

Emotional Branding on Social Media: A Cross-Cultural Discourse Analysis of Global Brands on Twitter and Weibo



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Abstract This chapter contributes to the ongoing debate of cultural influence and construction in the social media sphere by examining the discourse practices of sampled global brands in terms of emotional branding on Twitter and Weibo, the leading social networking sites in the US and China respectively. Findings suggest that there are more commonalities than differences in the thematic appeals used by the global brands across Twitter and Weibo. Instead of exhibiting a developmental divide, all three characteristic appeals of emotional branding (Pragmatist, Evangelist and Sensualist) co-exist across Twitter and Weibo. The brands also tend to use similar positive face strategies and relational rituals on both Twitter and Weibo. One notable difference consists in the tendency that corporate Weibo posts contain more emoticons, more intimate address forms, and more instances of small talk, which is a significant break-away from the established Chinese traditions of face and politeness in interpersonal interaction. Implications for corporate communication and higher education in the age of internationalization and digitalization are discussed.

1 Introduction

“Intercultural new media studies” is said to be the next frontier in intercultural communication (Wu and Li 2016). Part of the social reality today is the widespread adoption of myriad new communication technologies and platforms, which has led scholars to increasingly recognize that the study of culture should move beyond the

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fragmentary perspectives towards a more holistic view of culture that includes not only nation-state cultures, but organizational and technological cultures.

The present study attempts to contribute to the ongoing debate of cultural influence and construction in the social media sphere by examining the discourse practices of the global brands in their emotional branding with their followers on Twitter and Weibo, the two different social networking sites (SNSs) in the USA versus China. Specifically, the present study attempts to depart from the dichotomous perspective with pre-assigned cultural categories and to examine the actual instances of social media discourse, to better understand the nature of virtual language and culture and the ideology behind its construction, and to provide implications for the ever-changing world of higher education and internationalization.

2 Social Media and Intercultural Communication Studies

An increasing body of literature in the field of social media and intercultural communication studies has reinforced the belief that new communication technologies are anything but neutral instruments; rather, they are subject to cultural influences in various aspects related to particular communication circumstances and outcomes. Nonetheless, most previous studies in the field have been confined to a dichotomous perspective: the studies frequently draw on Hofstede's (1980, 2001) dimensions of nation-state cultures, or Hall's (1976) distinction of high- and low- context cultures, or Triandis' (1995) horizontal/vertical individualism/collectivism, and conclude with a simple account of dichotomous differences between the East and the West in the communication practices on social media.

For instance, comparing China and the US, Chu and Choi (2011) found that Chinese SNS users engaged in a greater level of information giving, information seeking, and pass-along behavior in SNSs than did their American counterparts. The results confirmed the respective cultural orientations of horizontal and vertical collectivism vs. individualism, pointing to the significant influence of national cultures on eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth) behavior. Further, Jackson and Wang (2013) surveyed the use of social networking sites (SNSs) by Chinese and American students, and found that collectivistic emphases on family and friends could be partly responsible for lesser use of SNSs by Chinese participants, while individualistic values of self, and having more but less close and enduring friendships, could explain US participants' greater use of SNSs. Similarly, Barker and Ota (2011) compared the use of Mixi and Facebook by Japanese and American females, and found that young American women preferred public expressions on Facebook, whereas Japanese young women were much more likely to communicate closeness via Mixi. In addition, Park et al. (2014) examined cross-cultural variations of the use of emoticons, and indicated that people from individualistic cultures tended to use horizontal and mouth-oriented emoticons such as:), in contrast to those in collectivistic cultures who preferred vertical and eye-oriented emoticons such as ^_^.

From the perspective of persuasive technology, Fogg and Iizawa (2008) analyzed how Facebook and Mixi were designed to influence users in relation to four activities: creating profile pages; inviting friends; responding to content by friends; and returning to the site often. Fogg and Iizawa concluded that Facebook's persuasive design is more assertive and mechanistic, whereas Mixi's design seems to be more subtle and indirect. The different styles in persuasive design were said to map to cultural differences between the two countries.

