UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

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Conceptualisation of Micro-blog branding: exploration of micro-blog branding communication and how customer-based brand equity (CBBE) is affected by such communication

by

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Abstract

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CONCEPTUALISATION OF MICRO-BLOG BRANDING: EXPLORATION OF MICRO-BLOG BRANDING COMMUNICATION AND HOW CUSTOMER-BASED BRAND EQUITY IS AFFECTED BY SUCH COMMUNICATION

By Yun Xu

New prominence has been given to WOM and accelerated the generation and transmission of brand-related eWOM. Though existing studies on eWOM's influence are abundant, research especially on how social media eWOM affect branding practice is still in its novel stage. In particular, research systematically explores how brand-related eWOM affects customer-based brand equity is limited. The present study answers both the call by Christoph to address the gap in understanding user-generated branding and the call by Kimmel and Kitchen for exploration of possible influence of social media brand-related eWOM on intermediate stages of consumer decision-making. In order to fulfil the gaps, the present study asks two research questions: (1) how do micro-blog branding communication contributes to CBBE and (2) how do micro-blog affordances influence CBBE of brands?

Using qualitative interviews, this study constructs a model of how a brand's CBBE is affected by micro-blog branding communications based on both reflexive qualitative data analysis and template analysis. The model constructed in this study (see Figure 24) is the first that systematically reflects how brands' CBBE is affected in micro-blog branding communications and how eWOM affordances influence those effects. Creation and strengthening of strong, favourable and unique brand associations are through each stage of the eWOM branding communication. Brands' learning, consideration and choice advantage are all achieved in the CBBE chain. Frequency and richness of brand-related exposure affects learning advantage. Consumer confidence is increased by positive user and usage imagery, knowledge co-creation by peers as well as increased trust to brand-published content. High trust to brand-published user-generated content significantly influences the consideration advantage. Also, consistency between (1) presupposition and micro-blog brand experience as well as (2) consumption involvement and brand publicity both enhance the consideration advantage. Last but not least, solution provision to recognised consumer problems largely increases the choice advantage. Immediacy of brand touch point in micro-blog space also drives consumers to make brand choice. Besides, permanency of micro-blog content makes eWOM in such a medium searchable, which indicates long-tail effect of micro-blog branding communications on brands' CBBE. The model also points out that in order to avoid brand dilution, brands need to monitor content valence and existing or possible breach of consistency. This model bears significant contributions to theoretical understanding of CBBE creation and strengthening in micro-blog brand eWOM communication. It is the first that explores brand eWOM in social media context from the CBBE perspective. It also contributes significantly to the practice of branding in social media platforms, especially micro-blogs, that the model should be used as guidance for brands, both well-established and start-ups or small ones in designing and implementing their social media branding strategies.

Keywords: micro-blog branding; CBBE (customer-based brand equity); eWOM/WOM; Sina Weibo; user-generated content (UGC)

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Author’s Declaration

Academic Thesis: Declaration Of Authorship

I, ……………………………………….Yun Xu……………………………………………………….
declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

Conceptualisation of Micro-blog branding: exploration of micro-blog branding communication and how customer-based brand equity (CBBE) is affected by such communication

I confirm that:

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Signed:
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Date: ……**September 30th 2015**……………………………………………………………………….

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I would also like to thank Debbie Evans for troubling her with endless emails about everything related to university administration during these years.

I want to dedicate this thesis to the love you have given, the caring you have shown, and the time passed.

Definition

Customer-based brand equity (CBBE):

'The differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand' Keller (1993:1)

User-generated content (UGC):

In this thesis, UGC has been limited to digital content created by users in regard to products or services in a business context.

Micro-blog:

A form of social media tool (Harris, 2009) that allows interactive user communication by using no more than 140 characters (English characters or Chinese words) and a wide range of other media formats such as photos, hyperlinks, and videos.

Micro-blog branding (MBB):

Branding activities that are carried out in micro-blog space.

Abbreviation Used:

BPC: Brand-published content

BPUGC: Brand-published user-generated content

MBB: Micro-blog branding

UGB: User-generated branding

UGC: User-generated content

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Background of Research

1.1.1 Customer –based Brand Equity and Digital Branding in Social Media

A brand is a set of mental associations that add value to the products and services with the brand name. Those associations are widely recognised to be exclusive, salient and desirable in order to deliver promises to customers who purchase the offerings of the brands (Kapferer, 2008). Though brand names are adding value to brand offerings, not all names are brands and not all brands are salient. In order to build salient brands, firms need to establish an identity, express meanings of the brand, evoke brand-related response and create relationships with consumers (Keller, 2008). Therefore, brands need to firstly be known and then to be preferred by consumers when a purchase intention occurs (Das, Stenger and Ellis, 2009).

The branding process involves both giver and the receiver of a brand message. The two parties involved should be attached equal importance to by brands. To consumers, choosing a brand is aligning with a set of values. The utility of those values to generate profits is understood as brand equity, which is a broad and complex concept. Brand equity can be viewed from both a finance-based and a customer-based perspective. Though highly accountable, the finance-based brand equity viewpoint overlooks the active functionality of customers (Keller, 1993; Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011), the other party that the branding communication cannot exist without.

Customer-based brand equity is then the subject field to be studied in this research. It has been pointed out in existing research that favourable, strong and unique brand associations create learning, consideration and choice advantages of the brand (Keller, 1993; Keller 2008; Das, Stenger and Ellis, 2009). Those advantages together then create and maintain brand saliency. The practice of building and maintaining salient brands has been extended from the physical world to the virtual world. The new media environment, especially social media, has complicated the marketer's perennial challenge to build and maintain effective branding programmes. Social media, as a new and now prevalent media format, has been praised for its affordances to drive meaningful connections and provoke brand-related conversations with online consumers (Briggs, 2010). When, where and how elements of brand touch points occur have been altered by the new communication space (Edelman, 2013). Very recently, Kimmel and Kitchen (2014) proposed that lessons learnt at the academic interface with how brand-related social media communication is carried out and managed would assist businesses that are striving to integrate social media in their digital branding strategies. Practically, recent advice given by branding professionals (Tempkin Group, 2012) also urged business to empower consumers to talk about them, a process during which integrated customer experience can bring a wide range of grassroot possibilities.

The new media environment has made it more complicated to conduct effective and efficient brand communication so that marketers should consider alternative communication options available to create favourable brand knowledge. Communication is needed by brands to deliver brand promises. It is regarded as the brand's weapon (Kapferer, 2008 since brand-related communication can unveil what is invisible and hidden about the brand. Keller (2010) further explained this statement and stated that the roles of communication in building brands are informing, persuading and reminding consumers either implicitly or explicitly about value propositions of brands. Simply explained, communication can tell consumers what the brand is about, where to purchase the offerings and why the offerings should be considered and chosen. Two decades ago, Keller (1993) emphasised non-traditional media such as in-store advertising, sports and event sponsorship and product placement in movies and TV programmes. Those tactics, though novel then, are obsolete now; instead, the new non-traditional media is the social media that is accessible on the go.

Social media has been praised for its potential to drive meaningful connections and provoke conversations with online consumers engaged in brand-related conversations (Briggs, 2010). The adoption of social media in doing branding activities is inevitable in today's multichannel communication marketplace. Multiple channels for communication are justified for the fact that different consumers have differentiated preference on media on which they are connected to brands and to other consumers (Keller, 2010). It has also been suggested that different communications play different roles and have different impacts on any particular consumers (Zhang *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, when multiple channels are used together, they allow maximum coverage of target segments and allow different levels of consumer engagement. As regard to branding, social media is indeed one of the multiple channels that brands choose to connect consumers and a place where consumers are interconnected.

From the CBBE perspective, the most useful and simplest way to gauge the effectiveness of a branding activity is to judge whether it has contributed to brand awareness or to establishing or strengthening certain brand associations (Keller, 2008). Figure 1 below illustrates a simple three-step model by Keller (2008) to assess the effectiveness of brand-building communications. The differences between current and desired brand knowledge can be attributed to the branding activities adopted. In the new media environment, social media branding activities allow brands, organisations and brand managers to be more responsive to audiences and consumer demands (Cadogan and Diamantopoulos, 1995; Yan, 2011), which clears a path to more consumer insights. Besides, it also allows top management teams to grasp the prevailing mood of their customers for strategic management (Yan, 2011). Thus, the communication step in the 3-step model is characterised by much higher interactivity, more immediate response and closer and more direct connection between brands and consumers.

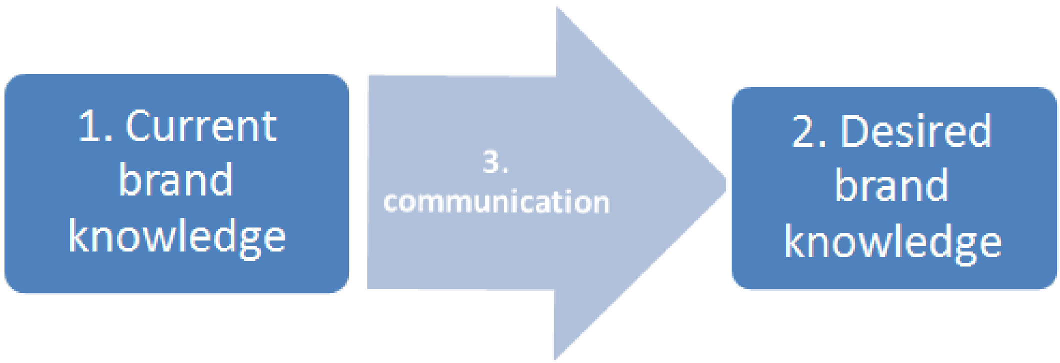

Figure 1 Model for effective marketing communication, source: Keller (2008:233)

Changes to the communication step have made many traditional branding strategies obsolete and unsustainable (Edelman, 2013). Changes have been brought to consumer touch points, especially when, where and how those touch points are handled (Edelman, 2010). In this sense, when, where and how current brand knowledge develops to desired brand knowledge through social media communication is a novel field to both researchers and branding practitioners. The rocketing academic interest in the use of social media technologies in branding activities is witnessed in recent few years. Three years ago when Foster, West and Francescucci (2011) first published a paper about online consumer segmentation and online brand profiles, they pointed out the scarcity of research on social media as a branding tool. During the three years, there has been increased attention from both practitioners and academics on the ever-increasing usage of interactive social media communication approaches in conducting branding activities.

It is widely recognised that the brandsphere (De Chernatony, 2006) has changed dramatically recently due to technological advancements and ever-increasing penetration of interactive technologies into branding practice (Christodoulides, 2009). The core of digital branding in Web 2.0 is all about facilitating conversations around the brand (Christodoulides, 2009). In practice, company-provided information is perceived to be less relevant and less important by consumers (Christodoulides, 2008). This phenomenon gives rise to user-generated content (UGC hereafter) websites, which have become globally prevalent places to visit online (Sanderson, 2007). These online portals have become great media for brands as they allow the brand managers to address consumers both individually and communally (Simmons, 2008). Also, they allow brands to detect consumers insights not visible elsewhere in the physical world (Ruane and Wallace, 2014). Figure 2 shows the Web 2.0 branding framework proposed by Christodoulides (2009).

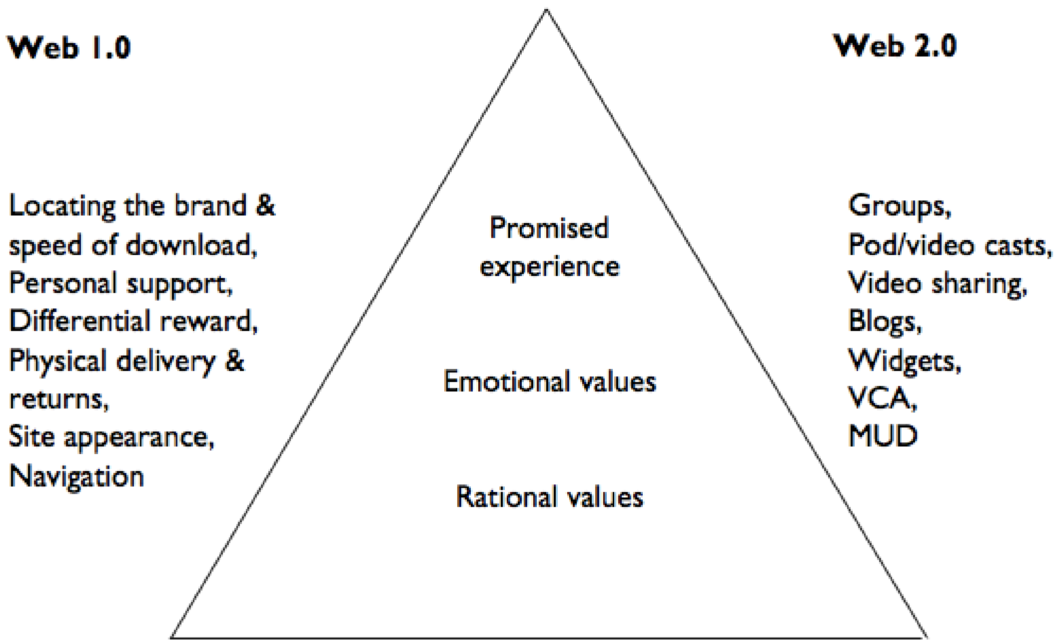

Figure 2 Web 2.0 branding framework, source: Christodoulides (2009:143)

The examples of popular branding activities in Web 2.0 shown in Figure 2 feature two characteristics of social media communication, (1) UGC and (2) high interactivity. Firstly, UGC and eWOM now account for a large proportion of online branding activities, with much higher interactivity between brands and consumers, as well as among consumers, compared to traditional offline branding programmes. For example, Keller (2007) estimated that average consumer in USA involves in more than 120 brand-related WOM per weak, a number that Kimmel and Kitchen (2014) expected to have increased substantially since then.

Branding in Web 2.0 is also characterised by high interactivity. The model of communication now in social media remains what Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) suggested more than a decade ago, a triad of customer-customer-brand relationship. What has been further developed are various affordances of Web 2.0 applications and the metamorphosis of consumer behaviour in social media platforms (this will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3). The high interactivity brought by Web 2.0 applications implies that brands need to monitor social media space for possible damaging content and respond appropriately to them (Gensler *et al.,* 2013) because not reacting to those content reflects negatively on the brands. Meanwhile, monitoring brand-related content may also provide the brands with great opportunities to interact with consumers in a positive way that increases the brands' assets. Becoming talkable (Kimmel and Kitchen, 2014) is a must for brands after having digital presence.

The rise of those interactive activities especially user-published brand-related content has been witnessed in the Web 2.0 era, when millions of consumers online have started publishing their own brand-related content (Christoph, 2010). The Web 2.0 era is then characterised by this participatory feature (Musser and O'Reilly, 2006). As Brogi (2014) emphasised, this participatory feature of Web 2.0 distinguishes itself from Web 1.0 since the latter features Internet-enabled delivery of content while the former is participation-based Internet community. The participatory feature of the Web 2.0 activities brings about another characteristic of the era, which is coined by Christodoulides (2008) as the grassroots movement. This is also why Fournier and Avery (2011) called social media 'people's media'. People's participation in social media activities accounts for more than 1/3 of their working day (Lang, 2010). However, the effectiveness of such participatory activities in creating and communicating brand-related content has not yet been explored in depth (Christoph, 2010). Academic literature on user-generated content from the perspective of branding and brand community is rather in its initial phase (Christoph, 2010). Kozinets (2008) identified pro-active pattern of consumer feedback, referring it to 'eTribalised branding' activities. Other strands of literature probed into co-creation of value of brands from an open-source brand perspective (see Pitt *et al.*, 2006).

