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Sharing as “frands”: Personified branding strategies on social networks sites in China

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Abstract

Prior research on social network sites (SNSs) has focused on interpersonal communication on Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace. Much less is known about the use of SNSs beyond the individual level and outside of the American context. This study fills in the gaps by offering insight into the personified use of interactive features on SNSs by organizations in China for branding purposes. Based on the notion of the social affordances of technologies, we conducted a content analysis of the presence and activities of 98 organizations on a popular Chinese SNS and identified 15 interactive features, including profile related features (e.g., status updates, discussion board, message forwarding) and social game related features (e.g., game players, raffles, virtual goods). The results of our statistical analysis indicated that the more interactive features that an organization used, the more page visits and fans it attracted and the more electronic word of mouth (eWOM) behavior occurred. All of these interactive features helped personify the organizations as friends to their fans, followers, service users, and

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potential customers, which created a new form of organization–public communication: sharing as “frands.”

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Introduction

Since the late 1990s, social network sites (SNSs) have grown exponentially in popularity and diversity among Internet users around the globe (boyd and Ellison, 2007; Papacharissi, 2011). They have been typically defined as a public or semi-public space created in the form of a profile by a registered individual user as a means to share information with a self-articulated network of personal connections and social ties (boyd and Ellison, 2007). The use of SNSs is becoming integral to everyday lives (Baym, 2010; Hargittai and Hsieh, 2011). Prior research on SNSs has focused on self-expression, social dynamics, and cultural identities in the context of mediated interpersonal communication on prominent U.S.-based SNSs such as MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter (*e.g.*, Donath, 2007; Ellison, *et al.*, 2007; Gilpin, 2011; Liu, 2007; Mendelson and Papacharissi, 2011). Although SNSs can be used internally in an organization, we were interested in how different organizations use SNSs as an interactive media platform for PR and marketing. In particular, this study offers insights into the social affordances of SNSs for branding purposes and how personified use of interactive features on SNSs have the potential to blur the lines between brands and friends and to contribute to the building of online communities through “franding” practices in China.

We begin this paper with an overview about the notion of affordance and its extension to new technologies, online communities, and SNSs, which led to our proposed research question about the features used by organizations on SNSs for branding purpose. After reviewing the research on interactivity and authenticity in the brand communities literature, we hypothesize that personified use of interactive features will help organizations to achieve more page visits, fans, and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) behavior on SNSs. We then summarize the literature on the scalability, activity, and creativity of social media use, especially SNSs use, in China to justify our choice of study site and our intention to broaden the understanding of communicative practices related to SNSs in a different cultural context. We then present the methodology, results of our content analysis, and conclude with implications for future research.



Literature review and research inquiries

The social affordances of SNSs

The notion of *affordance*, originally proposed by Gibson (1977) and appropriated by Norman (1988), refers to the possibilities of interaction between an agent and an object, enabled by their inherent characteristics. Scholars have extended this concept to include the *social affordances of technology* as a means to explore the relationship between technological environments and the social interactions enabled therein (e.g., Bradner, 2001; Brander, et al., 1999; Hutchby, 2001). It is important to understand that the design of a technology may dictate what users can or cannot do with it (Mitchell, 1995). Similarly, Lessig (2006) has advocated that code is law, emphasizing that the technological architecture can regulate social behaviors, enabling certain activities while prohibiting others.

Wellman and colleagues (2003) have argued that the social affordances of the Internet include increased bandwidth, continuous and glocal connectivity, wireless portability, and personalized platforms and that they contribute to a network society through individual's everyday communicative practices. Technology has always been an indispensable part of community building, even in the traditional and physical sense (Appadurai, 1995). New media and communities based on new media, however, offer a different sense of persistence and periodicity, reformulation of boundaries, and support for avid user engagement and authoring (Mynatt, et al., 1998; Ruhleder, 2002). Recently, Parks (2011) has proposed that, because SNSs offer an easy entry for lasting memberships, customized tools for personal expression, and a wide variety of communication channels for social connection, they can be viewed and studied as virtual communities.

