, developing linguistic skills for the future. The use of language is very particular. Hence, people often tend to avoid the use of slang and abbreviations as these factors usually damage the purpose of knowledge transmission. Zhihu is a part of the machinery that offers enhancing skills to its users. The articles on Zhihu Column are also a great way for users to improve their language reading and writing abilities and acquire information at the same time.

6. Effects of Zhihu on the Society

The platform has had brilliant effects on society. Firstly, it has allowed the members of society to engage in conversations and interact with other people while talking about their areas of expertise. In this way, the Q&A feature has proven to be a great help. Secondly, it has increased connectivity and has also facilitated the ease of conversation. The Q&A feature and the live feature allow people to connect anonymously and face-to-face, online,

respectively. This has facilitated several lecturers, presenters, and tutors in conducting educational courses, classes and engage with the students at the same time. Overall, Zhihu is a great help to the society, considering that it keeps every member of the community well-informed and well-educated, forwarding the growth of Chinese society as a whole. Additionally, Zhihu is one of the best marketing platforms in China. Due to this reason, it has connected businesses and organizations with each other, with existing customers, and with other potential customers. The growth of the economy is, hence, promoted by Zhihu, which further enhances the growth of the society. The marketers often engage in conversations with their customers and provide deals over the platform. Therefore, Zhihu has transformed Chinese society by making it feasible for people to engage in conversations, lectures, purchases, etc. A sense of connectivity has developed in the society which has promoted the development.

7. the Seven Features by Crystal (2007) for Zhihu

Speech	Extent	Text	Extent
Time Bound	No	Space-bound	Yes
Spontaneous	No	Contrived	Yes
Face-to-Face	Varying degree	Visually Decontextualized	Yes
Loosely Structured	No	Elaborated Structure	Yes
Socially Interactive	Varying Degree	Factually Communicative	Yes
Immediately Revisable	Varying Degree	Repeatedly Revisable	Yes
Prosodically Rich	Varying Degree	Graphically Rich	Yes

Source: (Crystal, 2007)

The Table above is based on the Seven Features of Text and Speech introduced by Crystal (2007). Zhihu is a text-like platform as it displays space-bound texts transferred over different locations, accessible by all people living in different locations. The texts on Zhihu employ the use of graphics and images in a well-regulated pattern as explored above, i.e. only to initiate discussions. Considering this, the texts and articles are graphically rich, have an elaborate structure, and can be revised several times by the authors. On the other hand, if Zhihu is

considered a speech-like platform, several features show varying degrees. This is because of the live feature of conversation that Zhihu has introduced. The face-to-face interaction, is, therefore, limited but present through online means. The facial expressions of people can be judged easily through live chat. This feature also allows users to interact with each other to a limited extent. Therefore, social interaction is also not completely absent. As people talk on the live chat, the immediately revisable feature is present because the tutors can rectify the errors in speech online and rephrase immediately based on feedback. However, it is available to a limited extent, and errors cannot be withdrawn once spoken. Lastly, live interaction allows people to talk, vary their tones, behaviors, tempo, rhythm, etc. Hence, making the experience somewhat prosodically rich.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, Zhihu is a brilliant platform and facilitates the transmission of knowledge, promotes societal and economic growth to a great degree, aids in educational courses, and allows users to interact socially. All in all, it serves the function of a text-like platform. It is, however, a speech-like platform to a very minor degree.

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