Though social media branding has received popularity in branding practice, how it is contributing to brand knowledge, the reflection of customer-based brand equity, has not been comprehensively explored. The research into UGC branding and eWOM branding is relatively new, with a small number of researchers having explored on one or several facets of the issue, but by no means holistically. Existing literature pointed out that CBBE corresponds to the mental associations activated in response to brand names (Krishnan, 1996). In this regard, previous research has slightly touched the linkage between WOM and brand equity by saying that those mental associations could be gathered from a wide range of sources such as eWOM communication (Krishnan, 1996; Bombauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011). How eWOM and UGC affect brand equity has also been briefly explored, though not in depth, by some researchers. Christodoulides *et al.*'s (2012) study on the relationship between UGC and CBBE was the first contribution to such a knowledge gap. Their findings generally suggested that UGC does influence CBBE. UGC can be used to increase CBBE through improving brand positioning with consumer needs and wants explored in eWOM communication. They pulled an example of a promotional strategy that encourages self-expression to illustrate their point that strong brand associations can be created and fostered if the brand allows and encourages meaning co-creation by brand and consumers through UGC and eWOM.

Being first of its kind, Christodoulides *et al.* (2012) did contribute novel knowledge to the understanding of UGC and brand equity in social media. However, their exploratory process was dependent purely on testing correlations between variables identified in previous research while they themselves argued strongly that how UGC influences CBBE is a novel area that has not been thoroughly examined.

Much existing literature has not distinguished user-generated branding from user-generated content. As Christoph (2010) introduced, user-generated branding (UGB), shall be defined as *'the strategic and operative management of brand related UGC to achieve brand goals'* (Burmann and Arnhold, 2009:66). UGB is then a narrower term with a specific characteristic that it is brand-related (Christoph, 2010). In terms of valence of UGB, it represents both positive content such as brand advocates' dedication and negative content such as customer complaint, in line with the valence of UGC. Based on what is suggested by Burmann and Arnhold (2009), the effectiveness of UGB then should be measured by whether the pre-set branding goals are achieved.

Several strands of research have yielded valuable results contributing to the understanding of UGB or brand-related UGC. The strand of study most relevant to UGB in digital branding in social media is the discussion around how UGB travels in such a platform. One fundamental change to branding practice brought by social media-powered social networks is the increasing blurring line between brand-centric networks and consumers' social networks online. Brands now, besides acting as a facilitator of brand-related communication among consumers, converse with consumers at personal level as if they were peers to consumers via participation in communication involving consumer-generated brand stories (Gensler *et al*., 2013). This phenomenon has several implications to brand managers. First of all, brand-centric networks and consumer social networks are now intertwined with each other in social media (Gensler *et al*., 2013), because of which brands are now playing similar roles as consumers with similar behaviour such as posting, responding, commenting, and reposting. The disparity between brands and consumers is blurred gradually by this metamorphosis of brand role in such a medium. Looking into this context, Goldenberg, Oestreicher-Singer, and Reichman (2012) proved that the dynamic presence of both networks improves consumer satisfaction.

Further, because of the intertwining of both networks, consumers can derive brand meaning from others who are also the brand's users (Gensler *et al.*, 2013). Consumers' inference about and attitudes towards a brand are inevitably affected by their exposure to UGB published by a brand's users in such a medium. Naylor, Lamberton and West (2012) showed that social media has made brand identity reflected by user image and user lifestyle more complicated, more visible and more impactful. This expands the role of brand social identity with knowing or unknowingly participation from various parties in creating brand-related content in social media. As Gensler *et al.* (2013) rightly commented, brand's social network created in such a context consists of voluntary connections from consumers, which makes brand management in such a context more complex.

Thirdly, due to the fact that brands are now acting as if they were just other consumers in social networks, originally inanimate brands are becoming humanised through intimate communications with average consumers in social media. The animation of brands makes consumer-brand relationship interesting and more complicated. As sharply pointed out by Gensler *et al*. (2013), existing studies have largely ignored the social role a consumer assigns to a brand in his or her network. Due to the presence and intertwined status of both networks discussed above, consumers choose roles for brands existent in their social networks. What role is assigned and how the selection process goes affect consumers' strategy to communicate with the brands (Naylor *et al.*, 2012). Thus, understanding of this assignment process is critical. It is still unknown whether brands will be elevated to intimate friends that indicate a strong tie between brands and consumers or maybe positioned as an acquaintance for infrequent request when need is concurrent. Aggarwal and McGrill (2012) coined these two identities as partners and servants. So far, what the core and peripheral cues for the formation of these two differentiated roles are unknown.

The effectiveness of social media platforms as branding tools has been suggested and bragged about by practitioners and various media sources. For example, 67 per cent of Twitter users who follow a brand report purchasing of the brand's offerings; 60 per cent of Facebook users who like a brand's fan page are more inclined to recommend the brand to their friends. More interestingly, 74 per cent of consumers' buying decisions are affected by the input of their connections on social media (Pentina, Zhang and Basmanova, 2013). Though these numbers are anecdotal and have not been empirically collected or academically tested, they does suggest unprecedented power of social media to affect brands.

With many studies and book publications emphasising the significance and effectiveness of branding in digital space with social media affordances and how brand management should adapt itself to this new medium, it is intriguing to question how customer-based brand equity is really affected by social media communication, a field that has not been very much explored. Though existing research discussed above has explored UGC in brand-related communication, the blending of brand-centric and consumer networks as well as the challenges for brand management in such a context, brand knowledge, the reflection of customer-based brand equity has not been much looked into. With social media branding on the agenda of many firms and social media consumers potential assets for brands (Wallace *et al.,* 2014), understanding of how CBBE is affected by social media affordances and corresponding consumer behavior in UGB communication is of significant contribution to contemporary branding practice and research.

1.1.2 eWOM Communication in Micro-blog Space

Two most crucial dimensions of social media branding practice are content and channels. The most utilised content for branding practice in social media is eWOM. Silverman (2005) once astutely called WOM as the oldest yet the newest marketing medium. Despite the language awkwardness, his description presents exactitude. It is the oldest because physical WOM caught the eye of academic since the 1950s (see Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). It is the newest because WOM communication has always been evolving, with new models of communication being formed one after another (see Kozinets *et al*., 2010). Though eWOM branding is still a novel field of academic contributions, there are several strands of studies in general field of eWOM marketing. Some focused on the conceptualisation of eWOM marketing (see Harrison-Walker, 2001; Mazzarol et al., 2007; Sweeney et al., 2009); some focused on consumers' motivations to participate in eWOM communication (see Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006; Daugherty *et al*., 2008 and many others); some explored the ties between individuals in eWOM communication (see Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006; Aral and Walker, 2012; Iyengar, Van den Bulte, and Valent, 2010); and others on the persuasiveness of eWOM (see Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011).

The second dimension is the channel for branding practice. Comparing to blogs, online forums and social networking sites such as Facebook, micro-blog space has been less studied in terms of social media affordances, let along the effect of those affordances on customer-based brand equity. Brands are investing money and efforts in carrying out branding programmes on micro-blog space. Each of the top ten brands on Twitter has more than 4 million followers (Social Baker, 2014). Twitter now also has more social care demand from customers than Facebook (ibid).

The success of micro-blogging service in marketing practice has long been suggested (Harris and Rae, 2009). Micro-blog space allows users to create and disseminate brand related content in a wide range of formats including text, video, image, embedded links. Micro-blogs are also archival (Jansen *et al*., 2009). Besides, micro-blog users are suitable targets for branding programmes. Based on their analysis of micro-blog users' characteristics, Harris and Rae (2009) suggested that micro-blog users must be recruited by brands with the objective to increase awareness.

While Twitter has been touched by some studies so far, other micro-blogging services in the digital world have not been much explored (Yu, Asur, and Huberman, 2011). Taking China's No.1 micro-blogger service Sina Weibo as an example. It ranks 5th on the list of global media brands (BV4 and HWZ, 2012) and attracts more visits than Twitter (Experian Hitwise, 2012). It has been studied from the perspective of trending topics (Yu, Asur and Huberman, 2011). However, its practice in doing branding has not been much explored.

Micro-blogs are chosen as the context for four reasons: (1) its increasing popularity as a branding tool, (2) the immediacy of brand sentiments, (3) its multi-media formats, (4) its relative permanency, (5) its feasibility to target appropriate segments, as well as (6) the micro-blog based brand communities.

2.3.4.1.1 Increasing Popularity as Branding Tool

First of all, micro-blogs, justified as a format of social media platforms by Harris (2009), are **increasingly popular** among both online consumers and brands. Micro-blogging services, such as Twitter, have been hailed as the next media for marketing (Yan, 2011). Yan also justified Twitter's affordance in branding communication with a number of hugely successful micro-blog branding examples including the Obama Campaign and the Oprah effect.

Secondly, micro-blogs are places where the social media branding goals can be achieved. Yan (2011) proposed nine goals of social media branding practice, which include (691-692, see Table 3):

Table 1 Nine goals of social media branding, source: Yan (2011)

1. Building a sense of membership or citizenship with the organisation,
2. Encouraging the acceptance and communication of brand values
3. Encouraging the audience to engage in dialogue and promote the brand,
4. Helping the organisation find and maintain a competitive advantage,
5. Informing the vision behind the brand and building differentiation for it,
6. Acting as a check on whether the brand is being properly communicated and understood by the audience,
7. Building positive brand association,
8. Building the perceived quality of the brand, and
9. Building greater awareness of the brand to audiences that it has not yet reached.

As shown above, the last three objectives are closely related to CBBE and goal No.1 to No.6 are means to achieve these three objectives.

Also, according to Silvermann (2014), measurement of return on investment (ROI) on online branding should not be examined in the traditional form of ROI; rather, it should be measured in the form of return on expectation (ROE). He strongly suggested that measurement of branding activities should be based on the goals of the branding activities (ibid). When the goals are broad such as driving motivation and increasing awareness, the measurement should be in line with the goals in investigating consumers' increased brand awareness and enhanced motivation in participating in brand-related activities rather than chasing number of clicks or purchase volume.

This study is then meaningful since a very limited number of studies so far are responding to those social media branding goals proposed by Yan (2011). This study, instead, will fill this gap. It aims at exploring how micro-blog branding activities may affect CBBE, whose core elements are brand association and brand awareness as stated in Yan's (2011) social media branding goals.

Micro-blogging services are tools with affordances for brands to achieve the above-listed goals. In fact, brands have already invested money and efforts adopting micro-blogs. Figure 7 below shows the TOP 10 brands on Twitter as in January 2014 (Social Baker, 2014). Each of the TOP 10 brands has more than 4 million followers on Twitter. The big number of followers indicates the potential connections brands can build with consumers in the micro-blog space. Also, according to Social Baker (2014), Twitter now is receiving more demand for customer care by online consumers compared to Facebook (see Figure 8).

#	Profile	Following	Followers	Rating
1.	Vine (@vineapp)	14	7 975 079	5
2.	Samsung Mobile (@SamsungMobile)	296	7 142 741	8
3.	Starbucks Coffee (@Starbucks)	84 527	5 631 465	6
4.	HootSuite (@hootsuite)	1 456 521	5 626 322	5
5.	iTunes Music (@iTunesMusic)	11	5 340 597	6
6.	Samsung Mobile US (@SamsungMobileUS)	19 869	5 065 227	8
7.	Android (@Android)	26	4 447 618	3
8.	Dior (@Dior)	101	4 110 827	3
9.	Microsoft (@Microsoft)	1 053	4 002 559	8
10.	CHANEL (@CHANEL)	0	4 000 751	5

Figure 3 Top 10 Twitter brands, source: Social Baker (2014)

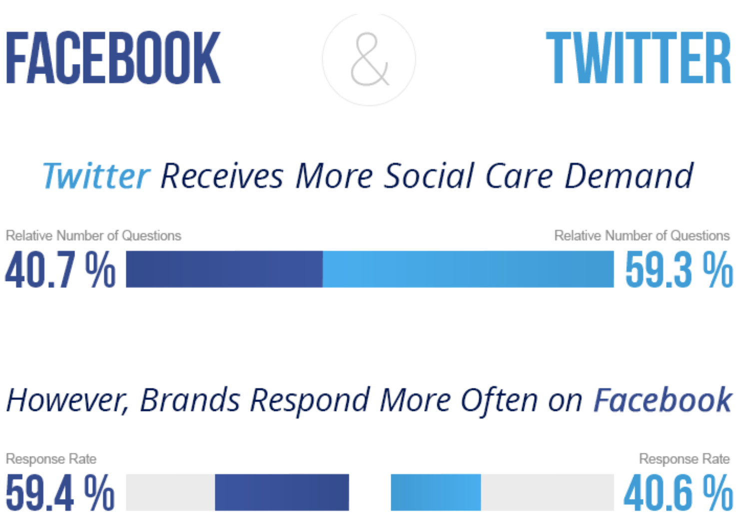

Figure 4 Twitter is gaining ground in social customer care, source: Social Baker (2014)

Though there are myriad statistics about Twitter usage in branding, very few academic studies have touched this field. Jansen *et al*.'s (2009) study pioneered in exploring brand-related micro-blogging activities. Jansen *et al.* (2009) identified three features of branding activities on micro-blogging services, including (1) brand related content, (2) freedom in terms of sender-receiver connection, and (3) a unprecedented larger scale. Senders of information could post brand-related content anywhere and at any time when Internet is accessible. On the aspect of information dissemination destination, such content could be received at a variety of platforms such as desktop, laptop, tablets and smart phones. As regard to the connectedness between senders and receivers of such content, it is assumed to be less strong compared to that in physical WOM communication (ibid).

2.3.4.1.2 Immediacy of Brand Sentiments Sharing

Besides the three features mentioned above, brand related micro-blogs also differ from other brand related WOM since micro-blogs offer immediate brand sentiments at critical points in the decision making process, which trigger affective reactions (Jansen *et al*., 2009). Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold (2011) are also supportive of this idea by commenting that eWOM could happen quite near or even at purchase point. This immediacy of micro-blogs affects consumers' brand experience sharing actions. As stated by Tse and Zhang (2013), this immediacy feature allows consumers to share their feelings for and attitudes towards a brand almost spontaneously. The spontaneity of those feelings and attitudes may imply stronger feelings and attitudes perceived by others. Therefore, micro-blogs have been recognised as a powerful eWOM medium for its widely circulating and instant nature (Tse and Zhang, 2013). Two nodes connected in such a platform are easily exposed to updates from each other when refreshing the service page on any available gadget. In this sense, brand related micro-blog content may affect not only consumers' perception of brand associations but more importantly consumers' decision of purchase, which is the source of profits for brands. For the fact that micro-blogs are often accessed by consumers on their mobile phones and as mobile phones are now an indispensable part of people's daily life (Goel and Devi, 2014), this immediacy nature that allows consumers to engage themselves in brand-related conversation in micro-blog space any time any where pushes companies to adopt micro-blog strategies.

The immediacy of micro-blogs weapons consumers up for spontaneous brand experience sharing, which requires cautious and timely response by brands. Since brands exist in micro-blogs as users, other users also expect immediacy of brand response. Thus, when brands utilise this space to get animated and converse with consumers, they are expected to be active users in such a medium. As Gensler *et al.* (2013) suggested, brands that utilise social networking services to converse with consumers should really act as a node in the social networking space. Besides being there, brands need to provide enticing content and acknowledge consumers' contributions by responding to them actively.