These conceptual arguments and empirical findings suggest that SNSs, given their nature as Web-based social spaces, can provide organizations with unique opportunities and ways to communicate with the public. A public, to some extent, can be seen as an imagined community (Anderson, 2006). Ito (2008) termed SNSs *networked publics*, which she defined as “a linked set of social, cultural, and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with digitally networked media.” boyd (2011) delineated the unique features of SNSs as online profiles, articulation of friend lists, and tools for public communication. Based on the unique qualities of digital media and communication (Negroponte, 1995), boyd (2011) noted that the distinct structural affordances of SNSs include persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability. These affordances of SNSs apply to not only individual users, but organizations as well. What remains unclear, however, are the options on SNSs available for organizations and how they can be used to create positive images and attract public interest. As such, the following research question was proposed:

RQ: What features on SNSs are used by organizations?

Technosociality of brand communities

People are attracted to online brand communities for various reasons. Some see them as an efficient way to obtain information about certain organizations or their products and services, some simply enjoy interacting with people of shared interests, and still others want to take advantage of the opportunity to vent their negative feelings and to express personal concerns (de Valck, *et al.*, 2009; Hennig-Thurau, *et al.*, 2004; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Kozinets (1999) provided a useful typology of virtual communities of consumption, arguing that Internet users join such communities based on individual goals and perceived interrelationships between their personal identity, social identity, and brand identity. Depending on how central the consumption activity is to a person’s self-construal and how important it is for the person to be linked to the community, members can be categorized as tourists, devotees, minglers, and insiders. These different objectives dictate their participatory behavior orientation toward information, recreation, social interaction, and community transformation (Kozinets, 1999).

Before SNSs became popular, consumers voluntarily developed brand communities on the Internet to exchange information, share experiences, establish a common identity, and develop a sense of belonging (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Organizations hosted commercial online communities to elicit consumer opinions, cultivate a loyal fan base, facilitate knowledge contribution, and harness social and economic capital (Wiertz and Ruyter, 2007). Studies indicate that organization–public communication can help boost sales, strengthen brand loyalty, and reduce the cost of customer support (Algesheimer, *et al.*, 2005; Thompson and Sinha, 2008; Wiertz and Ruyter, 2007).

The diversity of technological features provided on SNSs is conducive to initiating and nurturing direct and indirect interactions between organizations and the public. Thus, organizations strive to adopt all possible media platforms to increase their public exposure, establish a positive image, and engage existing and potential members. As SNSs are being incorporated into people’s everyday lives, it is likely that the “franding” practices on SNSs can lead to longer-term user engagement and commitment to organizations and their brands. The capacity of building brand communities in such a social space can also have profound implications in terms of strong brand–consumer relationships (McAlexander, *et al.*, 2002) as well as competent and continued brand use (Schau, *et al.*, 2009).

Such techno–sociality of brand communities primarily benefits from the interactive features on the Web sites. Research has found a correlation between the number of interactive features on a Web site and users’ perceptions of advertisements and their attitudes toward products (Sundar and Kim, 2005). A study on the consumer communities of the top 100 global brands demonstrated that the more interactive features brand community Web sites used, the more visitors they attracted, and the more comments and messages were posted on their Web sites (Meng, *et al.*, 2010). Although research on brand communities in the context of SNSs is rather sparse and simply descriptive (*e.g.*, Kuhn and Burns, 2008), the literature on virtual communities of consumption suggests that interactions between organizations and the public are tied to personal social networks and playful online activities can only enhance the social glue for the brands and their friends. Based on this, the following research hypotheses were proposed:

H1: The more interactive features on SNSs that an organization uses, the more page visits it will receive.

H2: The more interactive features on SNSs that an organization uses, the more fans it will have.