Cultural differences in corporate communications on social media have also been investigated and noted. For instance, Tsai and Men (2012) examined cultural differences in the use of communication appeals on corporate pages on China's Renren and America's Facebook. They found that value appeals in SNSs reflected dominant cultural values in different cultures: value appeals such as interdependence, popularity, high social status, luxury, emotions, and symbolic association were more common in collectivist, high-context societies such as in China, whereas individuality and hedonism were more frequently used in an individualistic society like the US.

Men and Tsai (2012) examined how companies use popular SNSs to facilitate dialogues with the public in China and the US, through a content analysis of 50 corporate pages with 500 corporate posts and 500 user posts from each. The study revealed that companies in both countries recognized the importance of SNSs in relationship development and employed the appropriate online strategies, but their specific tactics differed. Cultural differences among the types of corporate posts and public posts on SNSs indicated that culture played a significant role in shaping the dialogue between organizations and their public audiences in different countries.

Through a content analysis of microblogs of four smart-phone brands on Twitter¹ and Weibo¹, Ma (2013) found that consumers on both platforms were mostly used for sharing brand-central information and entertaining messages, but cultural values moderated specific types of content shared by consumers in significant ways. For example, US consumers showed significantly greater concern about unique product selling propositions and distinctive brand personalities, more eager for the special and the original, whereas Chinese consumers were more eager to know what was in vogue, and were more aware of status and prestige.

Although the study of websites seems to have been pushed into the background, as the medium is an "older" form of new media, a significant contribution of this line of research is that websites have incubated important conceptions of culture that are different from the traditional models offered by Hofstede (1980) or Hall (1976). Gallivan and Srite point out the importance of "articulating the cultural assumptions that are embedded into IT and explicitly evaluating whether these assumptions are congruent with potential adopters in other parts of the world"

¹ Twitter is the world's leading microblogging site, attracting around 320 million active users daily as of September 2015 (Twitter 2015). Weibo is a twitter-like service based in China and with Chinese-language interface, hosting more than 500 million users by the end of 2012 (*Global Times*, September 5, 2013), making itself the leading social networking service in China. Similar architecture of the two platforms has invited many studies using comparative data from them.

(2005, p. 296). They propose to move beyond the fragmentary perspectives to a more holistic view of culture that includes not only nation-state culture, but organizational and technological culture, which will lead to a more multi-layered conception of culture. Waters and Lo (2012), through a content analysis of Facebook profiles of 225 nonprofit organizations in the US, China, and Turkey, concluded that organizational uses of SNSs were only minimally affected by traditional cultural values, suggesting that global virtual cultures may be developing.

The present study thus attempts to contribute to the ongoing debate about cultural influence and construction in the social media sphere, by examining the discourse practices of the global brands in their processes of relational communication with their followers on Twitter and Weibo, the two different social networking sites (SNS) in the USA versus China.

3 Social Media and Emotional Branding by Corporations

The 2009 ENGAGEMENTdb Report measured the social media engagement and financial performance of the “world’s most valuable brands” (e.g. Starbucks, Toyota, SAP, and Dell), revealing a direct and significant positive correlation between financial performance and the extent of social media engagement: the socially engaged brands were more financially successful. In 2014, Twitter narrowly surpassed Facebook to be the most frequently used new medium for corporate communication activities (Wright and Hinson 2014). Global brands and their multinational corporations have always been among the enthusiastic users of new communications technologies. Before the advent of social media, for global brands, it would have sufficed to have a corporate presence on their official websites. However, the age of social media requires these brands not only to be “present”, but to actively engage with their key members of the public. For meaningful engagement and relationship-building between corporations and consumers to take place on social media, it requires the corporate branding discourse to move beyond transactional to emotional and relational to increase “site stickiness” and to “hook” followers tightly (Capozzi and Zipfel 2012, p. 339).

Since what is accentuated in the new protocols is relational and emotional communication, rather than transactional and informational communication between corporations and their customers (Blom et al. 2003; Wu and Feng 2015), emotional branding by corporations on social media becomes critical. Emotional branding can be defined as:

[...] engaging the consumer on the level of senses and emotions; forging a deep, lasting, intimate emotional connection to the brand that transcends material satisfaction; [...] creating a holistic experience that delivers an emotional fulfillment so that the customer develops a special bond with and unique trust in the brand (Morrison and Crane 2007, p. 410).