2.3.4.1.3 Multiple Media Formats Available in Micro-blog Posts

Thirdly, branding practice on micro-blogs is supported by various content formats available on this platform. With 5 years of development, the media formats integrated into a single piece of post on micro-blogging services have evolved and are now highly plural. Kimmel and Kitchen (2014) mentioned that eWOM are likely to be written. Though their statement is right in blogs and online brand communities, it is lopsided in micro-blog context. Micro-blog services have updated their affordances with various media formats available for consumers to generate their own brand-related eWOM. Take Sina Weibo, the number one micro-blogging service in China as an example, (Figure 9), a single Weibo post allows the users to use multiple media formats to share content with their chosen network. Media formats accepted include emotion figures, photos, video clips, hashtags, long posts (which is long blog shown in the format of a photo) and many more.

Figure 5 Sina Weibo single post multiple media formats integrated, source: Sina Weibo

As Gensler *et al.* (2013) stated, channels pose restrictions on amount or type of content that can be created. Thus, what micro-blog provides consumers is real multi-media experience based on various content formats. This multi-media experience offsets micro-blog's restriction on word limit. Online narratives are treated as valuable tool for examining consumer behavior online since they allow consumers to talk at length about their brand-related experience (Ruane and Wallace, 2014). As richness of narrative content is positively associated with perceived value of such content (Sweeney *et al.*, 2012), micro-blog's word limit in each post surely challenges the performance of those narratives. With multimedia formats allowed on China's Sina Weibo, the word limit is offset since richness of content is increased with details that can be shown in other media formats rather than text alone.

2.3.4.1.4 Relative Permanency

Furthermore, though micro-blogs are immediate, they are not temporary. Micro-blogs are **archival** in the sense that its content can permanently exist on the Internet (Jansen *et al.*, 2009) as long as those with editing access do not delete it. The content is retrievable as long as it is archived. Compared to offline WOM communication, eWOM in micro-blogs does not perish unless deleted.

2.3.4.1.5 Appropriate Online Branding Targets

Fifth, micro-blog users are **appropriate online branding targets**. Harris and Rae (2009) suggested that for business that seeks to increase product awareness it should be keen to recruit micro-blog users because they are (1) early adopters of novel technologies; (2) well-educated; (3) receptive to online media advertising and willingly to involve in product-related communication; and (4) influential in their own network and potentially powerful in shaping brand profile by interacting with their followers positively. While the online leadership has been described and explained by others (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010) and the early adopter characteristics explained by diffusion of innovation theories (Rogers, 2003), no other literature so far has proved either the well-educated facet in the micro-blogging service user profile. Nevertheless, given micro-blog users' early adopter characteristic and willingness to receive and disseminate brand-related content, micro-blogs are appropriate venue with potential for branding activities. Brand executives also perceive such social media platforms as appropriate venue for branding since their targeted audiences are visible and accessible there (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014).

Also, the role of users in micro-blog information processing is consistent with role of consumers in WOM communication. Allsop *et al.* (2007) justified consumers' dual identity as both information givers and receivers in WOM communication . Furthering that, Gong, Stump and Li (2014) emphasised micro-blog users' dual identity as passive content consumers and active content generators. It is also evident that online social networking channels, of which micro-blog is one, are providing an increasingly attractive ways of rapid and widespread dissemination of brand-related eWOM (Kimmel and Kitchen, 2014b). Thus, micro-blog is justified as a medium for consumers to carry out eWOM communication in which brands can facilitate, engage in and manage brand-related eWOM.

2.3.4.1.6 Micro-blog based Brand Communities

Sixth, brands' pages on these micro-blog platforms can be seen as social media-based brand communities where consumers gather together and communicate in the manner of consumer-consumer-brand triads. In their recent study, Laroche, Habibi and Richard (2013) mentioned that social media-based brand communities manifest the common features of brand community and social media, and become the ideal place for creating, negotiating and sharing contents, meaning, and value between like-minded people such as brand enthusiasts (Habibi *et al*., 2014). Micro-blogging space fits the description of brand communities by Schau *et al*. (2009) and Kuo and Feng (2013). They highlighted that members in brand communities are advocates and preachers of the brands. In this sense, it is highly unlikely that negative content is created and distributed in such an area because most brand community activities are to justify and evangelise the brands (Schau *et al*., 2009).

These social media-based brand communities are distinguished from other brand communities online and offline for their low initial investment and greater reward (LaPointe, 2012), which is the result of higher scalability of communication in such platforms (La Pointe, 2012; Habibi *et al.,* 2014). They are also featured with high centrality on the brands. These communities set the stage for members to involve in contextual communication through which meaning and values of the brands are shared and co-created with brand sentiments (Habibi *et al.,* 2014). These sources encompass social capitals owned by and shared among the community members. Through sharing and exchange of these social capitals, the invisible brand community becomes visible as one can *'weave through the fabric of the community'* (McAlexander *et al.,* 2002: 39).

Brand communities are recognised as important marketing tools, so understanding of who joins the communities for what reasons bears significant managerial implications (Brogi, 2014). Social media based brand communities advanced the original community types by diminishing the geographical boundaries between community members. With social media globally accessible, the shared identity among community members transcends geographical boundaries. These social media-based brand communities are particularly existent for brands and their users. Their functions are well summarised in the definition that is given by Muniz and O'Guinn (2011, cited in Brogi, 2014:386) that they are *'dispersed networks of social relations marked by affinity and emotional bonds situated within consumption context'*. Thus, in comparison to other communities, brand communities are more focused with discussions and stories specifically about brand experience.

Though social media provides venue for brand communities, such communities and brand-consumer social media-based brand communications are fundamentally different in nature. Though they both connect consumers, empower them and enable many-to-many communication (Gensler *et al.,* 2013), they are in fact nurturing different brand-consumer relationships. Relationships in brand communities are strong and stable (Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann, 2005) but relationships in social media-based brand communications are casual and non-committed (Gensler *et al.*, 2013). This difference sheds light on the loose link between consumers and brands in social networking based brand communication. Also, it implies possible consumer offense to brands since consumers are not as positively and strongly connected to brands as in conventional brand communities. When consumer post negative brand-related stories on micro-blogs, the content also benefit from large scalability, instantaneity and peer trust just as positive content. However, what Gensler *et al.* (2013) suggested is just their speculation, which needs more empirical evidence to support.

In short, it is worthwhile studying micro-blog branding activities since the venue is increasingly popular, its users are appropriate online branding targets, and its potential in doing branding activities and achieving branding goals has been seen.

2.3.4.2 Chinese Micro-blogging Service

2.3.4.2.1 Lack of Research Attention in Chinese Micro-blogs

China's micro-blog service is the context of this study given the popularity of the service and the lacked academic attention given to it. Chinese social media, compared to its Western counterparts, have remained much less touched even given their rapidly increasing popularity. This section then describes Chinese social media, especially the dominating micro-blogging service in China – Sina Weibo, which is also called a hybrid of Facebook and Twitter.

To date, though use of social media in branding is less researched, the application of social media in general marketing field in the western world has been studied by quite a large number of researchers. Prior studies covered a wide range of topics including the consequences of WOM adoption (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006), attributes that affect consumers' reliance on WOM to make purchase decisions (Duhan et al., 1997), how features of messages influence WOM adoption (Li and Zhan, 2011), consumer's motivation for creating user-generated WOM content (Daugherty, Eastin and Bright 2008) and many more. While the synergy of social media and eWOM is exploited as a business process in the Western world, the Eastern online counterpart remained comparatively barely mentioned by academics. For instance, though China's Sina Weibo is among the top 5 most valuable social media brands globally, it has not been studied much in regard to how brands can take advantage of the medium. The popularity of China's social media and its potential value for brands has been recognised by western academics. For instance, very recently Kimmel and Kitchen (2014a) highlighted the acceleration of brand-related eWOM in China. Thus, this study, by studying China's micro-blog space Sina Weibo, fulfils the gap and explores brand-related micro-blog communication among Chinese consumers, of whom 144 million are monthly active users (Handford, 2014).

2.3.4.2.2 Popularity of Chinese Social Media, Sina Weibo in Particular

The Eastern online social media adoption by brands and consumers is worth exploring given its popularity among users. According to TechinAsia (2012), Chinese's occupation of all Internet content has raised from only 9 per cent in 2000 to 24 per cent at the end of 2011, only 3 per cent lower than English (Figure 10). The increasing use of Chinese features growing population of Chinese net-citizens and also implies a large opportunity for brands, especially foreign and global brands to connect with Chinese consumers if the brand-related content is accessible in Chinese language on platforms frequently visited by Chinese consumers. Unlike in Western countries where Facebook and Twitter dominate the social media, Chinese consumers make their presence elsewhere on Sina Weibo.

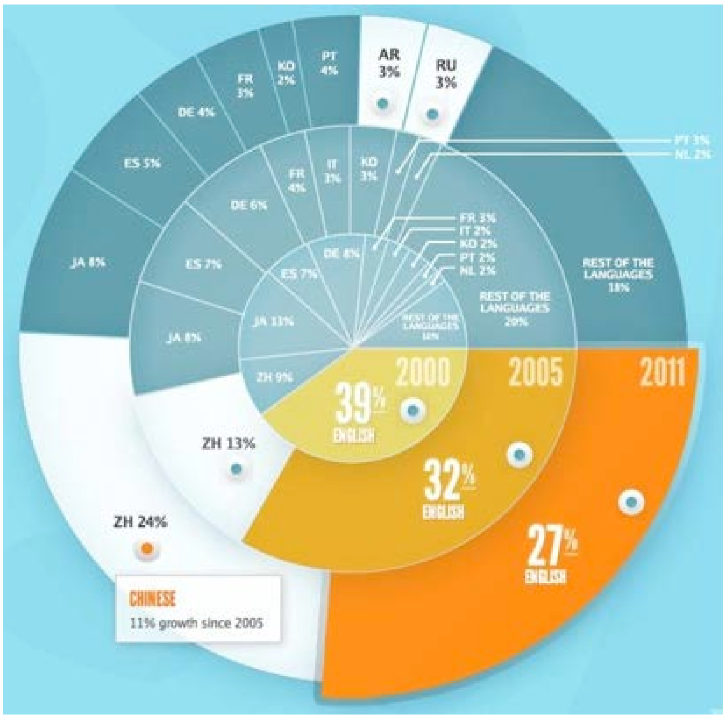

Figure 6 Language frequently used in WWW, source: TechinAsia (2012)

After its launch in August 2009, Sina Weibo's number of registered users reached 503,000,000 in 2012 (Sina Corporation 2012). In less than three years' of its debut, Sina Weibo was accredited the 5th most valuable social media brand in 2012 with an estimated brand value of $3,994 million (BV4 and HWZ 2012,Figure 11). It has been suggested that social media from emerging countries like China are becoming increasingly significant in the future and Chinese social media's huge success is attributable to the rapid growth of net-citizen population, the more active feature of Chinese social networks site users and the trust issue of many online shopping sites in China that turns net-citizens to make purchase transactions on reliable social networks (BV4 and HWZ 2012). China's micro-bloggers are also reported to be among the world's most active micro-blog users. Sina Weibo accounted for one out of 106 Internet visits in China, while Twitter accounted for one out of every 227 in the UK (Experian Hitwise 2012). Given Weibo users' active participation in micro-blogging activities, it would be unwise for brands to stay away from this platform. Although Sina Weibo's global presence due to limited regional language is doubted (BV4 and HWZ, 2012), the launch of its English interface accessible on various portable gadgets makes its stance in global social networks' market more promising.

Figure 7 Global social media brand ranking, source: BV4 and HWZ (2012)

In 2009, Harris and Rae (2009:31) commented that entrepreneur individuals who adopted the social media marketing strategy were *'ahead of the curve'*, now it would be unwise if a brand does not actively have its social media presence when its existing and potential customers are relying heavily on social media in their daily life. It justified great opportunities for foreign and global brands to take advantage of this emerging micro-blogging service and increase Chinese consumers' awareness of their names. However, without knowing who they are and what they are interested in, there is no effective way of knowing customer insights. Though there are many reports about Sina Weibo, there has been very limited amount of academic research about consumer insights in Sina Weibo and how businesses could take advantages of those interactive consumer activities.

In academia, Yu, Asur, and Huberman's (2011) study on trending topics in Sino Weibo is one of the very limited existing studies in such a field. They pointed out that unlike on Twitter, trending topics on Sina Weibo are formed almost entirely due to repeated re-posts of UGC (Yu, Asur, and Huberman 2011). This implies possible eWOM branding communication on Sina Weibo as successful branding strategies since UGC is a significant component of brand-related eWOM which may increase CBBE largely, especially brand awareness and brand image. This then explains the interest of this topic and justifies the purpose of the study.

In practice, companies have noticed the importance of Sina Weibo in consumers' life and established their Weibo presence. As in January 2014, there were 404,000 enterprise Weibo accounts (CIW, 2014). The top three ways through which users follow enterprise Weibo are advertising, friends' repost and enterprise brochures (CIW, 2014). Also according to CIW (2014), Weibo users followed enterprise Weibo accounts mainly for information seeking, interaction with enterprises, and customer service purposes. Given the wide adoption of Sina Weibo by enterprises and consumers' response to enterprises' Weibo presence, it is worth investigating how specifically micro-blogs could affect brands on Sina Weibo.

2.3.5 Challenges and Threats

There are possibilities for brands to optimise social media affordances, such as those discussed in Section 2.3.4, for benefits (Sundararjan, *et al*., 2013). However, challenges come along with those benefits when adopting social media branding strategies (Yan, 2011). The first and foremost is trust. Since trustworthiness is one of the most prominent features of social media communication, how to establish and manage trustworthiness properly should be put under close scrutiny. Second of all is market segment. It is the brands' obligation to find out who the market segments are and whether the particular segments demand high level of interaction on social media. The third challenge is the authority and authenticity of brands' social media account as well as brand-published content (Yan, 2011). Gensler *et al*. (2013) argued that perceived authenticity of content depends on the role the brand is playing in the content creation process. For instance, Ertimur and Gilly's (2012) research on the authenticity and reliability of UGC shows that unsolicited UGC is authentic yet not reliable; while solicited UGC is perceived with lower authenticity but higher reliability. The role of brands is observer in the first case but a facilitator in the second. Ideally, the authenticity and the reliability of the content is high when the content is not solicited but at the same time implying trace of brand initiative. The fourth and last challenge here is how to properly and effectively measure the success of social media branding activities (ibid).

Furthermore, social media communication is also capable of undermining brands. As analysed by Yan (2011), social media communication is a wasted opportunity if the so-called communication is only a one-way channel. On the other hand, under the situation of two-way communication, the misuse of any social networking sites can also be defined as failure to engage sincerely (Yan, 2011). The threats also come from the fact that consumers, just like brands, are also utilising social networks to facilitate communication. The digital, visible, ubiquitous, real-time and dynamic features of social networks (Hennig-Thurau *et al*., 2010) augment such threats. The consequent decrease of control in the hands of brand managers over brand-related content due to the lose of pivotal authorship triggered by social media has posed threats to brands since even those brands who are not digitally visible in social media face the challenge from consumers with negative UGC (Gensler *et al*., 2013). Without brands' self-defence, consumers become authority with their authentic voice. As confirmed by Gensler *et al*. (2013), UGC through social media is much more impactful than content spread through traditional channels because of those features listed above. UGC can be devastating to brands. As proved by the 'United breaks guitar' storytelling in the format of songs, the stories told and shared by consumers can determine a brand's general image, associations (Holt, 2003), and eventually consumer actions (Gensler *et al*., 2013).

Finally, though challenges and threats have been recognised, consumer insights on how those challenges can be overcome and how those threats can be eliminated are not yet elaborately explored.