Because information is digitally recorded and stored on the Web, information sharing is as easy as a simple click. A popular sharing practice in brand communities is electronic word of mouth (eWOM), to which some refer as “word of mouse.” When information comes from trustworthy sources, the user’s beliefs and attitudes are more likely to be influenced (Slater and Rouner, 1996). SNSs can harness existing and readily available personal networks and render information credible by the endorsement of one’s friends and family. When news, photos, messages, and comments about an organization and its brand products are forwarded to a multitude of SNS users at virtually no cost, the effect of eWOM can be quickly multiplied (de Valck, *et al.*, 2009; Hennig-Thurau, *et al.*, 2004; Mabry and Porter, 2010). Studies have found eWOM to be an effective strategy for persuasion and marketing (*e.g.*, de Valck, *et al.*, 2009; Hung and Li, 2007). Yet, simply putting positive content about a brand product on its official Web site may not provide any additive effect (Sussan, *et al.*, 2006). SNSs can function as a hybrid marketing platform of mass media, mediated, and interpersonal communication (Chu, 2009; Razzaque, 2011; Williamson, 2006). Not only can consumers’ disclosure of brand-related experiences, opinions, and feelings carry certain authenticity and intimacy similar to personal selling in traditional marketing contexts, the volume and diversity of such information may have significant influence on the decision-making processes as well. Based on this, the following research hypothesis was proposed:

H3: The more interactive features on SNSs that an organization uses, the more eWOM it will achieve.

“Franding” on social media in China

China, with a population of 1.3 billion, has always been seen as an attractive business market by global investors. In spring 2008, China surpassed the United States in the number of Internet users (Barboza, 2008). In 2009, the Chinese “netizens” spent more than one billion hours per day online, which is double the daily total in the United States (Michael and Zhou, 2010). China has 210 million SNS users, with a 20 percent growth rate (China Internet Network Information Center, 2010), as compared to 88 million SNS users and an 11 percent growth rate in the United States (Walsh, 2009). Data suggest that the use of SNS in China is both more frequent and profound than that of the United States.

More importantly, 40 percent of Chinese Internet users create original content on social media whereas only about 21 percent do so in the United States (Tobin, 2010). In addition, 47 percent of Chinese users access SNSs through mobile phones (China Internet Network Information Center, 2010), while only 11 percent of American users utilize the same method (ComScore, 2010). Temple (2011) reported that, due to better integration

of multiple-layer applets and means of access, popular Chinese SNSs might be so competitive that they can soon take the place of Facebook in the global market.

OgilvyOne (2010) reported on the vitality and dynamic of branding market on SNSs in China. This report indicated that social media users in China ranked following and friending brands as the second most popular social media activity in which they participate. Specifically, 87 percent of social media users in China follow and friend brands on SNSs; and, 61 percent reported having made an online purchase based on their engagement with branding organizations on social media. Such “franding” experiences hold great potential for high return on investment of marketing as seen in the fact that not only would 42 percent of the SNS users consider a brand for purchase, but almost one in every three would eventually place the order, with an additional 13 percent recommending the brand to their friends. Moreover, 21 percent make and share videos about products or brands (OgilvyOne, 2010). Given the scalability, activity, and creativity of the social media scene in China, we chose to study a Chinese SNS.



Methods

Sample selection

Kaixin001 was founded in February 2008 and has since become one of the most popular SNSs in China, with more than 70 million registered users at the end of 2009 (B. Cheng, personal communication, 15 January 2010). Kaixin001 incorporated digital gaming elements on its Web site, which attracted enormous public attention and user activity in 2009. Kaixin001 also was one of the first SNSs to offer features that afford the presence of organizations on SNSs. On 15 June 2009, Xinhua TV created the first organizational profile on Kaixin001. Within nine months, over 200 organizations had joined Kaixin001 and started using the interactive features on its Web site. Among them, five categories of commercial organizations are of interest to this study: (a) mass media groups; (b) recreational services; (c) popular portals; (d) automobiles; and, (e) electronics.

A systematic sampling strategy (Krippendorff, 2004) was used to select a representative subset of the organizations. In each category, every other organization (*i.e.*, half of the population) was selected for our content analysis, with a final sample of 98 organizations. These organizations included 65 mass media groups, 14 recreational services, three popular portals, 10 automobile companies, and six electronics companies. Of these organizations, a range of 7–14, with an average of 11 organizations joined Kaixin001 each month during the first nine months after it launched features for organization–public communication (see [Figure 1](#)).