Aiming at building consumers' attachment with a strong, specific, usage-relevant emotional response (e.g., bonding, companionship or love) to the brand (Roberts 2004; Rossiter and Bellman 2012), emotional branding directly appeals to the consumers' emotional state, needs and aspirations, and triggers an emotional response among consumers in their external corporate communication. Drawing on the case of the US, Gobe (2009, p. 128) identified three developmental phases of emotional branding: the Pragmatist Age (1940–1967), the Evangelist Age (1968–1989) and the Sensualist Age (1990–2009). Specifically, emotional branding in the Pragmatist Age emphasized products or service function, reliability and the pragmatic functions, as manifested by omnipresent advertising that dominated corporate communication at that time. The Evangelist Age represented philosophies of justice, equality and sensitivity to the environment, making people realize that they have power and could positively change the course of politics and the world. Finally, emotional branding discourse in the Sensualist Age is lifestyle-oriented and tends towards hedonism, glamour, fame and the individual expression, creating its own language, culture and symbols (Gobe 2009).

The unique merit of social media in humanizing or personifying corporations enables them to converse with the public using a conversational human voice. From a perception perspective, Kelleher and Miller (2006, p. 413) identified 11 defining aspects of the conversational human voice: it invites people to conversation; is open to dialogue; uses conversation-style communication; tries to communicate in a human voice; tries to be interesting in communication; provides links to competitors; uses a sense of humor in communication; attempts to make communication enjoyable; would admit a mistake; provides prompt feedback addressing criticism in a direct but uncritical manner; and treats me and others as being human.

Nonetheless, many studies of corporate/organizational communication on social media (e.g., Rybalko and Seltzer 2010; Seltzer and Mitrook 2007; Waters and Lo 2012) found that the dialogic potential of social media has not been fully utilized. Despite the plausibility of their conclusion, the studies often coded the content and technical features of social media pages, instead of examining the discourse characteristics of the actual messages. For instance, Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) recorded the presence of links to press releases or newsrooms, links to annual reports, links to Facebook, links to corporate websites, and whether questions are posed and user comments/questions are responded to on Twitter.

In view of the gaps, this chapter will present the results, findings and conclusions of a study designed to investigate the discourse realization of emotional branding, not only in terms of content of corporate updates but also the relational ritual and interactional strategies used to involve the brands' followers on social media. The emotional branding discourse by global brands on two dominant social networking site (SNS), Twitter, and its indigenous counterpart in China, Weibo, will be examined to further our understanding of cross-cultural corporate-public communication on social media.

4 Relational Ritual and Communication Across Cultures

In addition to the concerns and efforts by scholars of corporate communication in identifying the means of humanizing and personifying corporations in their relational communication with their stakeholders, scholars of interpersonal communication, particularly Interactional Sociolinguists, have long been concerned with describing and explaining how language is constructed for relational ritual and communication between people across cultures. The interdependence between people that constitutes a personal or social relationship derives in significant ways from their language use (Cappella 1988; Duck and Pittman 1993). The context of conversation, in which participants must coordinate their roles and contributions to the “joint project” of discourse moment by moment (Clark 1996), is a window through which this interdependence can be richly observed.

According to Interactional Sociolinguists, among the linguistic forms that are indexical of people’s beliefs and evaluations regarding their relationships with others, one is the terms of address used in greeting each other. The choice of an address term is often governed by a number of factors, including the consideration of power and solidarity (see Brown and Gilman 1962). Gu (1990, p. 249) indicated that the choice of an address term in Chinese depends on the consideration of multiple variables: (1) kin or non-kin, (2) politically superior or inferior, (3) professionally prestigious or non-prestigious, (4) interpersonally familiar or unfamiliar, solidary or non-solidary, (5) male or female, (6) old or young, (7) on a formal or informal occasion, (8) family members or non-relatives, and (9) in public or at home. This wide array of variables suggests that the system of address forms in Chinese in contexts other than social media is highly complex and particularly indicative of power and social hierarchy.

Another type of linguistic form contributing to relational communication can be called small talk or phatic communication. The term *phatic* was first proposed by Malinowski (1923, p. 315) to refer to the role of talk in human sociality in that “each utterance is an act serving the direct aim of binding hearer to speaker by a tie of some social sentiment or other”. Such communication is achieved “by the exchange of words, by the specific feelings which form convivial gregariousness, by the give and take of utterances which make up ordinary gossip” (Malinowski 1923, p. 315).