1.1.3 Gap Identified

The two fields presented above are separate yet interwoven in terms of today's digital branding practice. A large number of brands are adapting their integrated marketing communication to the rapidly changing digital world. However, even with digital branding one of the most trendy topics all over the Internet and business related publications, there is only a small number of academic papers regarding social media branding activities (see Gensler *et al*., 2013; Habibi, Laroche and Richard, 2014). Furthermore, very limited academic attention has been laid on how social media communication has influenced customer-based brand equity. Habibi, Laroche and Richard (2014) have also highlighted this particular gap in their most recent study. They articulated that despite the growing popularity and growing agreement on the influence of social media on marketing communication of brands, a systematic understanding of how brand managers should behave on these platforms to communicate with consumers remains elusive. The influence of eWOM on brand equity has been briefly mentioned by Gunelius (2011) that it is a cost effective approach to increase brand awareness, increase brand recognition and recall, and strengthen brand loyalty. However, without a thorough exploration of the facts, variables and connections, what Gunelius (2011) suggested may only be an assertion based on no reasonable grounds.

The second gap identified is the lack of attention in micro-blog branding activities. With its prevalent popularity now, this under-researched area deserves an increased amount of attention. As pointed out by Gensler *et al.* (2013), channel is a crucial dimension of digital branding practice. Smith, Fischer and Yongjian (2012) suggested that in comparison to other social media channels, Facebook and Twitter are more suitable for brand-related talks. Their findings indicate the survival and potentially booming growth of brands in such social networking services. Looking into this context, Jansen *et al.* (2009) pioneered this field of micro-blogs by choosing Twitter as the subject of study. However, they did not propose a theoretical framework despite of their findings which suggest that micro-blog is a promising tool for branding activities. This current research then further extends the scope of study in this subject field to another micro-blog service – China's Sina Weibo, which ranks 5th on the global media ranking (BV4 and HWZ, 2012).

In short, this author saw a gap in academic research to explore micro-blog branding communication and how customer-based brand equity may be influenced by such communication.

1.2 Research Aim and Objectives

The research aim is to explore micro-blog branding activities in building salient brands and how customer-based brand equity (CBBE) is influenced by those activities. In order to achieve the aim, two objectives were set:

Objective 1: to find out how micro-blog branding activities affect the elements of customer-based brand equity,

And

Objective 2: to explore how micro-blog affordances affect the customer-based brand equity of brands on micro-blog space?

1.3 Visual Presentation of Structure

Chapter 2 Customer-based Brand Equity: Concepts, Practice and Context

2.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 briefly introduced the background of this research and pointed out the aims. Since the two key phrases in the aims are CBBE and micro-blog branding, the literature review is twofold, dedicating one chapter to each aspect respectively. This chapter then is going to take the readers through a systematic review of CBBE, the core terminology of the study, from its concepts and practice. The review is divided into two parts. The first section (Section 2.2) is going to present the theoretical underpinning of CBBE concepts, discussing how important a salient brand is to a business and how CBBE is a major component of the theory of brand and branding. The second section (Section 2.3) is going to lead the readers to another path, which is yet highly relevant to the research aim -- the practice of branding in digital platforms. The presentation of literature review in this aspect starts broadly on the general digital branding and then narrows down to how CBBE is affected in social media branding. The second section also justifies why Chinese micro-blogging service is a suitable and feasible research context.

2.2 Brand and Brand Equity: Concepts

2.2.1 Theoretical Understanding of the Brand Definition

Understanding and investigation of any issues should begin with a solid comprehension of the definition of any terminologies involved. Thus, this chapter starts from a discussion of what a brand entails. As Keller (1998) noted, brands are '*a set of mental associations, held by the consumer, which add to the perceived value of a product or service*' (Keller, 1998 cited in Kapferer, 2008:10). More recently, Kapferer (2008:2) explained the function of a brand as to '*encapsulate in its name and its visual symbol all the goodwill created by the positive experiences of clients or prospects with the organisation, its products, its channels, its stores, its communication and its people*'. This is not merely a praise of the function of a brand, but also an indication of the importance of controlling and managing those contact points.

Between those two definitions, Keller's (1998), though proposed one decade before Kapferer's, is perceived as more suitable in this study. In contrast, Kapferer's definition of brand is too positive. Kapferer (2008) emphasised that associations should be exclusive, salient and desirable and that the essence of a brand is its capability to influence consumers. While the latter half of the statement is true, the former half is not always achieved without difficulty. Kapferer's definition overlooks the possibility that brand contact points are not always exerting positive influence on consumers and that the mental associations held by consumers can also damage the brand values. Thus, Keller's (1998) is adopted in this study since it is more comprehensive.

However, Keller's (1998) definition of brand is not perfect. Kapferer (2013) challenged Keller's definition on two grounds. First, brand offerings are isolated from the brand as if they are not an integral entity in Keller's definition. Kapferer (2013) pointed out that it is a misinterpretation since Keller's (1998) definition of brands narrows the function of brand to merely communication work, which is not the case in real business. Brand management, suggested by Kapferer (2013), begins exactly with the product/service offerings as the prime container of the perceived value mentioned by Keller (1998). Then communication is there to structure and shape tangible and intangible perceptions. Secondly, Keller's (1998) definition focuses only on consumer cognition; however, more dimensions of a brand, such as emotional appeals, should be included. The inclusion of emotional components is also supported by neurosciences (Kapferer, 2013). As neuroscientists suggest, brands have emotional bonds with consumers and they are merely names if they do not drive consumer emotions (Kapferer, 2013). Therefore, though Keller's definition of brands is adopted in this study for its inclusion of both positive and negative mental associations, product/service offerings as well as emotional dimensions should be taken into consideration when comprehending the meaning of brand.

Though brands have symbolic associations, they are more than just symbols. Brands are promises delivered by brand managers to consumers. Braun (2004), who uniquely discussed the meaning of brand from different philosophical perspectives, emphasised that brands are much more than just a set of superficial attributes related to products or services. Not all names are brands. A name is made into a brand when it has exclusivity, differentiability, intensity, and trust attached to mental associations provoked by the name in consumers' minds (Braun, 2004; Kapferer, 2008).

Thus, it can be briefly summarised that brands are the promises that they attempt to and that they successfully deliver to consumers through what they do and how they do it in the marketplace. Brands initiate with the offerings they provide in which their promises are projected and in which perceived brand values (both cognitive and emotional) are added onto the value of the offerings.

2.2.2 Salient Brands

As pointed out above, not all names are brands. A highly salient brand boasts brand awareness of both depth and breadth (Keller, 2008), which means that the brand can be easily retrieved in consumers' memory in a variety of settings as well as being purchased under multiple conditions. According to Keller (2008), there are four essential steps in building a salient brand: association encoding, linkage formation, response evoking, and relationship management, which raise a set of basic questions about a brand – brand identity, brand meaning, brand response and brand relationships (see Table 1 for the linkage between the four above-mentioned steps and the fundamental questions.

Table 2 Four steps in building salient brands and fundamental questions asked in each stage, adapted from Keller (2008)

Four steps (summary)	Four steps (detailed)	Fundamental questions
Association encoding	Create identification of the brand and ensure an association of the brand in consumer's minds with specific product class or customer needs	Who are you? (brand identity)

Linkage formation	Firmly establish the totality of brand meaning in the minds of customers by strategically linking a host of tangible and intangible brand associations with certain properties	What are you? (brand meaning)
Response evoking	Elicit the proper customer responses to this brand identification and brand meaning	What about you? (brand response)
Relationship management	Convert brand response to create an intense, active loyalty relationship between customers and the brand.	What about you and me? What kind of association and how much of a connection would I like to have with you? (brand relationships)

Successful brands, according to Keller and Lehmann (2006), should then succeed in five aspects, namely, awareness, association, attitude, activity, and attachment. Those five As make up a hierarchical ladder that brands need to climb for success (Keller and Lehmann, 2006 cited in Das, Stenger, and Ellis, 2009). The five As structure the foundations of brand knowledge in the minds of consumers (Keller and Lehmann, 2006) and are found in both academic models related to brand and branding (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2003) and commercial applications of branding activities (Das, Stenger, and Ellis, 2009). These five As are also quite similar to the four steps in building salient brands illustrated in Table 1 above. The identification questioning process (awareness) asks the question of who the brand is. The association construct of successful brand asks question of what the brand is and the attitude construct forms the preliminary linkage between customers and brands. The activity construct corresponds with the response evoking process introduced by Keller (2008), eliciting proper customer responses to identification of brands and perception of brand meanings. The attachment process manages the relationship established in the previous stages, converting brand response to intense, actively loyalty relationship.

Das *et al.* (2009) further adapted the five As from Keller and Lehmann (2006) and divided them into three stages of relationship building with consumers: cognizance, connection, and affiliation. The first step, cognizance, is about establishing familiarity and salience in consumers' mind to initiate trial. Connection then links consumers to brands, resulting in brand preference in the decision-making process and increased purchase propensity. Affiliation, the third step, deals with not only the current purchase disposition but also potential purchase in the future (Das *et al.*, 2009). Thus, for a brand to be sustainably successful, it must triumph in the first two stages with long-term vision in accomplishing the third stage mentioned above.

In a short summary, the common part of the different explanation of how to build salient brands suggests that brands, in order to be salient, a brand must first be known to its consumers, and then be connected to its consumers in a way that is favourable to the brand and that is able to trigger favourable consumer actions.

2.2.3 Branding: Delivery of Promises from One Party to the Other One

As what has been pointed before, brands are intangible promises and the delivery of these promises through cognizance, connection and affiliation involves two parties, one who gives the promises and the other one who receives. In the context of marketplace, the former party are the brand managers and the latter one the consumers. Braun (2004) stated that brands exist only in the minds of consumers in the form of thoughts. Therefore, after the brand promise is made, how it is delivered to the consumers is also of importance to brands.

Though pointed above that the delivery of brand promises involves two parties, it would be an assertion to say that branding is divided into two separate processes. Regarding this, Braun (2004) argued that what brands represent and what consumers perceive the brands as should be regarded as an integrated entity. Given the point that brands are much more than superficial product or service-related attributes but promises they make to deliver, branding is not only about attribute creations. Rather, it is about creation and delivery of values. It has also been illustrated in Braun's (2004:104) statement that *'choosing a brand is therefore much more about aligning with a set of values than it is about buying a set of attributes'*. Thus, from the perspective of customers, purchasing from a brand is the outcome of aligning with the brand's values.

2.2.4 Customer-based Brand Equity

2.2.4.1 Definition of Brand Equity: the Broader View

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, to consumers, choosing a brand is *'aligning with a set of values'* (Braun, 2004:104); to businesses, successful brand promise delivery generates values to the businesses in terms of profits. Thus, as commented by Kapferer (2008), brands are intangible assets that produce added profits to the business. The utility of the brand promise to generate profits is what is widely understood as brand equity. It is the value added to the brand offerings. Thus, broadly understood, it is linked to associations with the brand name or design that enhances the value of the offerings and differentiates highly recognised brands from less recognised ones (Keller, 1993; Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011).

2.2.4.2 Finance-based versus Customer-based Brand Equity: the Narrower View

Brand equity is a complex concept. As Winters (1991) noted, *'if you ask ten people to define brand equity, you are likely to get ten (maybe 11) different answers as to what it means'* (p.70). The concept is multi-facet and too complex that a unanimously agreed definition is hard to achieve. The complexity of the concept is also due to the fact that it can be viewed from two different perspectives, one from the financial perspective and the other one from the customer-based perspective. From the financial perspective, brand equity is regarded as the monetary value of a company that is associated with the brand name (Kapferer, 2008). The increased accountability across all business areas calls for greater recognition of brands' asset value in terms of their ability to generate future cash flow (Das, Stenger, and Ellis, 2009).

However, while highlighting accountability, finance-based view of brand equity overlooks the active functionality of customers. Customers, who are the receivers of brand promises are who make actual behavioural changes (i.e. purchase decisions) that contribute to brand profits. Differently, from a customer-based perspective, brand equity is not measured by monetary value or possible future cash flow. Rather, it refers to customers' brand related beliefs. These beliefs comprise consumer attitudes and behavioural intentions (Keller, 1993; Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011). In recent years, this viewpoint has garnered considerable attention from both researchers and brand managers. Several conceptualisations of customer-based brand equity exist and these conceptualisations have offered valuable insights into the process that consumers view and evaluate brands.

2.2.4.3. Customer-Based Brand Equity: Definition and Core Elements

2.2.4.3.1 Comparison of Different CBBE definition and the Author's Choice

It has been pointed out that CBBE and brand equity are often used interchangeably (Netemeyer *et al.*, 2004). However, the interchangeable usage of these two terms is theoretically wrong since brand equity and CBBE are not equivalent alternatives. The most important studies so far on CBBE are that of Aaker (1996) and Keller (1993), which established the theoretical foundation for both conceptual and measurement studies on CBBE. Customer-based brand equity is defined by Keller (1993:1) as *'the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand'*. This concept of CBBE consists of three major ingredients, "differential effect", "brand knowledge" and "consumer response to marketing" (Keller, 1993). According to Keller's (1993) interpretation of the three elements, differential effects refer to different responses consumers give to the marketing mix of a branded product compared to the same marketing mix of the same product without a brand name. Brand knowledge is defined in terms of two components, brand image and brand awareness. Consumer response to marketing is defined as consumer perceptions of the products / services, attitudes, and corresponding behaviour evoked by the marketing programmes of the brand (ibid).

Based on Keller's (1993) definition of CBBE, various researchers have proposed their own definition of CBBE. For instance, Vázquez *et al.* (2002) highlighted ex-post brand utilities in their definition and ignored ex-ante brand utilities (i.e. utilities obtained prior to purchase). They maintained that CBBE means the *'overall utility that the consumer associates to the use and consumption of the brand; including associations expressing both functional and symbolic utilities'* (Vázquez *et al.*, 2002). Their definition fails to capture consumers' perception of brand utilities before the actual behavioural change, which affects consumers' decision-making. The ex-ante utilities have been gradually becoming the focus of investigation in studies in today's information economies (see Christodoulides and de Chernatony,2010).

Then, based on Keller's (1993) definition of CBBE, Christodoulides and de Chernatony's (2010:9) definition covers perspectives of both cognitive psychology and information economics, i.e. brands are '*a set of perceptions, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours on the part of consumers that results in increased utility and allows a brand to earn greater volume or greater margins that it could without the brand name'*. Though Christodoulides and de Chernatony (2010) pointed out the loophole of Vázquez *et al.*'s definition, their own suffers from the omission of the influence of negatively perceived brands on consumer decision-making. Their definition depicts CBBE as always linked to increased utility and greater profitability, which asserts that CBBE certainly lead to positive purchase decisions.

Table 3 Comparison results

	Merits	Demerits
Keller's definition (1993)	Unbiased in terms of valence of brand associations and is more holistic compared to the other two	Proposed two decades ago, may not be in a timely fashion Comparatively vague in constrast to Christodoulides and de Chernatony's
Vázquez *et al.*'s (2002)	Covered both functional and symbolic utilities of brands	Failed to capture ex-ante brand utilities
Christodoulides and de Chernatony's (2010)	Most recent Explicit and clear	Asserted that CBBE always leads to purchase decision

After the comparison of three different definitions analysed above (see Table 2), the author found Keller's (1993), though proposed two decades ago, is the most neutral one without any bias on either the brand equity is established or the valence of brand equity. As a result, Keller's (1993) definition of CBBE is used in this study as the theoretical foundation.

2.2.4.3.2 Core element: Brand Knowledge, A Brief Introduction

According to Keller (1993), brand knowledge is the key antecedent of CBBE. It is conceptualised as nodes in consumers' mind to which a number of brand associations are connected (ibid). It is further divided into two elements, brand awareness and brand image. Though customer-based brand perceptions have been explained by researchers who came up with models of different variables (Table 3), brand awareness and brand associations are two most commonly agreed constructs by various researchers. Therefore, these two constructs are further discussed in detail in this study as the core elements of CBBE (See Figure 1 for Keller's CBBE model).