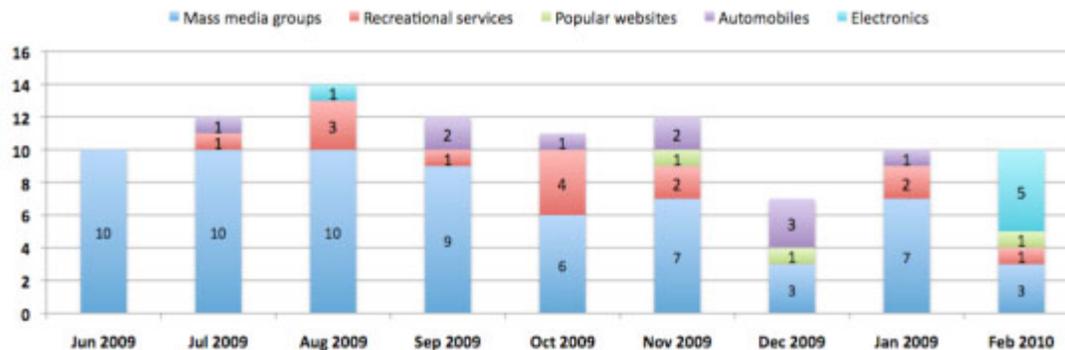


Figure 1: Organizational presence on Kaixin001 by number, type, and time (N=98).

Coding procedure

A comprehensive coding scheme was developed using both deductive and inductive approaches (Neuendorf, 2002). First, a preliminary coding sheet was created from the literature on interactive marketing, Internet advertising, online interface design, branding, and relational public relations (Coviello, *et al.*, 2001; Dou and Krishnamurthy, 2007; Hollis, 2005; Kuhn and Burns, 2008; Zeng, *et al.*, 2009). The results included interactive marketing features in terms of multimedia (*e.g.*, photos, videos, audios), text content (*e.g.*, news updates, about), loyalist support (*e.g.*, fan group, discussion forum, message forwarding), online gaming, and other features such as polls and entries for promotions and prizes.

Second, two graduate students were recruited as research assistants for this project. They were both native Chinese and had been actively using features on Kaixin001 for more than five months. Together with the second author, they engaged in extensive browsing of organization profiles, discussed their participant observations at weekly meetings, and, based on their observations, modified the coding scheme with more specific features used in social gaming environments, such as raffles and contests.

Once the coding scheme was finalized, the two research assistants were trained in content coding. They practiced the coding procedure on 10 organizations that actively used the interactive features on Kaixin001. The entire coding process took place from 15 February to 6 April 2010. During this time, the two coders logged in on Kaixin001 and coded the same organizations on the same date. This synchronous coding ensured that the Web pages being coded were the same for both coders (Dou and Krishnamurthy, 2007). Intercoder reliability was measured using Cohen’s Kappa (Krippendorff, 2004). For all the variables coded, the reliability between the two coders ranged from .73 to 1.00, with a mean of .83. Any disagreements between the coders were resolved at their weekly meetings with the authors.

Measurement

Independent variable. For each organization in our sample, the research assistants coded all of the interactive features on Kaixin001 (0 = not used, and 1 = used by the organization). A new variable was then computed as the total number of features used by an organization and used as the independent variable for hypothesis testing.

Dependent variables. Three dependent variables were used in this study:

1. The number of page visits indicated on an organization’s profile page was recorded and then converted into a 5–point ordinal scale (1=fewer than 20,000 page visits, 2=20,000 to fewer than 80,000 page visits, 3=80,000 to fewer than 200,000 page visits, 4=200,000 to fewer than 500,000 page visits, and 5=500,000 page visits or more) based on percentile markers.
2. The number of fans indicated on an organization’s profile page was recorded and then converted into a 5–point ordinal scale (1=fewer than 15,000 fans, 2=15,000 to fewer than 35,000 fans, 3=35,000 to fewer than 80,000 fans, 4=80,000 to fewer than 150,000 fans, and 5=150,000 fans or more) based on percentile markers.
3. eWOM behavior was measured by the number of users who forwarded messages posted by an organization. Because some organizations posted multiple messages per day, and different messages were forwarded by a different number of users, an aggregated scale was created (0=no users, 1=fewer than 100 users, 2=100 to fewer than 1,000 users, 3=1,000 to fewer than 2,000 users, 4=2,000 to fewer than 5,000 users, 5=5,000 users or more who forwarded messages posted by the organization).