Cheepen and Monaghan (1990, p. 21) distinguished transactional and interactional language use, with the latter referring to phatic communication. Warren (2006, p. 101) further pointed out that conversations are often examples of both transactional and interactional language use, and that there could be primacy of interactional discourse over transactional, or the supremacy of so-called “idle chatter” or “small talk” over speech-in-action. Often the maintenance of the relationship is given prominence in a talk to the total exclusion of anything else. Warren (2006, p. 102) stated that “even the most routine of utterances should never be described as meaningless”. Conversation is not talk for its own sake, but rather talk for the sake of building and maintaining social relationships.

Over the years, interactional sociolinguists have paid attention to comparing forms of phatic communication across cultures. For example, Chen (1993) compared Chinese and Americans in their responses to compliments in daily interaction, and found that while the Americans tended to accept compliments readily, the Chinese tended to show rejection or embarrassment over the compliments. The notion of positive politeness by Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) was then used to account for the behavior of the Americans, while the maxim of self-denigration in Chinese social interaction by Gu (1990) was used to account for the behavior of the Chinese.

Spencer-Oatey et al. (2000) undertook a similar study comparing the Chinese and the British in their varied ways of compliment responses, and came to a similar conclusion about the differences between the Chinese and the Westerners. Nonetheless, in 2010, Chen and Yang conducted a longitudinal study in compliment responses in Chinese, and found a tendency towards Westernization in Chinese compliment responses. The study revealed drastic changes in the way the Chinese in Xi'an city responded to compliments: in contrast to the overwhelming popularity of rejection in 1993 as found by Chen (1993), the 2010 Xi'an Chinese were found to largely accept compliments. The 2010 level of popularity of acceptance was so high that it was almost the same level as the English and German speakers. The study attributed this change to the influx of Western cultural influences that has occurred in the city of Xi'an since the early 1990s.

5 Methodology

5.1 Research Questions & Framework of Analysis

The present study, as noted above, aims to contribute to the ongoing debate of cross-cultural communication in the social media sphere by examining the discourse practices of emotional branding by global brands on two diverse social media platforms, Twitter versus Weibo. At least two dimensions have been identified as constituting the discourse realization of emotional branding: (1) thematic appeals, (2) interactional rituals and strategies. Specifically, two research questions will be addressed:

- (1) What are the common and different thematic appeals used by global brands on Twitter versus on Weibo?
- (2) What are the common and different interactional rituals and strategies adopted by global brands on Twitter versus on Weibo?

An integrated framework of analysis is built, incorporating a thematic analysis and an interactional analysis, to investigate the means of emotional branding by the leading brands in their English versus Chinese social media platforms. While the thematic analysis is employed to profile the brands' social media posts in terms of pragmatist, evangelist, and sensualist appeals, the interactional analysis investigates further the regular rituals and strategies of relational communication used, such as forms of greetings, phatic communication, and humor.

5.2 *The Data*

The data of the study consists of posts by nine of the World's Top 10 Best Brands (Forbes 2014), i.e., Apple, Google, Microsoft, IBM, Coca Cola, General Electric (GE), McDonald's, Intel, Samsung, and BMW, on Twitter¹ and Weibo¹ over a one-month period (1–30 Sept 2014). The dataset did not include posts by Apple, for the brand did not have official accounts on both platforms.

5.3 *Thematic Analysis*

Based on Gobe (2009), three possible themes of corporate posts on Twitter and Weibo have been identified: Pragmatist, Evangelist, and Sensualist. Pragmatist branding refers to the theme and content of the corporate posts centering on the pragmatic functions, reliability, endurance, convenience, and cost-effectiveness of the products or services provided by the brand. Evangelist branding content promotes virtues or positive values, such as peace, openness, justice, equality, humanitarianism, and sensitivity to the environment; while Sensualist branding content promotes themes of individual lifestyle and self-expression, hedonism, glamour and fame.