Table 4 conceptual researches on CBBE, source: the author

Study	Dimensions of CBBE
Aaker (1991, 1996)	➢ **Brand awareness** ➢ **Brand associations** ➢ Perceived quality ➢ Brand loyalty
Blackston (1995)	➢ Brand relationship (i.e. trust, customer satisfaction with the brands)
Keller (1993)	➢ **Brand knowledge which includes brand awareness and brand image**
Sharp (1995)	➢ Company/**brand awareness** ➢ **Brand image** ➢ Relationships with customers/existing customer franchise
Berry (2000)	➢ **Brand awareness** ➢ Brand meaning

Yoo *et al.* (2000)	➢ brand purchase intentions ➢ willingness to pay
Burmann *et al.* (2009)	➢ Brand benefit clarity ➢ Perceived brand quality ➢ **<u>Brand benefit uniqueness</u>** ➢ Brand sympathy ➢ Brand trust

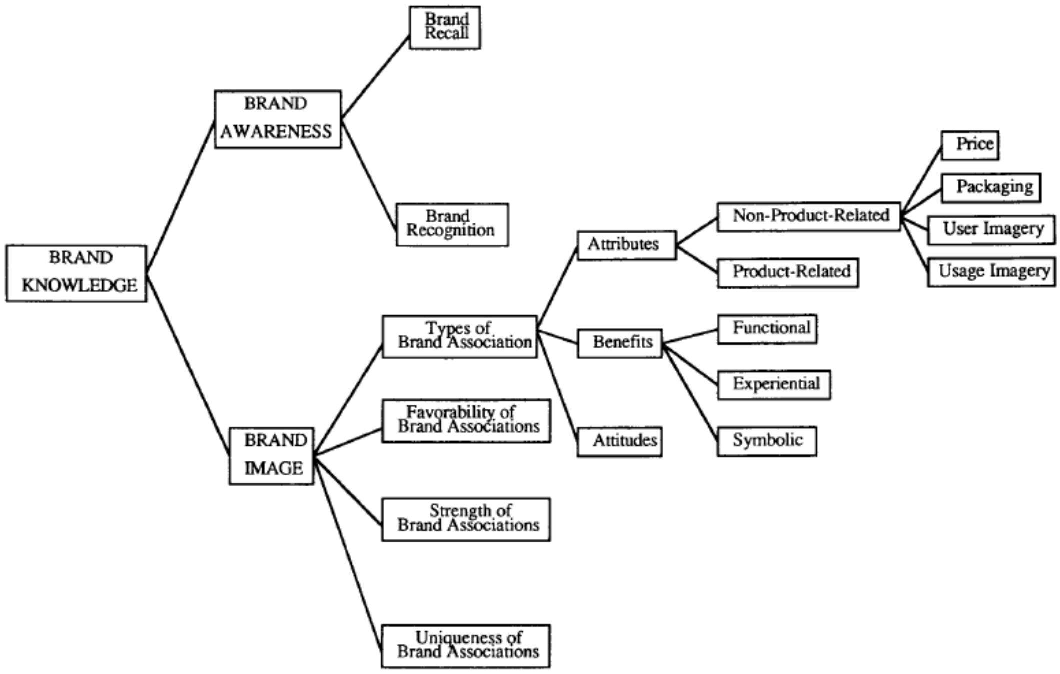

Figure 8 Brand knowledge components, source: Keller (1993:7)

2.2.4.4 Brand Awareness

Firstly, brand awareness as shown in Figure 1 below consists of two dimensions: brand recall and brand recognition. Bettman (1989) suggested that brand recognition is more influential when consumer decisions are made at the purchase point, whereas brand recall is more influential when decisions are made away from purchase point.

As noted by Keller (2008), one solid way to increase brand recognition is to repeat consumer exposure to brand-related information since repetition increases recognisability. On the other hand, in order to increase brand recall possibilities, one brand needs to forge strong associations between the brand and relevant product category or relevant consumption cues (ibid).

2.2.4.5 Brand Associations

Brand associations are the most basic elements that comprise brand image, which, along with brand awareness, creates brand equity. Brand associations are individually distinct in terms of their favourability, strength, and uniqueness (Keller, 1993, see Figure 1).

2.2.4.5.1 Favourability

According to Keller (1993), brand associations are different based on how preferably they are evaluated by the consumers. He also emphasised that the success of a marketing programme lies in favourable brand associations created in consumers' minds (Keller, 1993). When a consumer believes that the brand attributes and associations satisfy their needs and wants, they form overall positive attitudes towards the brand and its offerings. MacKenzie (1986) also added into the discussion of favourability that consumers actively judge the favourability of a brand association only when they find the association salient. Thus, it is difficult to create a brand association when consumers do not perceive the attribute in question as important. In Web 2.0, since consumers and brands are co-working on a variety of aspects, one could assume that favourable brand associations are now co-produced by consumers and brands, as the same as what has been emphasised before in Section 2.2.3 that branding activities is co-work by brand promise givers and receivers.

2.2.4.5.2 Strength of Associations

Not all associations are equally considered by consumers in the decision making process. Regarding this, associations are characterised by their respective connection to the brand. The level of connection is coined as the strength of associations (Keller, 1993). The strength depends on how the association is formed and how it is maintained as an element of brand related memory in consumer's mind. It relates to both the quantity and quality of information processing of brand related information (Keller, 1993), which projects two aspects of information processing, namely, 'how much' information is involved and 'how' the information is encoded and stored in consumers' memory. This claim is not merely an assertion. It is supported by previous research on memory theories, for example, the level- or depth-of-processing approach [1]held by Craik and Lockhart (1972) and Lockhart, Craik, and Jacoby (1976); durable memory concept[2] by Loftus and Loftus (1980); and information retrieval process[3] by Tulving and Psotka (1971).

In this sense, the strength of brand associations contributes to the level of brand familiarity held by the consumers, which theoretically is referred to as brand awareness. Both the 'how much' information and 'how' the information is encoded and stored in consumers' memory discussed above relates to brand recognition as explained by Keller (1993, see Figure 1). The more information is stored and the more familiar the consumer is with the brand, the more easily brand-related memory could be triggered by certain demand cues; hence, the higher brand awareness the brand possesses.

2.2.4.5.3 Uniqueness of Brand Associations

As the third measure of brand associations, uniqueness of brand associations refers to the exclusivity of brand positioning reflected by the associations. As rightly remarked by Aaker (1982), the essence of brand positioning is a sustainable competitive advantage endued to the brand by the unique product proposition that gives the consumers an absorbing reason for positioning the particular brand as a prior one in the consideration set. The more unique the associations are, the more absorbing the reason becomes.

2.2.4.6 Advantages Brought by CBBE

Previous sections demonstrated core elements of CBBE. How these elements could be applied in practice to generate profits can be explained by three advantages of CBBE identified by Keller (2008), which are learning advantages, consideration advantages, and choice advantages respectively.

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[1] Level-of-processing approach: more meaning processed in the encoding process, stronger the associations are.

[2] Durable memory concept: memory is durable that once the information is stored the strength of associations fades away very slowly.

[3] Information retrieval process: information may not be retrieved successfully without strong associated retrieval cues.

Learning advantage, as the most basic set of advantages among these three, refers to the advantage brought by CBBE to help consumers know the brand better. Learning advantages affects the establishment and strength of brand associations. It affects brand familiarity by either forming new brand nodes or adding additional associations to an existing brand node (Keller, 2008). Ideally, favourable, strong and unique brand associations contribute to forming favourable, strong and unique new brand nodes or adding favourable, strong and unique associations to an existing brand node. Hence, perceived brand image is improved, which then positively affects brand knowledge. In short, increased CBBE helps consumers to know a brand better.

Consideration advantages mean that raising the brand awareness increases the likelihood of a brand being included in the consideration set for a particular purchase intention. Also, according to the part-list cuing effects (Roediger, 1973; Nickerson, 1984), recall of certain information can inhibit the recall of other information; thus, recall of certain brands in the consideration set can inhibit the recall of other brands. When fewer brand names are recalled in the consideration set, competition of brands becomes less fierce and competitive advantage is given to the brand with the most consideration advantages.

Choice advantages are the third set of advantages. According to Keller (2008), even under the condition that there is no significant association attached to certain brands, brand awareness increases the probability of a brand being recognised and included in the consideration set. Brand awareness is then believed to influence consumer purchase motivation since lack of perceived differences between brands leads to unmotivated consumers. In addition, in the condition of lacking brand knowledge, brand familiarity drives consumer decision-making. Hence, increased brand awareness and positive brand image contribute to higher profits in both high-involvement situations when consumers are aware of the brands and low-involvement situations when consumers are not familiar with brand names in the consideration set.

In conclusion, when the three advantages are processed by a brand, it wins the competition of gaining consumer attention and preference by letting consumers know better the brand and its offerings, position it in the consideration set ahead of its competitors, as well as be motivated by brand knowledge to make decisions favourable to the brand.

In a brief summary of the three advantages brought by CBBE (see Figure 2 below), all three advantages contribute to consumers' positive decision making. They comprise a sequence that consumers know the brand, know more about it, consider it when a demand cue arises, and make favourable choice to the brand by ruling out other brands.

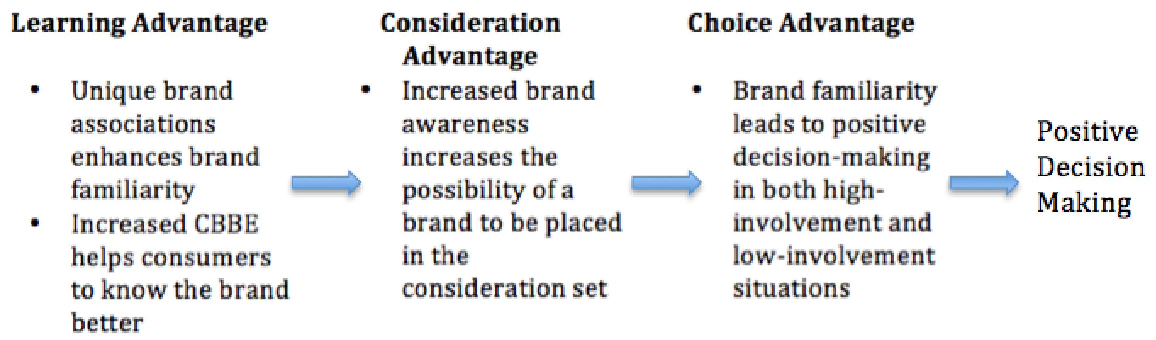


Figure 9 Three advantages brought by CBBE, source: the author

2.2.4.7 Attitudinal Equity and Behavioural Equity

Based on categorisation of brand equity into two levels, attitudinal equity and behavioural equity (Das, Stenger and Ellis, 2009), learning advantage and consideration advantage can be categorised as attitudinal advantage and choice advantage categorised as behavioural advantage. Attitudinal equity represents brand preference generated from consumers' experience with the brand. It also represents how consumers perceived the ability of a brand to respond to certain demand, which links back to Keller and Lehmann's (2006) concept of brand relevance. However, relevance stays on attitudinal level and it along does not surge purchase decision. An essential factor that pushes consumers forward in the decision-making process is familiarity with the brand and its offerings. The higher the degree of familiarity is, the higher the propensity of brand choice is (Das, Stenger and Ellis, 2009) as discussed earlier in brand's choice advantage.

Once the propensity of brand choice reaches what is required for actual behavioural change, consumers make choice that favours the brand. Behavioural equity then accounts for consumers' actual brand choice (Das, Stenger, and Ellis, 2009). In this sense, attitudinal equity is the antecedent for behavioural equity; thus, without certain level of cognizance (related to learning advantage) and connection (related to consideration advantage), the affiliation activity (related to choice advantage) will not happen.

2.2.4.8 Summary of Salient Brand Establishment

Based on the review of literature presented from Section 2.2.4.3 to Section 2.2.4.7, a CBBE chain of salient brands is illustrated in Figure 3. There are five stages of establishing CBBE for salient brands. The first stage is the creation of favourable, strong and unique brand associations, which is the most basic and core dimension of brand knowledge (Keller, 1993, see Figure 1). The second stage is the 5 As demonstrated by Keller and Lehmann (2006) which was discussed in Section 2.2.2 previously. The third stage is the three stages of brand –customer relationships proposed by Das, Stenger and Ellis (2009) also explained in Section 2.2.2. The fourth stage is the three advantages of CBBE suggested by Keller (2008), which was explained in Section 2.2.4.6 and the last stage the two levels of customer-based brand equity as discussed in Section 2.2.4.7.

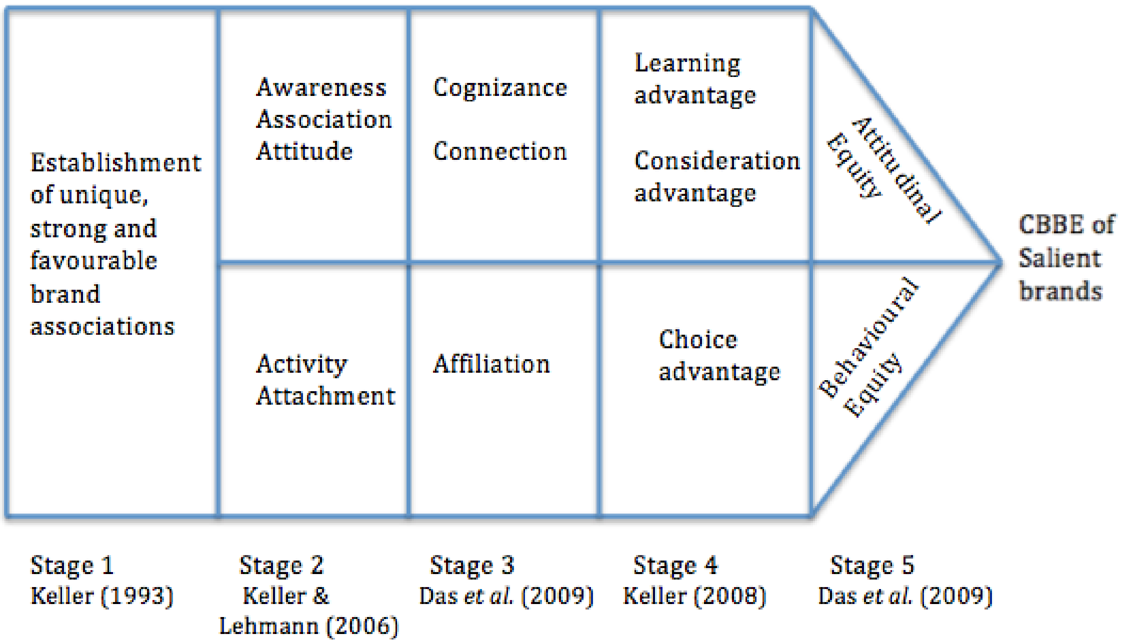


Figure 10 CBBE chain of salient brands, adapted based on Keller (1993), Keller and Lehmann (2006), Keller (2008), and Das, Stenger and Ellis (2009)

Based on the categorisation of CBBE into attitudinal and behavioural levels, the chain is also divided vertically into two. In the upper section of the chain, brand awareness and brand associations contribute to the cognizance and connection between consumers and brands, which endow the brands with learning advantage and consideration advantage. These two sets of advantages further develop into attitudinal equity held by the brand. In the lower section of the chain, consumer activities and attachment with the brand lead to affiliation between the brand and its consumers. Affiliation gives the brand choice advantage, which further develops into behavioural equity held by the brand. Together, attitudinal equity and behavioural equity constitute the customer-based brand equity of salient brands.