Control variable. The timing that an organization joined Kaixin001 could influence its page visits, fans, and eWOM. Therefore, the number of months that an organization had been present on Kaixin001’s Web site at the time of data collection was coded and used as a control variable in the multiple regressions.



Results

Interactive features on SNSs

The first goal of this study was to investigate what interactive features on SNSs were used by organizations for branding. We identified a total of 15 interactive features used by organizations on Kaixin001 (see [Table 1](#)). The number of features used by an organization ranged from one to nine, with a mean of 5.01 ($SD=1.62$). Of the 15 features, six were based on the organization’s profile page: status updates, discussion board, message forwarding, polls, photo sharing, and announcements. There were also seven features related to social games: game player, contest, raffle, game element, logo, background, and virtual goods. In addition, organizations used banner ads and fan groups.

Table 1: Interactive marketing features used by organizations on SNS
 Note: N=98.

	Feature	Description	Usage
Profile page	Status update	Organization posted status updates on its profile page open to comments	100.0%
	Discussion board	Organization had a public discussion board on its profile page; topic thread can be initiated by the organization, its fans, consumers, or any other SNS users on the site	80.6%
	Message forwarding	Organization forwarded messages to its fans and followers and recorded on its profile page	80.6%
	Public opinion poll	Organization hosted public opinion polls about their products, services, etc. on its profile page and SNS users could participate and comment using their real names or anonymously	72.4%
	Photo sharing	Organization shared photos from its events on its profile page, open to SNS users comment	71.4%

	Announcement	Organization announced upcoming events and campaigns on its profile page	27.6%
Social game	Game player	Organization played a social game with SNS users	48.0%
	Contest	Organization hosted contests in a social game	5.1%
	Raffle	Organization appeared or hosted a raffle in a social game	2.0%
	Game element	Organization’s name or product appeared as a gaming element in a social game	2.0%
	Logo	Organization’s logo appeared in the corner of the background of a social game	2.0%
	Background	Organization appeared in the entire background of a social game	1.0%
	Virtual good	Organization appeared on the virtual goods and gifts in a social game	1.0%
	Other	Banner ad	Organization appeared on the banner ads on Kaixin001’s homepage
Fan group		Organization or its fans created a fan group page,	5.1%

	separate from its profile page	
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The three most commonly used features were status updates (100.0 percent), discussion board (80.6 percent), and message forwarding (80.6 percent). Although only about half of the organizations in our sample used features in social games, the number of game-related features identified in this study suggests that this is an emerging trend.

“Franding” effects

The second goal of this study was to evaluate how effective it was for organizations to use different interactive features on SNSs for branding. We hypothesized that the more features that an organization used, the higher number of page visits, fans, and eWOM behaviors resulted. We followed the procedures recommended by Pedhazur (1997) and used multiple regression analysis to test these hypotheses:

$$Y = a + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 + e$$

The number of interactive features (X_1) and the number of months an organization was present on Kaixin001 (X_2) were used to predict an organization’s page visits (Y_1), fans (Y_2), and eWOM (Y_3). Our results suggested that, controlling for the time that an organization had been on Kaixin001, the number of interactive features was a highly significant predictor of its profile page visits, fans, and enacted eWOM behavior ($p < .001$, see [Table 2](#)). Therefore, H1, H2, and H3 were all supported.

Table 2: Multiple regression results of “franding” effects.

Note: $N=98$. CI=confidence interval. *** $p < .001$; * $p < .05$.