Unlike Gobe's (2009) view of the three themes as a temporal dimension that delineates different stages, we have found that the three themes co-exist in contemporary corporate communication. The global brands are actively involved in pragmatist emotional branding on Twitter and Weibo alike. For instance, a Microsoft tweet on September 16 reads:

Extract 1:

Microsoft @ Microsoft · Sept 16

Our new Universal Mobile Keyboard works on iOS, Android, and Windows Tablets. Check it out: msft.it/6013oB9

[Image omitted]

The tweet above explicitly promotes the compatibility of Microsoft's keyboard product. For today's increasingly mobile consumers who own and use a variety of mobile devices, compatibility is one of the most pragmatic functions, and is thus appealing to consumers. As an electronic products provider, Microsoft appeals to consumers' pursuit of compatibility and promotes its versatility. More traditional pragmatic emphasis such as product reliability is also promoted on Twitter, illustrated by an IBM tweet on September 13 that promotes the reliability of its cloud servers:

Extract 2:

IBM @ IBM · Sept 13

How @Intel and @softlayer are delivering trusted cloud platforms: ibm.co/X8TFot #IBM Cloud

[Image omitted]

The brands also promote their pragmatic values on Weibo. For example, McDonald's Weibo post in Extract 3 emphasizes the quality and cost-effectiveness of its new burger, the star product. The post is very much like a hard-sell advertisement that explicitly indicates the price of the product:

Extract 3: 继麦麦汉堡【10元天团】三足鼎力后,双层吉士成为最新“掌门堡”!它有才
有料,还超值10元,还不快来膜拜?!

[图略]

9月27日 12:00 麦当劳的微博

Extract 3: Translation: Double-cheese Burger has become the new star burger! It's rich and
delicious, and costs 10 yuan only! Why not hurry and have a try now?!

[Image omitted]

12:00 Sept 27 McDonald's Weibo

Technology brands like Google and Samsung also promote the convenience and versatility of their products on Weibo, illustrated by Extracts 4 and 5. In Extract 4, Google promotes its Google Glass as being convenient and easy to use, able to capture the full picture on various occasions. Extract 5 highlights the innovative features of Samsung's new smart phone: the S Pen and the multi-window display:

Extract 4: #Google 全球汇# Google glass能帮大家记住最美好和有趣的时刻。无论是一个人的自由、怡然,两个人的甜蜜还是三口之家的温馨,Google glass都能解放你的双手,帮童鞋们记录最完整的记忆。只需简单说出“ok glass”,然后发出“take a picture”的英文口令,Google glass就会为您拍下最美的回忆啦~

[图略]

9月22日 11:33 谷歌的微博

Extract 4: Translation: Google glass can help you remember the best and fun moments.
Whether it is freedom being alone, sweetness being with your love or warmth being with family, Google glass can always free your hands and record the fullest memory.

11:33 Sept 22 Google's Weibo

[Image omitted]

Extract 5: #星推荐#赞叹那水晶般的清晰画面,喜欢上触感升级再创奇迹的S Pen,着迷于更多便捷的随心多窗口,Samsung GALAXY Note 4,创新突破,让人轻易就会爱上你的手机。

[图略]

9月29日 16:02 三星电子的微博

Extract 5: Translation: Marvel at the crystal clear picture, fall in love with the updated S Pen, be fascinated with the convenient multi-window display – Samsung GALAXY Note 4, the innovative phone you can readily fall in love with.

[Image omitted]

16:02 Sept 29 Samsung's Weibo

In addition to pragmatist branding, Evangelist branding content is also prevalent in the corporate posts on both Twitter and Weibo. The Evangelist theme is often related to corporate social responsibility (CSR). The publicity generated by CSR campaigns and presence on social media contributes to the positive image and reputation-building of the brands. A Google tweet in Extract 6 calls for universal access to and protection of the safety of the Internet. The pursuit of freedom, openness, and the safety of cyberspace is echoed by all users of the Internet, which at the same time presents Google as a caring Internet service provider with the same positive values:

Extract 6:

Google @ Google · Sept 10

The Internet belongs to everyone – and it's our job to protect it. Are you in?