2.3 Social Media Branding: How CBBE is Affected

Section 2.2 reviewed core literature in conceptual CBBE studies and boiled those conceptualisations down to a CBBE chain of salient brands as illustrated in Figure 2. While Figure 2 illustrates how ideally the CBBE of a salient brand is established, real word practice is more complicated. Establishment of those equities depends on various branding activities through which brand promises are designed and delivered to consumers. Given the rocketing development of social media as described in the introduction chapter, branding in the digital age has received much attention in recent years. Section 2.3 then reviews literature that covers how CBBE is assumed to be affected in social media branding context.

2.3.1 Brand Awareness

As Foster, West and Francescucci (2011) pointed out, one of the most salient factors that make online branding practice successful is the familiarity that online consumers hold for brands. Foster *et al*.'s (2011) argument is supported theoretically by marketing and branding concepts. For instance, Keller (1993) noted that brand familiarity is related to brand awareness and Alba and Hutchinson (1987) interpreted awareness as the accumulative response to brand related experiences by consumers. Keller (1993) further added that anything that causes consumers to accumulate brand related experiences or increase brand related exposure has the potential to increase brand familiarity that leads to enhanced brand awareness. Brand awareness is then expected by brand executives as an outcome of adopting social media branding strategies (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014) since they believe such communication increases consumers' familiarity with the brands. With social media applications becoming an indispensible part of consumers' daily life, increased exposure to brand-related information can be achieved if social media branding activities are conducted properly. Thus, brand familiarity is presumed to increase when consumers are exposed to large amount of brand-related social media content.

The extent to what brand awareness may be increased through social media communication depends on the persuasiveness of the content. As illustrated by Schank (1999) and Woodside (2010), UGC that contains provoking stories, personal experience, as well as person-to-person and person-to-brand relationships within specific contexts is easily retrievable from memory. The high retrievability of those content would increase the possibility of brand recognition. In such a way, brand-related content in UGC may affect CBBE in the direction the content is pointing at.

2.3.2 Brand Associations

Brand associations are most basic components of brand image (Kapferer, 2008). Influenced by social media, it is harder for brand managers to control brand image. In traditional branding theory, brand image is easily congruent with brand identity since brand managers control both (Gensler *et al*., 2013). On the contrary, brand cultural theorists argued that consumers no longer absorb brand knowledge passively in new media. Rather, it is a *'repository of meanings for consumers to use in living their own lives'* (Allen, Fournier and Miller, 2008:782). This statement points out the subjective initiative of consumers in shaping brand knowledge. As Gensler *et al.* (2013) stated, all stakeholders of a brand are active creators of brand meanings. The rise of social media, the propensity of instantaneous and large-scale consumer-to-consumer interaction, as well as easiness to generate UGC put the spotlight on not only recognising but also, if possible, managing what Gensler *et al*. (2013:244) called *'the multi-vocal nature of brand authorship'*. This particular authorship is now realities with social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram on the branding agenda of many companies.

Though Gensler *et al.* (2013) pictured a promising scenario of how brand image is positively affected by social media branding, so far, existing research has not covered how specific brand associations or their dimensions (i.e. favourability, strength and uniqueness) are affected by social media branding activities. Nevertheless, a limited number of studies have touched perceived consistency of branding efforts in social media. Branding efforts from various parties involved in collective creation of brand image and brand meanings may not reflect same or similar brand associations due to the high level of fluidity of conversation in the digital world. Thus, the consistency of branding efforts may be in question when consumers do not perceive brand associations created by various sources as consistent.

First of all, theoretically, congruence of brand associations is a factor that influences the favourability and strength of brand associations. It refers to the extent to which brand associations of a particular brand share common ground (Keller, 1993). Congruence of brand associations determines their cohesiveness. As pointed out by Keller (1993), Brand image cohesiveness may determine consumers' holistic attitudes towards the brand.

From the CBBE perspective, cohesiveness here may determine the attitudinal equity as proposed by Das, Stenger and Ellis (2009, see Figure 2). Thus, when brand image is not consistent across the set of attributes related to the brand, diffusion of brand image may occur and consequent potential harm to the brand may happen. For instance, consumers may only be able to retrieve a small number of brand associations that may not represent the essence of the brand due to confusion triggered by the diffused brand image.

Practically, brand's user and usage imagery, which belong to non-product related brand associations in brand image dimension, is an aspect that brand managers cannot afford to ignore in the digital age. In the context of social media that features highly interactive interpersonal communication, user and usage imagery could be both positively and negatively affected by consumers who share their brand experience by texts, photos, and videos. Keller (1993) supported this argument by pointing out that user and usage imagery can be formed by indirect content through the articulation by the market segments in WOM. An assumption here is that the content valence exerts influence on the non-product-related attributes that further affects the functional, experiential and symbolic benefits of the brand. Since brand managers have relatively limited control over the generation, delivery, response and dissemination of such (Ennew, Banerjee, and Li, 2000; Jansen *et al*., 2009) due to its user-generated nature, unfavourable links between user and usage imagery to other brand associations may pose potential harm on the brand image.

2.3.3 Brand Dilution

Following what is suggested above, social media is capable of undermining the brand it stands for by diluting brand value. There are several circumstances that brand dilution might happen due to social media communication: lack of communication, negative content as well as aggregate influence of consumer backfire.

The first and foremost circumstance is lack of communication. Social media is highlighted with its participatory feature (Brogi, 2014). Thus, social media communication is a wasted opportunity if the so-called communication is only a one-way channel. On the other hand, even though under the situation of two-way communication, the misuse of any social networking sites can also be regarded as failure to engage with consumers sincerely (Yan, 2011).

Brand dilution can also happen when online consumers are exposed to negative comments about the brands on an individual level. Bombauer-Sachse and Mangold's (2011) study suggested that even brands that enjoy abundant perceived brand knowledge are not immune from potential detrimental effect of negative brand-related articulation. They argued that product reviews published in vivid formats and on such an interactive platform such as social media could strongly affect consumer judgements. Accordingly, negative online product-related articulations may have detrimental effect on CBBE and lead to brand equity dilution (ibid). Their results clearly showed the destructive effect of negative brand-related online articulation on CBBE dilution, which should not be neglected by brand managers.

Brand dilution can also happen on an aggregate level. As pointed out by Chatterjee (2011) and Sen and Lerman (2007), traditional offline WOM happens among one consumer and only a few others via peer-to-peer information exchange. In such cases, information consensus across diverse information sources is hard to reach. However, empowered by the Internet and various mobile applications, diverse information sources are now accessible for consumers so that eWOM travels further, more widely and with more depth. In the case of eWOM, peer-to-peer information is disseminated and exchanged on a much larger scale (Jansen *et al.*, 2009; Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014), which was not characterised in traditional WOM. Regarding the effect of source consensus on receiver's perception of information, previous research pointed out that when consensus is low across information sources, consumers would regard source of negative information less reliable with the assertion that providers of such information may not be able to use or evaluate the products appropriately (Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011). However, given the increased scalability, negative information also travels fast and reaches a large number of consumers online. When exposed to large amount of negative brand-related information, consumers could easily perceive a high level of consensus across different information sources and thus make negative brand evaluations accordingly (Laczniak *et al.,* 2001).

In social media, those negative brand-related content are ubiquitous and available in real-time (Hennig-Thurau *et al.,* 2010). Companies are concerned about consumer backfire since web technologies allow savvy and critical consumers to network together to contest against brands (Fournier and Avery, 2011). With the aggregate feature of communication, negative content is disseminated quickly and to a large scale of consumers in social media. With the aggregation of consumer backfire, brand dilution can occur quickly and becomes difficult to manage.

As a strategy to protect brand value, brands must react to those content in time and at the right place (Gensler *et al.,* 2013). However, crisis literature to date has neglected optimal reaction approach to avoid unwanted brand dilution in such circumstances. One solution is a salient brand that is strong, favourable and unique to consumers. As East, Vanhuele, and Wright (2008) found, the impact of positive WOM is generally greater than negative WOM on brand purchase if the brand is familiar to the consumers, which indicates strong brand associations. The same study also pointed out that consumers spontaneously resist negative WOM if the brand is preferred and vice versa (East,Vanhuele, and Wright, 2008). Thus, to avoid brand dilution triggered by negative eWOM, brands need to increase their CBBE perceived by their target segments. More research is needed to address such an issue, specifically on when and how brand dilution may occur in social media branding communication and how potential brand dilution threats should be responded to from the perspective of CBBE.

2.3.3.2.4 Brand Value Co-creation

Another strand of literature that arose with the prevalence of eWOM branding is about brand value co-creation. Brand value co-creation activities do not only happen in the offline world; it is more likely to happen in the online world in this modern digital era. Commented by Kozinets *et al.* (2010), eWOM is not only the cradle for co-created messages, but more importantly the cradle for co-created brand meanings. The cocreating activities from both parties involved in the branding process, i.e. brand managers and consumers, are needed due to the obsolete separation of brand promise givers and receivers in brand relationship management. As strongly suggested by Engeseth (2005), there should be no more ‘them’ and ‘us’ in branding practice. Rather, brands and consumers should work as an integrated entity in producing brand value. Brands need to think beyond and go beyond cooperating with existing and potential customers merely in the research and development process. Their cooperation should extend to all brand touch points mentioned previously.

Though in practice, the need to brand value co-creation has been voiced, there have not been much academic efforts in exploring this specific field. Helm and Jones (2010) are some of the few who studied co-creation of brand equity. Yet, they studied this issue more from a value-chain perspective. As they emphasised, what matters in the exchange between brands and consumers are not goods or services; rather, it is the value that matters. Similarly, Gronroos (2007) also put that what customers seek is not goods or services but the solution for their own value generation processes, which, understood from the brand equity perspective, is the perceived brand value created by various pertinent brand associations.

In value co-creation standpoint, for firms, holding brands that provide differentiated offerings is only the first step. The second step is to consistently deliver satisfactory experience so as to increase brand affiliation (Helm and Jones, 2010). This links back to Das, Stenger and Ellis’s (2009) idea of brand affiliation, which is the highest stage in brand-consumer relationship construction and an important stage in creating behavioural equity as proposed in the CBBE chain (see Figure 2). Therefore, what value co-creation highlights is not a simple notion of product quality (Helm and Jones, 2010) but a holistic experience that the brands can provide the consumers with. This is also in line with the experience economy concept proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1999) who argued that brands give a stage on which consumers and other relevant parties play out their value-seeking roles.

Another feature of the value co-creation process is the consistency of value delivery. Consistency of value delivery refers to reliability described by Aaker (2004) – the capability to deliver expected experience on a consistent level to consumers. This capability is a critical component of value-creation (Helm and Jones, 2010). However, in social media the value delivery process is not entirely controlled by brand managers since other stakeholders also participate in the process. Therefore, consistent delivery requires not only the initial efforts from brand managers to provide satisfactory experience but also their efforts in managing the experience to make it 'expected' as long as possible.

Regarding content in such co-creation process, most content is user-generated and is motivated by consumers' internal desire to co-create value with brands and with other consumers. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2002) postulated that consumers see themselves as an integral part of the value-creation system that their content creating and sharing behaviour influences where, when and how value is created. This opinion has been well taken and further developed by Christodoulides *et al.* (2012). Christodoulides *et al* (2012) emphasised that consumers are no longer satisfied with fabricated brand-related content. Rather, they desire to share their own experience to co-create the value. This is how UGC as the major content in eWOM communication thrived. The prevalence of such eWOM content indicates a metamorphosis of consumer ideology of their identities in brand value co-creation. This metamorphosis stemmed from advanced technologies that have made social media communication instantaneous, real-time, at low cost, and with increased reach to wider audience at different platforms (Kaplain & Haenlein, 2010; Habibi *et al*., 2014).

2.3.3.2.5 Scarcity of Research in this Field

Academia follows the trend of branding practice and shifts its focus from offline WOM to eWOM. However, compared to the massive amount of literature about motivations and effects of WOM communication and online WOM communication, there have been a limited number of sources exploring brand related eWOM. The effect of eWOM on brand equity should not be neglected given the fact that eWOM has been seen as increasingly important by businesses in terms of brand reputation management (Jansen *et al*., 2009) and the wide adoption of social media in branding practice (Hobsbawm, 2009). Need for exploration of this specific field has also been clearly articulated by researchers such as Foster, West and Francescucci (2011).

The need to explore brand-related eWOM is also justified by specific affordances of eWOM; for instance, the immediacy of eWOM. With the development and wide spread of technological advancements, particularly with the prevalence of smart phones and mobile applications, online articulation could happen quite near or even right at consumer touch points (Edelman, 2010). As wisely pointed out by Edelman (2010), brand managers are required to become real-time multimedia publishers on a global scale. The instantaneous and real-time features of social media platforms (Habibi *et al.*, 2014) are the reasons why social media tools such as Twitter and Instagram are so popular. This evolution then urges an exploration into how the immediacy of eWOM at or near customer touch points could be leveraged into favourable ones rather than negative ones.

The third reason that justifies the exploration is the changing consumers. Given the increased availability of information, the number of consumer touch points with brands is increasing. Consumers are differentially adopting social media tools, which enable them to interact with a brand on various levels at those consumer touch points. Those touch points provide consumers with a myriad of information sources and enhance consumer confidence in making purchase decisions (Uncles, 2008). Branding activities now focus more on relationship building than on response-stimulus communication as often utilised in traditional advertising (Christodoulides, 2008). Therefore, corporations who intend to leverage the new rising medium to promote their brands need insights of online habits and consumer motivations in order to craft successful online promotion strategies (Foster, West, and Francescucci, 2011). Given this feature of brand related activities online, it is worth studying brand related eWOM to have a deeper understanding of brand-consumer interaction and brand-related inter-consumer interaction in social media.

However, it must be acknowledged that social media is a rather big concept that it covers a wide variety of applications. A thorough investigation of all those applications would not be highly feasible. Thus, this study chose micro-blog, which is increasingly popular among online consumers as the context and studied micro-blog branding communication. Why micro-blog is chosen is explained in the 'where' part of branding in the digital age review below.

2.4 Summary

This chapter was divided into two big sections. The first section extensively discussed theories and concepts about customer-based brand equity, which received increasing attention in strategic brand management. The second section briefly discussed how branding is carried out in the digital age and in the form of eWOM and UGC and how CBBE may be affected by social media branding strategies. The second section also introduced a social media brandsphere – Sina Weibo—that has obtained increasing attention and popularity in branding activities yet less attention in academic research. Given the aim of the study to explore micro-blog branding activities and how CBBE can be affected by those activities, Sina Weibo is chosen as the context to explore the issue.

Before the author jumps to the research gaps and research design, there is a need for the readers to understand another strand of theories, which is eWOM and UGC. As discussed in Section 2.3.3, eWOM and UGC are the most often used means by which brand related content is generated and disseminated on social media. An understanding of eWOM and UGC will help underpin the theoretical framework better. Therefore, the next chapter will present a comprehensive review of pertinent literature.

Chapter 3 eWOM and UGC in Social Media Branding

3.1 Introduction

Before presentation and discussion of eWOM and UGC literature, there is a need to restate the aim of this study. This study aims at exploring micro-blog branding activities and how the CBBE may be influenced by those activities. The previous chapter has presented the theoretical underpinning of CBBE and how brand knowledge delivery happens in this digital age in social media platforms. Social media branding is rooted in the theoretical framework of eWOM communication and user-generated content (Christoph, 2010). In order to investigate social media branding and how those activities influence CBBE, an understanding of eWOM and UGC is a must. Therefore, this chapter reviews the mechanisms of eWOM and UGC in order to better investigate the issue in concern. This section is divided into four elements involved in eWOM communication and UGC creation and dissemination, namely, who, what, how and why.