Variable	Page visits		Fans		eWOM	
	<i>B</i>	95% CI	<i>B</i>	95% CI	<i>B</i>	95% CI
Constant	0.33	[-0.55, 1.21]	0.61	[-0.27, 1.49]	-1.14*	[-1.99, -0.28]
Features	0.36***	[0.21, 0.52]	0.23***	[0.08, 0.39]	0.46***	[0.32, 0.61]
Time	0.14***	[0.05, 0.24]	0.23***	[0.13, 0.33]	0.13***	[0.04, 0.23]
R^2	.28		.28		.36	
Adjusted R^2	.26		.26		.35	

F	18.22***	18.26***	26.52***
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Post-hoc analysis

Because 13 out of the 15 interactive features that we identified in the content analysis were associated with either an organization’s profile or a social game application on Kaixin001, two new variables were created: the total number of profile features and the total game features that an organization used. The number of profile features used by an organization ranged from one to six, with a mean of 4.33 (*SD*=1.27). The number of game features used by an organization ranged from zero to five, with a mean of 0.61 (*SD*=0.77).

Status updates, discussion board, and message forwarding were the three most popular interactive features, used by 80.6 percent to 100 percent of the organizations in our sample. How frequently these three features were used reflected how active an organization was on Kaixin001. Therefore, the frequency of the use of these features was coded into three new variables using the same ordinal scale (1=only a few activities in total, 2=some activities in weeks/months, 3=some activities per week but fewer than one activity per day, 4=about one or two activities per day, 5=more than two activities per day). The results of our analysis indicated that 10.2 percent of the organizations had just a few updates over the course of the study; 41.8 percent posted some updates per week but fewer than one per day; 18.4 percent posted one or two updates per day; and, 29.6 percent posted multiple updates per day. Of the organizations with a discussion board, all had some comment exchanges between the organization and SNS users on at least a weekly basis. More specifically, 79.7 percent had at least one comment on the discussion board per week but fewer than one comment per day; 8.9 percent had one or two comments per day; and, 11.4 percent had more than two comments per day. Of the organizations that forwarded messages to their followers, 25.3 percent had forwarded just a few messages in total; 53.2 percent had forwarded some messages per week but fewer than one per day; 6.3 percent had forwarded one or two messages per day; and, 15.2 percent had forwarded more than two messages per day.

We then ran a different set of multiple regressions to use the number of profile features, the number of game features, frequency of status updates, frequency of discussion board comments, and frequency of message forwarding to predict an organization’s page visits, fans, and eWOM on Kaixin001, while controlling for the time that the organization had been on the Web site. Our results indicated that the frequency of message forwarding was a marginally significant predictor (*p*=.066) of page visits; the frequency of discussion board comments was a significant predictor (*p*=.024) of the number of fans; and profile features, game features, and the frequency of message forwarding were all significant predictors (*p*_{profile}=.032, *p*_{game}=.016, *p*_{forwarding}= .019) of eWOM (see [Table 3](#)).

Table 3: Multiple regression results of post-hoc analysis.

Note: N=98. CI=confidence interval. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; † $p < .10$.

Variable	Page visits		Fans		eWOM	
	B	95% CI	B	95% CI	B	95% CI
Constant	1.63*	[0.40, 2.86]	2.49***	[1.26, 3.72]	0.67	[-0.56, 1.89]
Profile features	0.12	[-0.14, 0.38]	0.10	[-0.16, 0.36]	0.28*	[0.03, 0.54]
Game features	0.22	[-0.11, 0.55]	0.06	[-0.27, 0.39]	0.40*	[0.08, 0.73]
Status updates	0.11	[-0.12, 0.35]	0.01	[-0.22, 0.25]	-0.09	[-0.32, 0.14]
Discussion board comments	0.18	[-0.07, 0.44]	0.30*	[0.04, 0.55]	0.05	[-0.20, 0.31]
Message forwarding	0.19†	[-0.01, 0.39]	0.09	[-0.12, 0.29]	0.24*	[0.04, 0.44]
Time	-0.16**	[-0.26, -0.06]	-0.23***	[-0.33, -0.13]	-0.13*	[-0.23, -0.03]
R^2	.34		.33		.39	
Adjusted R^2	.29		.29		.35	
F	7.64***		7.54***		9.53***	