[Image omitted]

IBM in Extract 7 shares a story of using its analytic tool in an Africa-aid project on Twitter, appealing to humanitarianism:

Extract 7:

IBM @ IBM · Sept 24

Here's how @IBMWatson is working in Africa through Project Lucy: [video URL link omitted]

[Image omitted]

CSR posts also occur frequently on Weibo, illustrated by Coca Cola (Extract 8) and GE (Extract 9). In Extract 8, Coca Cola promotes its sponsorship for a Chinese garden built in Washington D.C. and its contribution to China-US cultural exchanges:

Extract 8: 一座中国园林出现在异国的土地上,会是什么样子?美国华盛顿特区的国家植物园中,就坐落着一座中式花园。这座中国园林由一对中国设计师设计,展示着人与自然之间微妙的平衡,也是中美文化交流搭建的一座美丽桥梁。可口可乐也有幸参与其中并提供支持。

[图略]

9月29日 20:00 可口可乐的微博

Extract 8: Translation: What would it be like to have a Chinese garden on foreign soil? In the National Botanical Garden, there is a Chinese-style garden. The garden is a work by Chinese designers, demonstrating the human-nature balance, while also standing as a bridge for cultural exchanges between China and the US. Coca Cola is proud to be part of the project and have provided support for it.

[Image omitted]

20:00 Sept 29 Coca Cola's Weibo

General Electric broadcasts its health project for koalas in Australia, conducting reliable and humane checks for them to prevent infection and contagion. The action (as well as the post) appeals to people's love and care for the planet and for biodiversity:

Extract 9: #GE全球村#GE有爱又天才的科学家最近在为澳洲国宝考拉做超声检查,防治目前危机它们生存的传染病。为了及早诊断并减少传染,哥家科学家借鉴人体医学领域经验,将超声技术应用到病菌检测中,操作简单,效果精确,而且全程无痛,让这些人人见人爱的小家伙看病时也能保持“萌萌哒”。

[图略]

9月1日 19:37 通用电气的微博

Extract 9: Translation: GE's loving and talented scientists are conducting ultrasonic imaging tests for koalas in Australia, to detect and prevent contagious diseases that threaten their lives. GE scientists have drawn on experience from medical care for humans to provide painless testing for the cute ones.

[Image omitted]

19:37 Sept 1 GE's Weibo

Furthermore, Sensualist branding is also common on both Twitter and Weibo platforms, illustrated by BMW's status-promoting tweet in Extract 10 and Samsung's Weibo post in Extract 11:

Extract 10:

BMW @ bmw · Sept 26

All eyes on me. All roads become red carpets wherever the BMWi8 goes.

[Image omitted]

Extract 10 personifies BMW's product as a super star walking the red carpet, attracting enormous attention, thus appealing to consumers' desire uniqueness, individuality, and being the focus of the crowd.

Extract 11: #星娱乐#喜欢他帅气的侧脸,喜欢他安静的性格.....暗恋的小心思那么多,最终也只是幻化成手机中一张偷拍的照片.....那一刻悸动的美好,经历过就不会忘,年轻真好。[emoticon: Smile]

[图略]

9月26日 09:01 三星的微博

Extract 11: Translation: Liked his handsome face, liked his quiet character [...] So many fond feelings of a secret admirer ended up as a picture taken secretly and saved in the phone [...] The beauty of the moment shall never be forgotten. So good to be young.

[Image omitted]

9:01 Sept 26 Samsung's Weibo

At first sight, Extract 11 does not seem to promote any product, but emphasizes the beauty of being young. By thematizing its content into a romantic experience shared by many young people, the Samsung post appeals to the feelings of a secret admirer and implicitly promotes its product – the smart phone as a camera.

6 Interactional Analysis

This interactional analysis of corporate tweets/posts aims to identify the solidarity-building strategies and verbal rituals, which function to address followers in a conversational human voice, in order to maximize their emotional attachments to the brands. We identified three verbal rituals and strategies as being employed to close the psychological and cognitive distance between the corporations and their followers on Twitter and Weibo: (1) intimate address forms, (2) phatic communication, and (3) humor and jokes.

6.1 Intimate Address Forms

Intimate address forms refer to the forms that are used interpersonally between people who are very familiar, close or in intimate relationships, and often take place in the private domain. These are different from regular daily interactions, in which the choice of an address form can be subject to a consideration of many variables such as kin versus non-kin, superior versus inferior, public versus private, etc. In contrast, the use of address forms on social media platforms tends to be simple, casual or intimate. Examples of address forms used by some of the global brands on Twitter are as follows:

Extract 12:

McDonald's @ McDonalds · Sept 24

Hey @lenadunham, we wanted to confirm your reservation. The corner booth is waiting for you!