3.2 eWOM Marketing: A Brief Introduction

Interactive communication enabled by technological advancements has catalysed the success and prevalence of WOM communication in business context, especially eWOM in the digital context. Kimmel and Kitchen (2014a) even called eWOM the most powerful online content form. Companies have been continuously seeking for new approaches in obtaining and retaining competitive advantage and eWOM represents a great opportunity because of its powerful influences on consumer attitudes and consumer behaviour (Mazzarol *et al.*, 2007). So far, many studies on eWOM have based their theoretical framework on WOM as eWOM is regarded by some as an extension of WOM in digital platforms (Mazzarol *et al*., 2007). This review will embark from this perspective and then point out the differences between eWOM and WOM later, which makes eWOM a more interactive and immediate communication on a much larger scale.

Many researchers so far have praised the effectiveness of WOM as a marketing tool in both physical and virtual world (Brown and Reingen, 1987; Day, 1971; Katona and Mueller, 1954; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Murray 1991; Silverman, 2001). WOM plays an important role in shaping consumers' attitudes and behaviour. Katz and Lazarfeld (1955 cited in Harrison-Walker, 2001) estimated that WOM was four to seven times more effective in enhancing or shifting consumers' choices. It was also suggested to be nine times as effective as advertising in swaying neutral or unfavourable predispositions into positive ones (Days, 1971). More recently, Silverman (2001) claimed that sales could be increased tenfold by WOM. Though the numbers differ under in different research, what has been commonly identified is that WOM is an effective tool in accomplishing marketing goals.

Understanding how WOM takes effect in influencing consumer attitudes and behaviour requires a correct and comprehensive perception of the essence of WOM. Research prior to Harrison-Walker (2001) and Mazzarol *et al*'s (2007) offered little insight into what WOM really means. Sweeney *et al.* (2012) also suggested that conceptualising WOM construct as simply the form and number of consumer comments only leads to an overly simplistic understanding WOM communication. Though the conceptualisation has not been unanimously agreed; researchers have given various definitions of WOM (Anderson, 1998).

According to Anderson (1998), WOM is informal conversation between individuals or groups. This definition ruled out communication between consumers and organisations of the scale of WOM communication. As highlighted by Anderson (1998), WOM is positive or negative recounting of vivid, novel and memorable experiences. Another feature of WOM is the implicit or explicit recommendation[4]. WOM may or may not include an explicit recommendation; however, negative WOM often include complaining utterance, rumour, and product disparagement (Anderson, 1998).

Later, Harrison-Walker (2001:63) referred WOM to *'informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organisation, or a service*'. WOM, compared to traditional marketing communication tools, is perceived to be more credible and

[4] Recommendation is defined as a *'specific form of product-related conversation that tends to be stronger or more emphatic than a comment or discussion'* (Sweeney *et al.*, 2012:238)

trustworthy and is more likely to generate empathic emotions and decrease consumer resistance to brands (Bickart and Schindler 2001). Extant literature has documented two basic functions of WOM: (1) acting as a highly trustworthy information source for a new brand (Plummer 2007) and (2) influencing consumers' perception of a brand (Allsop, Bassett, and Hoskins 2007). Therefore, from the standpoint of Allsop, Bassett and Hoskins (2007), WOM is more likely to be specifically a branding tool rather than a marketing tool in a broad way.

Both definitions presented above are in line with the aim of this study; however, the latter one is more appropriate to be adopted. Anderson's (1998) definition of WOM focuses on communication specifically about product/service evaluation. On the contrary, Harrison-Walker's (2001) definition is more comprehensive, indicating that WOM have the ability of functioning as a branding tool rather than merely a marketing tool. However, the role of WOM/ eWOM has been extensively studied more from a broad marketing perspective rather than from a specific branding perspective. The review of literature in this chapter then is based on a broad marketing perspective with a touch of branding related issues where pertinent literature is available.

The understanding of WOMM can be assisted by an analysis of the WOM activity model. There are currently two models of WOM communication that have clearly analysed the elements of WOM, each from a specific angle. One is the two-construct model by Harrison-Walker (2001) and the other one more complicated and more recently proposed by Mazzarol *et al.* (2007).

Harrison-Walker (2001) developed two brief constructs about WOM, namely, "praise" and "activity". Mazzarol *et al.*'s (2007) study further extended the understanding of those constructs and proposed a model of WOM activities, which depicts five elements (Figure 12). They categorised consumers involved in WOM communication in "givers" and "receivers" according to their relationship with the content. In the creating process of WOM, the antecedents, which are the perceived service quality, level of satisfaction towards products/services, and perceived value, are reflected in the message content of

WOM. Once a consumer is triggered by any or all of WOM catalysts such as a recognised need by other consumers, a chance of serendipity, or an advertisement or promotional campaign, s/he would create a message and deliver it to others. Thus, one piece of WOM message is created and delivered when the receiver receives the message with expected outcomes (ibid).

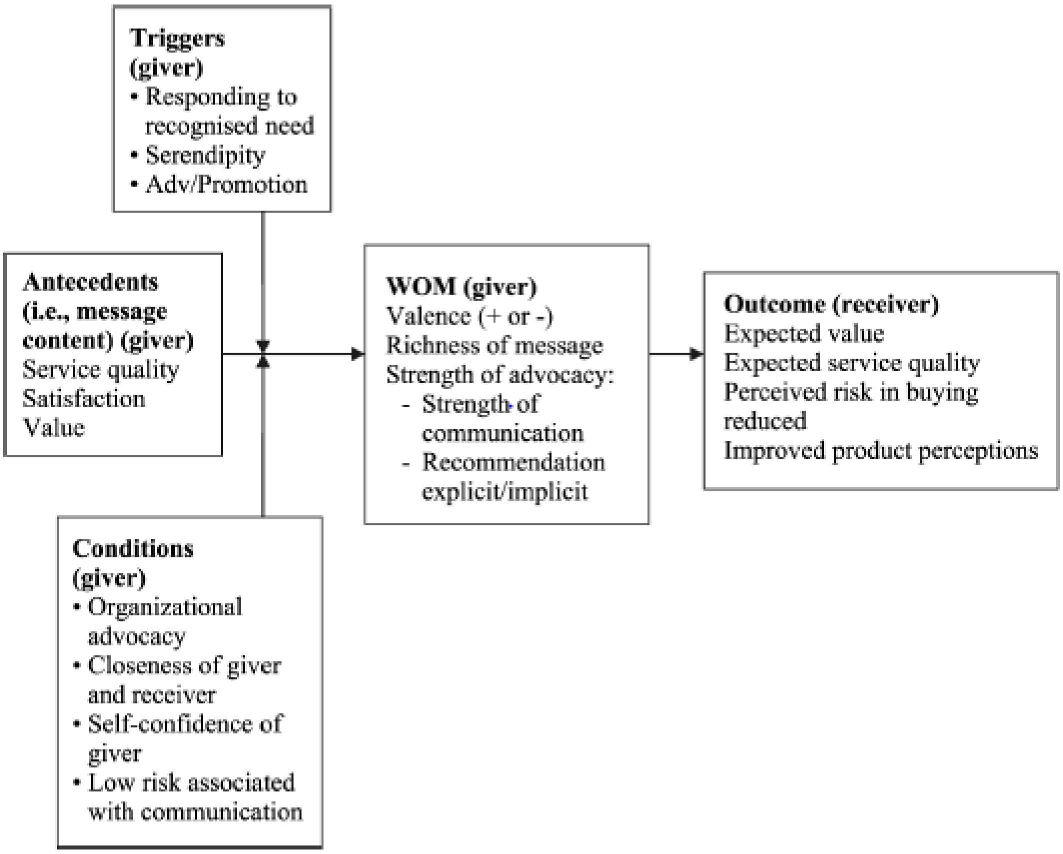


Figure 11 Suggested WOM model, source: Mazzarol et al. (2007)

Mazzarol *et al.*'s (2007) conceptualisation of WOM is adopted in this study for that it is the most recent conceptualisation of WOM and the first comprehensive theoretical framework in a business context. However, this model is not used without adaptation. This model is adapted by the author with review of other relevant literature to make sure that components missing from the framework are added into this study for a more comprehensive understanding of eWOM, the container of micro-blog branding activities studied in this research.

Mazzarol *et al.*'s (2007) framework of WOM basically answers four questions regarding WOM communication – who, what, why and how. Their giver and receiver categorisation of consumers involved in WOM communication addresses the question of 'who'. Antecedents and WOM (giver) dimensions as shown in Figure 12 above answer the question of 'what' is involved in WOM communication. Triggers and conditions, as well as outcome dimensions answer the question of 'why' consumers are involved in WOM communication. Though their model is the most comprehensive in recent years, the 'how' dimension (i.e. how WOM communication is carried out especially in digital platforms) is missing. Though they implicitly illustrated the WOM communication process with arrows as shown in Figure 12 above, those arrows do not deliberate the scalability and social networks, which are expected in eWOM communication. The author then reviewed relevant literature and present them below in a similar logic, starting from the most basic dimension in WOM communication, both physical and electronic – who, followed by other three dimensions, what, why and how.

3.3 First Element – 'Who' in WOMM

3.3.1 Online Consumers – Basic Features

The first dimension is the 'Who' dimension as without them WOM communication cannot happen. Since this study aims at investigating micro-blog branding activities, online consumers are the focus of this study. Consumers' activities online are changing rapidly. Consumers are taking part in a wide range of activities as shown in Table 3 below. As revealed by the literature, consumer activities online are generally information-based, socially oriented and very importantly not always active.

Firstly, information-based communication accounts for a large proportion of consumer social media activities (as shown by all four studies summarised in Table 4). This involvement compasses activities of both creating and consuming digital content. It is in line with Harrison-Walker's (2001) binary categorisation of information giver-receiver in WOM communication. However, what was missing in Harrison-Walker (2001) but emphasised by Shao (2009), Fill (2011) and Heinonen (2011) is that individual consumers can have dual identities online, being both creators and consumers of WOM content. This feature is of importance especially in micro-blogs where, given the affordance of information dissemination in a social contagion manner of such social networking services, consumers can easily disseminate information by reposting content received to chosen social networks. Interactivity in those consumer activities implies that new branding strategies to attract consumers online should demonstrate a shift from conventional intervention-based approach to the conversation-based approach. Stephen and Galak (2009) also supported this statement by commenting that individuals who take part in and contribute to social media activities collectively play a very important information-disseminating role. Through their daily activities online, consumers receive, reflect and reshape myriad pieces of information directed to them. Therefore, the fundamental of social media communication is the travel of information through connections between each node in the network.

Table 5 Consumer activities online

Study	Forrester Research (Pinkerfield, 2007)	Shao (2009)
Consumer activities in social media	• Publish content (9%) • Make comment (18%) • Socialise (1%) • Gather information (12%) • Listen and observe interaction (19%) • Ignore all these activities (41%)	• Consumption of information and entertainment • Participation in social interaction • Production of self-expression and self-actualisation
Study	Fill (2011)	Heinonen (2011)
Consumer Activities in social media	• Discover • Participate • Share • Express	• Create and consume content • Participate in discussion • Share knowledge with others

Secondly, all four studies identified social orientation in consumer social media activities. Although Pinkerfield (2007) noted that socialising only accounted for 1 per cent of consumer activities in social media, this feature has been increasingly emphasised in more recent studies such as Shao (2009), Fill (2011) and Heinonen (2011). Also, social orientation is an important motivation for consumers to create WOM content, which will be deliberated on in section 3.5.1.4.

Thirdly, though interactivity of social media communication has been proudly claimed and praised, not all users are active. Pinkerfield (2007) emphasised that not all consumers are active in social media though social media itself is characterised by high level of interaction. Although consumers are provided with opportunities to be active and interactive, pertinent literature indicated that consumers are not necessarily as active online as believed (Jones *et al*., 2004; Preece *et al*., 2004; Heinonen, 2011). Consumers are described as being active and creative online users (Berthon *et al*., 2008); however, only a small number of online consumers create the majority of UGC online. Heinonen's (2011) observation of online consumers also backed up this opinion. Courtois *et al.* (2009) attributed this phenomenon to the differences in interests and resources that consumers possess. Other research such as Davies and Elliot (2006) also stated that increased choice and responsibility brought by the empowerment of digital media can be challenging and confusing and therefore prevent some consumers from expressing their views and contributing to digital content. However, being inactive does not mean that they are not important to brands. Given the fact that being inactive does not deprive them of their role as WOM receivers, brands should not ignore their importance and potential influence on brand performance.

3.3.2 Differentiated Online Consumer Segments

Beside the strand of studies on general consumer behaviour in social media, another strand of research further analysed online consumers by putting them into different categories. Categorisation of online consumers was neglected before and marketers who develop online strategies often treated online consumers as homogenous groups (Foster, West and Francescucci, 2011). In response to that, Foster *et al.* (2011) conducted a pioneering study and created a typology of online social media users (see Figure 13). Their findings suggested that since brands often highlight differences among targeted consumer segments (Baltas and Doyle, 1998), who are also coined as differentially savvy consumers by Uncles (2009), understanding of various groups of social media user segments is a brand management focus in the digital world. Consumers are categorized according to benefits they obtain from social media participation, which include tangible return, such as access to useful and up-to-date expertise, intangible returns, such as intrinsic satisfaction from participating in information exchanges, and finally value from exchanges with peers with common interest (Foster, West and Francescucci, 2011). Their segmentation of online consumers again highlights the three feature of social media consumers pointed out in Section 3.3.1 – information involved, socially oriented and not always active.

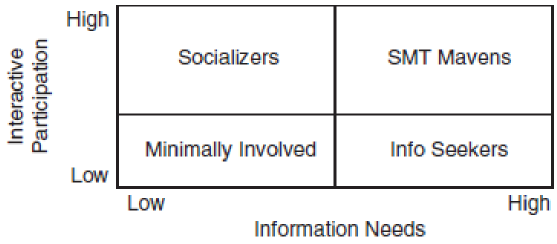


Figure 12 Typology of online social media users, source: Foster et al. (2011:12)

Therefore, since the characteristics held by different consumer segments are distinct, it is reasonable to assume that their behaviour norms would be identifiably different from each other's. This assumption has been proved by Kozinets *et al*.'s (2010) netnorgraphic study in four different kinds of blogs and their distinctive online community norms. As a result, brand managers should be able to design and deliver different branding programmes in order to communicate with different consumer segments online, such as establishment of brand associations for socialisers, questions and answers for information seekers, and etc.

Furthering categorisation based on information needs and participation, social media consumers can be further categorised with a close focus on their relationships with brands in social media. Wallace *et al*. (2014) explored features of Facebook users who 'Like' brands and categorised them into fan-antics, self-expressives, utilitarians and authentics (see Figure 14) based on their relationships with the medium and the brands. Their findings have valuable implications for this study. Because Sina Weibo is a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook, Wallace *et al.*'s (2014) findings assist the understanding of social media users as regards their motivation to communicate with brands and with their peers about brand-related content. As implied from the features of those four categories, the behaviour of consumers involved in brand-related communication is influenced by both their role in WOM communication and their connection with brands. Thus, it again indicates that eWOM communication and consumer-brand connections are intertwined in social media, which is the focus of this research. However, as their research is limited to a single affordance of Facebook 'Likes', their contribution to holistic understanding of brand-related eWOM communication is novel yet restricted since eWOM communication goes beyond clicking 'Like'.