Discussion and conclusion

Major findings

This study presented, to our knowledge, the first systematic content analysis of organization’s branding strategies and practices on Chinese SNSs. Our findings indicate that organizations have started to move into the realm of social media, exploring the possibilities of novel branding strategies afforded by the digital and social networks on SNSs. In the first nine months since a popular Chinese SNS Kaixin001 launched features to allow the presence of organizations on its Web site, on average, 11 organizations in our sample joined this social media Web site each month. Mass media groups were the

dominant and early adopters, but other types of brands, including recreational services, popular Web portals, automobile companies, and electronics companies quickly followed suit.

Using content analysis, we identified 15 interactive features on Kaixin001 used by organizations, with an average of five features per organization. Of these 15 interactive features, six were related to an organization’s profile page, with an average of four features per organization. Moreover, seven features were related to social games (*i.e.*, digital games on SNSs), and almost half of the organizations in our sample used at least one game-related feature. Many organizations joined social games as players while others used in-game contests, raffles, logos, and other strategies to increase their presence and interaction with SNS users.

Additionally, an emerging trend is organizations’ converting their brand products and services into digital gaming elements (*e.g.*, seeds for Happy Farmers) and virtual gifts (*e.g.*, free soft drinks). Who would have ever thought of playing an online social game with your favorite brand just five years ago? But companies are thinking of creative ways to become part of their consumers’ social networks and interact with them on a regular basis. Our analysis of such “franding” effects indicates that, in general, the more interactive features that an organization used, the more page visits and fans they attracted and the more eWOM behaviors occurred.

All of these features allow an organization to communicate with SNS users in a casual and playful manner as if the organization were a real friend; this is what is known as the “franding” phenomenon. The organization and the SNS users can share news, deals, insights, opinions, experiences, and virtual gifts in an entertaining and social space full of information and activities, making their interactions personal and intimate. Such personified interactive branding strategies can then generate new cultural identities and practices. These strategies also afford the transparency, authenticity, and deep trust needed for organizations to build a loyal community.

Our post-hoc analysis provided even more nuanced results in regard to profile features, game features, frequency of status updates, frequency of discussion board comments, and frequency of message forwarding. Although all of the organizations in our sample posted status updates, the frequency of their postings was not a significant predictor of page visits, fans, or eWOM. This suggests that posting status updates has become a default feature or a norm; it doesn’t make an organization different from others. The only marginally significant predictor of page visits was message forwarding. This means that, when organizations forwarded messages to their followers on SNSs, this helped to increase the number of page visits. The only significant predictor of the number of fans was the frequency of discussion board comments. This means that the more often organizations exchanged comments with SNS users on its discussion board about their brand products, services, or events, the more people became fans of the organization on Kaixin001. There were three significant predictors of eWOM: profile features, game features, and message forwarding. This means that the higher the number of profile features and game features an organization uses, along with a higher frequency of organizations’ forwarding messages to their followers, the more people spread the word about the organization and its brand products, services, and related events. Taken

together, the results of this study demonstrate that organization–public communication on SNSs is not just about one–way broadcasting but more critically about interaction and engagement, specifically, sharing through multi–modal, multi–platform, social networks and playful activities.

Theoretical implications

Cooke and Buckley (2008) urged scholars to pay attention not only to network effects in the era of Web 2.0 but also to specific social computing tools and functionalities that will allow researchers to better understand the development, management, and engagement of online communities for marketing purposes. This study used the social affordances of technologies as a guiding theoretical framework to investigate the interactive features on SNSs for organization–public communication. Our study showed that there are, indeed, different kinds and levels of user engagement and participation. A “frand” on SNSs can play the role of (a) an *initiator*, who starts something new, such as a fan group or brand event; (b) a *commentator*, who shares personal stories and opinions, including response to an organization’s status updates, event photos, or discussion board threads; (c) a *disseminator*, who faithfully spreads the word by forwarding messages posted by an organization to all of the friends in his or her social networks; (d) a *gamer*, who interacts with brands in a gaming environment and passes on virtual goods and gifts to friends; and, (e) an *observer*, who scans information about brands and occasionally shares with others outside of the SNS context. Such categorization overlaps with Kozinets’ (1999) typology and the work of others such as de Valck, *et al.* (2009), which further highlights the relational dynamic between brands and SNS users for personified interactive marketing.