Extract 13:

McDonald's @ McDonalds · Sept 28

My coffee is **your** coffee. Visit us 'till 9/29 for a small @McCafe coffee during breakfast.

Extract 14:

Samsung USA @ Samsungtweets · Sept 25

Bakers, start your ovens: it's pie season.

Extract 15:

Samsung USA @ Samsungtweets · Sept 28

Indulge **your** inner foodie with these must-have apps:

On the Chinese Weibo, the corporations use and create a range of intimate forms to address the followers and themselves. Some of these forms are general intimate address forms borrowed from those used frequently in daily interactions on Weibo, e.g., “童鞋(们)” (“classmates”), “小伙伴们” (“folks”), “(各位)亲(们)” (“dear”), “粉丝们” (“fans”), as well as first names (e.g., Jenny). Others are brand-specific address forms that are often initiated or suggested by brands and also adopted by followers. For example, self-appellation forms include “麦麦(家)” (“Maimai/Wheat”, McDonald's), “哥” (“Brother”, GE), “小可” (“Little Co”, Coca Cola), etc. Brand followers are called “星迷” (“star fans”, Samsung's followers), “英粉” (“Intel fans”, Intel's followers), or “麦粒(们)” (“wheat grain”, McDonald's followers). Such casual as well as brand-specific address terms play an important role in building emotional attachments between the brands and the followers.

6.2 Phatic Communication

As indicated earlier, phatic communication refers to small talk, including routine utterances which are seemingly purposeless but contribute significantly to relational communication by building “convivial gregariousness” and binding the addressee to the addresser using “a tie of some social sentiment or other” (Malinowski 1923, p. 315). We can observe that many tweets by the corporations are purely relational tweets with hashtags manifesting ritualized small talk. For instance, Coca Cola sends “good morning” tweets almost every day (Extract 11 as an example). If the “good morning” tweets said the two words “good morning” every day, it would become boring; therefore, Coca Cola resorts to sharing chicken-soup content (i.e. content containing warm, touching, or inspirational lines or life stories) in its morning tweets while marking these tweets with a hashtag “Coca Cola. Good morning”. The hashtag not only serves to topicalize, and thus ritualize the phatic communication of “Good morning”, but also makes explicit the purpose of its chicken-soup content and thus the tweet. This design grants dual functions of the tweet: the phatic “good morning” function and the thematic “chicken-soup”:

Extract 16: 细雨从星星上落下,浸湿痛苦,称为我们的一部分。九月结束时,请唤醒我。——Wake me up when September ends#可口可乐.晨安#

[图略]

9月30日 09:15可口可乐中国的微博

Extract 16: Translation: Here comes the rain again, falling from the stars, drenched in my pain again, becoming who we are. Wake me up when September ends. – Wake me up when September ends #Coca Cola Good morning#

[image omitted]

9:15 Sept 30 Coca Cola's Weibo

Below are more instances of phatic communication by the global brands on Twitter and Weibo:

Google (Twitter): Happy Grandparents' Day!

McDonald's (Twitter): Commute conquered.

McDonald's (Twitter): There's only one way to shake hands today. #ChocolateMilkShakeDay.

Samsung (Weibo): #星暖语#总是抱怨梦想的不可实现性,却从未怀疑自己是否足够努力,真正强大的人,是在暮色之后,面对疲惫和困扰,依然咬住牙继续前进的人。坚持一下,或许就能收获意想不到的奇迹。晚安~ (Translation: People always complain about how far away the dream is, but never doubt whether they are trying hard enough. The true man is someone who still fights with clenched teeth when it goes dark. Persevere and you may get a miracle. Good night~).

McDonald's (Weibo): 最爱你的人是我,我怎么舍得让你错过早餐!唤醒你的味蕾的除了麦麦,还有永远都想和你好在最佳“早餐小伙伴”,把TA@出来,从此每一天的早餐都有滋有味!(Translation: I'm the one who loves you most and how do I have the heart to see you go without breakfast! Your taste buds are not only woken up by Maimai (McDonald's), but by the breakfast partner who wants to spend time with you every day. Come @ him/her and have a sweet breakfast every morning!)