The results of this study demonstrate that there is a critical connection between the technological infrastructure and communicative practice that allow organizations to interact with SNS users in an entertaining, compelling, meaningful, and effective way. Although Kozinets (1999) and others have provided useful frameworks to understand online brand communities from the user’s perspective, this study provides expanded theoretical framework that incorporates the communication goals and strategies of organizations.

Practical implications

The use of interactive features on SNSs helps cultivate a vibrant space for marketing and management. Researchers can cull out rich information about consumer motivations, decision–making processes, behavioral patterns, social practices, and emotional responses in relation to certain brands and brand organizations (Razzaque, 2011; Urstadt, 2008). Astute online community managers and marketers should recognize and value such unique characteristics of SNSs and make an effort to match the needs of their organizations and the needs of their past, present, and future members to strengthen the brand–consumer relationship (de Valck, *et al.*, 2009; Kozinets, 1999).

SNSs can be viewed as an aggregate of various existing marketing platforms that allow rich media presentation for organizations. Multiple media modalities and communication platforms can provide a variety of contact points for organizations to engage SNS users

that a single mode such as an online discussion group may never be able to achieve. Similarly, the diversity of information sources and user-generated content on SNSs enhances knowledge sharing and facilitates decision-making. The development of data tracking and data mining techniques can help provide a more nuanced understanding of user perceptions and behaviors for tailored marketing and service delivery. Personified “franding” communication tools make organizations more accessible to the public and help develop trust and faith in the brand. Network structures embedded in SNSs can accelerate the diffusion of information exponentially via eWOM and further incorporate brand-related practice into people’s everyday lives.

This study also suggests that there is an increasing interest in using interactive features in social games for branding. Juul (2010) points out that there is a casual revolution that is taking place in the gaming industry right now. Digital games such as the ones on SNSs are different from conventional video games in that they do not require a high level of knowledge, skill, or time commitment. What makes social gaming features so compelling to consumers is that SNS users often use their real names and identities and play with their family, friends, and acquaintances, which is a different setup from fictional multiplayer online games and role-playing games (Hou and Wang, 2011; Nardi and Harris, 2006; Williams, *et al.*, 2008; Yee, 2006). This means their “franding” behaviors on SNSs are perhaps more closely tied to their personal, social, and brand identities. Organizations may consider social games as an engaging interactive platform to strategically increase their presence, improve their image, and encourage participation and communication with the public.

Directions for future research

The findings and limitations of this study suggest several directions for future research. For example, scholars may consider looking into the specific content of each feature identified in this study (*e.g.*, status updates, discussion board comments, forwarded messages) and examine each in terms of its underlying communicative patterns of “franding” practice on SNSs. It also would be useful to explore strategies that can help organizations incentivize creative expressions, navigate and facilitate user engagement online, and integrate social activities on SNSs with off-line events in what Jenkins (2006) calls a convergence culture.

Overall, this study suggests that the interactive features on SNSs can convey a sense of transparency and authenticity, providing that both the organizations and the community members do not abuse their rights in such a space. However, in the past, there have been incidents in which SNS use by organizations was harmful to brands, such as in the scandal of masked Facebook postings by a Honda manager in an attempt to reverse the negative consumer feedback after the 2009 Accord Crosstour release (Sanders and Hollingshead, 2010). Now a legal stipulation is in place that requires brand-sponsored bloggers to clarify their affiliation (Kang, 2009). Researchers may examine the misuse of interactive features on SNSs that can jeopardize the reputation of a brand.

Last but not least, this study was intentionally designed to offer insights into organizational practices on SNSs in China. Many social media platforms in other countries now provide tools for organizations to connect and interact with the public as well. A

cultural comparative approach can offer a more comprehensive understanding of the “franding” phenomenon. 

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