Microsoft (Weibo): 秋季美剧即将回归,大家最期待的美剧是哪部?(Translation: American TV series are coming back! Which one is your favorite?)

6.3 Humor and Jokes

Humor and jokes could be defined as anything “funny, amusing, or laughable” (Attardo 1993). Humor and joke-telling have long been regarded by Interactional Sociolinguists as an important means of accomplishing relational work and boosting solidarity (Holmes and Schnurr 2005). Norrick (1989, p. 118) indicates that “joke telling counts as positive politeness, [...] as an invitation to demonstrate membership and solidarity”. Below are some instances of humor and jokes posted by the global brands on both Twitter and Weibo.:

Google (Twitter): Mr. Yeti? Can we call you Bigfoot? Or do you prefer Sasquatch?#OkGoogle#NationalComicBookDay.

McDonald's (Weibo): 麦麦今天给大家粗一个心理测试,题目:你会怎样度过这个美好的周末呢?A 在家吃麦麦发呆,B去电影院吃麦麦欣赏大片,C带着麦麦去郊外野餐,D和好伙伴们去公园享受麦麦野餐。测试答案如下:资深麦粒,鉴定完毕!! (Translation: Maimai is giving you a fun test today, a multiple choice. Question: How will you spend this great weekend? A. Daydream at home while eating McDonald's; B. Go to the cinema while eating McDonald's; C. Bring McDonald's and go for a picnic in the suburbs; D. Have a McDonald's picnic in the park with friends. Key: A veteran McDonald's fan!)

7 Conclusion

The present study has attempted to contribute to the emerging research on intercultural new media studies by examining the discursive practices of the global brands in their emotional branding on Twitter versus Weibo, the leading social networking sites (SNSs) in USA versus China respectively. Specifically, this study has attempted to depart from the dichotomous perspective with the pre-assigned cultural categories and to examine the actual instances of social media discourse, so as to better understand the nature of virtual language and culture and the ideology behind its construction, and to provide implications for the changing world of higher education and internationalization.

It is found that there are more commonalities than differences in the thematic appeals used by the global brands on Twitter versus Weibo. Instead of exhibiting a developmental divide, as indicated by Gobe (2009), all the three characteristic appeals of emotional branding, i.e., Pragmatist, Evangelist, and Sensualist appeals, exist across Twitter and Weibo. Hybridized appeals are also observed, notably pragmatist blended with Evangelist or with Sensualist branding, demonstrating the extent of multi-valued emotional branding. Furthermore, the global brands tend to use similar positive face strategies and daily rituals on both Twitter and Weibo. Nonetheless, the actual wording and topics in the English versus the Chinese versions can be different according to their different targeted stakeholders on Twitter versus Weibo. For example, compared with Twitter posts (tweets), Weibo posts, their Chinese counterparts, contain more emoticons, more intimate address forms, and more instances of small talk as well. What is worthy of notice is that the Chinese traditions of face and politeness in interaction (as postulated by many previous scholars, such as Gu 1990) are no longer applicable to describe or explain Chinese social interactions on social media such as Weibo.

This chapter thus concludes that given the ever increasing development of digitalization and the ever increasing usage of SNS/social media for human interactions, we need to reexamine our orthodox notions or theorizations of intercultural communication, redefine the existing notions or develop new notions for a better description and explanation of the emerging global virtual language and culture. Furthermore, in our future development of curriculum for higher education in a changing world of internationalization, we need to move beyond the learning of cultural practice as confined by nation-states but turn our attention to the emerging cultural practice with the growth of advanced communication and technological services. We also need to be acutely aware that internationalization is not equal to globalization or homogenization, i.e., inclusion of the local, context- and individual-sensitive learning dimension as well as the global, universal dimension is important in the curriculum of internationalization. Finally, as suggested in the prevalent use of solidarity-building strategies and daily verbal rituals by the global brands on the social media platforms, our curriculum development, the teaching learning process of higher education in this world of increasing market economy, democracy and liberalization, should include not only formal or elite language education but also the informal, non-elite language education.

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