FAN-ATICS	SELF-EXPRESSIVES	UTILITARIANS	AUTHENTICS
• Brand is self-expressive • Highest brand loyalty • Highest brand love • Highest WOM • High number of Facebook friends • Highest self-monitoring • Highest materialism • Claims highest self-esteem • Opinion leader and opinion seeker • 'Likes' due to genuine interest and to create image • 'Like' for incentive although no the primary motivation for 'Liking' • Mainly females	• Brand is self-expressive • Medium brand loyalty • Medium brand love • High WOM • Highest number of Facebook friends • High self-monitoring • Medium materialism • Medium self-esteem • Medium opinion leader and opinion seeker • 'Likes' mainly to create image • Mainly males	• Brand is not self-expressive • Lowest brand loyalty • Lowest brand love • Lowest WOM • Average number of Facebook friends • Medium self-monitoring • Lowest materialism • Medium self-esteem • Least likely to be opinion leader and opinion seeker • 'Likes' only to gain incentives • Mainly males	• Brand is not self-expressive • High brand loyalty • High brand love • Medium WOM • Lower number of Facebook friends • Lowest self-monitoring • Low materialism • High self-esteem • Low opinion leadership and medium opinion seeking • 'Likes' only because of genuine interest • Mainly females

Figure 13 Facebook Fan Typology, source: Wallace et al. (2014:19)

3.3.3 Structure of Online Consumer Influence

3.3.3.1 Opinion Leader – Opinion Follower

Understanding consumers in WOMM also requires understanding of online consumer influence structure, in which opinion leadership-opinion follower relationship is often studied. Opinion leadership, though being defined in many differentiated ways, is consistently linked to influence, information sharing, or both (Goldsmith and De Witt, 2003; Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006). In one strand of research that associates opinion leadership with influence, opinion leaders are characterised by their unequal amount of influence on the decisions of others (Rogers and Cartano, 1962). In another strand of research that associates opinion leadership with information sharing, opinion leaders are characterised by their expertise in a certain field and, as a result, perceived as appropriate sources of information and advice when relevant need occurs (Eliashberg and Shugan, 1997). There are also researchers, for instance, Weimann (1994) and Bertrandias and Goldsmith (2006), who hold that opinion leaders, in business context, play both the roles as endorsers and information sources.

No matter which specific role the opinion leaders play in a particular incidence, it takes two parties to complete the interpersonal communication in which any kinds of influence could possibly happen. As rightly remarked by Gatignon and Robertson (1986), interpersonal influence is an exchange process and thus it involves both givers and receivers of the influence. In a modern business context, the other end of the influence shift is the opinion follower (Bertrandias and Goldsmith, 2006). This echoes Harrison-Walker's (2001) binary categorisation of WOM consumers as givers and receivers and Mazzarol *et al.*'s (2007) giving – receiving two stage of WOM communication framework. However, opinion leaders and opinion followers are not equally powerful since influence is not equally distributed to individuals in social networks. A small number of influential opinion leaders are found to be able to accelerate or block product adoption and product diffusion (Goldenberg *et al.*, 2009).

3.3.3.2 Peer Effect

3.3.3.2.1 Increasing Recognition of Peer Effect

However, another strand of research argued that though influential opinion leaders are important, it is the peers (i.e. average consumers) that really matter in shaping trends. Individual's power in expressing influential views in online communications has been acknowledged (Grossman, 2006). Many believe that Time Magazine's declaration of 'You' as 'Person of the Year' in 2006 resulted from extended application of social media tools by ordinary people to express themselves (Johnson and Kaye, 2004; Cheong and Morrison, 2008). The extended application has generated spheres of influence via eWOM communication that encompasses millions of users (Garcia-Bardidia and Quester, 2006).

Peer effect is supported by both increasing practical use of social media applications among consumers to influence each other and academic studies on this issue. For instance, Smith, Menon and Sivakumar (2005) found that both experts and regular consumers, who have certain level of influence in their own social networks, have relatively the same influential power. Also, Fill (2011) indicated that the power of opinion leaders is much reduced in the digital world, especially within the predominant young user group as they reject opinion leaders' comments for peer group recommendations. Fill's (2011) finding offered a positive theoretical affirmation to Time Magazine's choice of 'You' as influential people in the digital world. Furthermore, statistical interdependence relationship structure also posits that consumer's product choice may be related to direct advertising from a connection in his/her digital social networks (Sundararajan *et al.*'s, 2013). With all these evidence, putting opinion leaders over peers on the influence ladder would be an assertion.

Peer effect, fundamentally can be comprehended by the characteristics that define the term 'peer'. They are like-minded, sharing common interests, and gathered by the networked and social nature of social media (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). These facts lead to increasing trust in peer groups. Trust between peers in online space such as consumer communities has been proved to enhance evaluation of products due to similarities in consumers' identity (Naylor *et al*., 2012). However, in social media, especially social networking space such as micro-blogs, consumers' identities are heterogeneous. The heterogeneity of participants in communication is then suspected to reduce the trust (Habibi *et al*., 2014). In this case, the specific affordance in micro-blogs that consumers are able to see others' profile and browse previously generated content provides them with the opportunity to make judgment about trust given to other users. Those judgments then assist consumers in perceiving the reliability of the UGC created by those users (Naylor *et al.,* 2012).

3.3.3.2.2 Decline of Power of the Influential

Along with the increase of peer effect is the decline of power of the influential. First of all, it has been suggested that being influential does not necessarily ensure susceptible peers (Aral and Walker, 2012). It is argued that influential individuals catalyse the diffusion of opinions, behaviour, innovations and products (Valente, 1995; Aral and Walker 2012);

thus, the influential in social networks (i.e. opinion leaders) speed up the process of innovation diffusion and social contagion. However, as Aral (2010) pointed out, the benchmark of being really influential in social networks should be the existence of behavioural change of the message receiver caused by the message giver. Therefore, the occurrence of certain attitudinal or behavioural change is the focal point of influence in social networks. In this sense, being simply connected to a large number of individuals is not equal to having influential power to bring about changes.

3.3.3.2.3 Increase of Power of Peers

Secondly, many academics recognised that the power of average peers has been increasing. For instance, Iyengar, Van den Bulte, and Valente (2010) suggested that as regard to dissemination and adoption of awareness-level product information rather than information that mitigates perceived risk, average peers are just as powerful as recognised influential in social networks. They are not the only ones who are in favour of peer influence. Watts and Dodds (2007) also confirmed that myriad easily influenced individuals are the key to drive the cascade of influence.

Theoretically, the above made statement is well recognised by studies on strength of weak ties. Goldenberg *et al.* (2001) conducted their study with respect to dissemination of information in WOM communication based on Granovetter's (1973) emphasis on the strength of weak ties between individuals in social networks. Their findings noted similar results to what Granovetter (1973) and Rogers (1995) suggested earlier. They (Goldenberg *et al.,* 2001) observed that it is the follower hubs (i.e. the average individuals in social networks) that really affect the scale of innovation adoption. Their finding was later also supported by Watts and Dodds's (2007) simulation study, which showed that the influential are disproportionately less responsible for cascade of social contagion. On the contrary, homophily, the degree to which individuals have common attributes (Rogers, 1995) is believed to be one of the most influential factors that affect the strength of ties.

3.3.3.2.4 Peers' Susceptibility

Besides the message giver's influence over the message receiver, there is another essential element that affects influence, that is, the message receiver's susceptibility to being influenced (Aral and Walker, 2012). Aral and Walker (2012) concluded similar inferences to Iyengar, Van den Bulte and Valente (2010) that being influential does not necessarily ensure susceptible peers. Peers' susceptibility increases on a cumulative level relating to quantity of exposures to certain information. On an aggregate level, the number of connections an individual node has in a social network affects positively the possibility of the node being exposed to certain information (in the context of this study, brand-related information) and affects the probability of attitudinal and behavioural change (Roger, 1995; Goldenberg *et al*., 2009). Aral (2010) supported this concept by stating that consumers retain memory about previous exposures and would eventually adopt the product/service when their cumulative exposure exceeds a certain threshold. Then, in the specific context of WOMM, due to increasing exposure to brand-related information, consumers' susceptibility increases. Once the susceptibility arrives at a certain level, behavioural changes occur.

In the specific context of micro-blogging services, Romero *et al*.'s (2011) work on influence and passivity in social media suggested that high popularity among users does not necessarily lead to high influence and vice versa because message receivers' passivity should be considered. It should be noted that high popularity among users is a common feature of brands, especially well-established brands such as those mentioned in Figure 7. However, being popular among micro-blogging service users does not guarantee influence. Yet, taking into account what has been suggested earlier in Section 3.3.1 and Section 3.3.2 about inactive consumers in online social networks, that large number of online consumers is of importance even though they are passive since they are also exposed to brand-related information and cumulative exposure brings about changes.

Meanwhile, consumers are increasingly sceptical than ever before. As highlighted by Kimmel and Kitchen (2014b), peer influence usually takes precedence over purchasing or other related behaviour shaped by brand-generated communication with consumers.

Granted with increased power of peers, consumers are increasingly distrusting professional marketers and brand managers in business context (Edelman, 2013). This underscore the growing prominence of peer influence in social media context where peer influence is prevalent in branding practices as practitioners strive to leverage eWOM to achieve branding objectives.

In short, the structure of online consumer network is increasingly flat. The opinion leader-opinion follower relationship, though still at work, is not the main channel through which influence can be leveraged . Instead, peer effect is.

3.4 Second Element – 'What' They Do in WOMM

The second element in in WOMM is the 'What' element. There has been an increasing recognition of the importance of content in measuring WOM communication. It has been commented that most WOM measures rely on counting the mentions of certain brands or the likelihood of initiation of WOM messages (Sweeney *et al*., 2012). However, little research has taken the elements of message content into WOM measurement (Anderson, 1998; Mazzarol *et al*., 2007). As argued by Mazzarol *et al.* (2007), WOM is not a simple activity of passing one piece of information from one node to another in social networks; therefore, it should not be measured by simply counting times of delivery. Understanding the content element can be done from two aspects: the content itself and the way of presentation.

3.4.1 The Content

3.4.1.1 Antecedents

Westbrook's (1987) approach of measuring WOM communication by simply counting mentions was criticised by many as too singular to capture the dynamics of WOM communication (Anderson, 1998; Harrison-Walker, 2001; Mazzarol *et al.,* 2007). In response to this limitation, Mazzarol *et al.* (2007) explored message content of WOM and identified service quality, satisfaction, and value as antecedents of WOM activities on the message givers' side (as shown in Figure 12).

Also, extreme satisfaction and dissatisfaction with brands are antecedents of WOM creation (Dabholkar *et al.,* 2000; East, Vanhuele and Wright, 2008; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002 cited in Kimmel and Kitchen, 2014). Customer satisfaction is decided by perceived performance of brands in relation to the buyer's expectations (Kotler and Armstrong, 2012). Thus, when a customer is more likely to speak in favour of the brand if satisfied with the brand experience (Kotler and Armstrong, 2012).

Satisfaction is believed to increase customer loyalty (Peppers and Rogers, 2011). However, there has been dispute about whether loyalty should be included in the WOM framework. Early study on WOM suggested that WOM is often linked to loyalty (Zeithaml *et al*., 1996). On the contrary, Mazzarol *et al*. (2007) remarked that WOM is not closely connected to loyalty because loyalty is generally *related to 'positive repurchase intentions'* (Gremler and Brown, 1999, cited in Mazzarol et al., 2007:1477), but so far there is no evidence that WOM content displays givers' repeat patronage intention or that givers' repurchase intention initiates WOM creation. In fact, Gremler and Brown (1999) once even questioned why loyal customers do not create WOM about brands they patronise.

Though satisfaction and dissatisfaction are antecedents of WOM/eWOM content, they appear to be less important factors to prompt eWOM communication (Kimmel and Kitchen, 2014). Thus, communication interactivity is comparatively low in satisfaction- or dissatisfaction-driven eWOM. Also, not many studies have explored peer response to eWOM content generated by this reason. Therefore, whether this type of eWOM accounts for a large proportion of eWOM branding practice is unknown.

3.4.1.2 Valence

From a general viewpoint, WOM content can be positive, neutral, or negative towards a brand/product/service. Valence of WOM content depends on how consumers are satisfied with their brand experience (Luo, 2009). Extreme dissatisfaction is also as important a reason as satisfaction for WOM creation (Kimmel and Kitchen, 2014). A common assertion in existing literature is that negative WOM far exceeds positive WOM (see Silverman, 2001; Naylor and Kleiser, 2000). However, East, Hammond, and Wright (2007) reported a greater incidence of positive WOM than its negative counterparts. Their observation is also supported by Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006), Oetting *et al.* (2010) and more than 15 other studies published during 2000 to 2010 (Kimmel and Kitchen, 2014).

As regard to the influence of valence, both positive and negative WOM is considered as effective in affecting consumer attitudes. Research revealed that valence has a positive relationship with innovation acceptance (Arndt, 1967). His findings suggested that favourable WOM aids acceptance of new products while unfavourable WOM hinders it. Arndt is in line with Senecal and Nantel (2004), who concluded that consumers exposed to positive recommendations are more likely to make decisions in favour of the product or service compared to consumers who do not. For marketers, making good use of those positive content is much cheaper than traditional advertising like Laura Ries[5] said *'that was a major fallacy in the dot-com boom where companies went out and spent millions and got no benefit'* (Noreen, 2009). Though Arndt's (1967) findings were not in a digital context, they are still evident in eWOM communication as identified by many (see Sweeney *et al.*, 2009). Sen and Lerman (2007) also found that valence of online articulation significantly affect consumers' attitudes towards the product or service mentioned.

Though both positive and negative WOM is effective in affecting consumer attitudes, there has been debate on which type is more influential. Some claimed that both positive and negative WOM bring equal impact (East, Hammond, and Wright, 2007; Cheong and Morrison, 2008). However, others argued that negative WOM is more powerful than positive one (Arndt, 1967; Sweeney *et al.*, 2012). For example, Hennig-Thurau and Walsh's (2003) suggested that 43.5 per cent of their sample either always or mostly restrain from making further purchase decision after being exposed to negative

[5] Laura Ries, President of Ries and Ries.

comments; whereas only 28 per cent of their sample either always or mostly reinforce their purchase decision after being exposed to positive WOM.

If this is the case, negative WOM deserves more attention from brand managers. Negative online WOM can have detrimental effects on consumer attitudes and purchase intention (Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011). Consumers could effectively attack brands with their counter-signals. It is even more so on digital platforms. One example of how brands can be dragged down by eWOM in social media is the 'United Breaks Guitars' social media phenomenon. In 2008, musician Dave Carroll complained actively his unsatisfied experience with the United Airline in the composed song which quickly went viral on the Internet. The results were startling. Carroll got the full compensation but the United suffered 10 per cent drop of its stock price (McCarthy, 2009; Hanna, 2010). This example proves what was rightly commented by Anderson (2010): consumers, if left alone with their own devices, will by all means use social media as a tool of defection rather than a tool of proactive cooperation with brands.

Intriguingly, valence of WOM/eWOM content is also affected by recognised need from others, which is a major motivation for WOM creation (see section 3.5.1.1). Evidence has shown that valence could be different even when the same consumer articulates his thoughts on the same brand (Kimmel and Kitchen, 2014). First of all, under certain conditions, consumers generate brand-related eWOM as a response to their perceived need from others in regard to that brand. Thus, the belief that dissatisfied consumers always produce negative WOM and satisfied consumers always produce positive WOM are unfounded (East, Hammond, and Wright, 2007). As a result, it is possible that even dissatisfied consumers would recommend the brand if they perceive the brand as needed by others, and satisfied consumers would generate negative comment if they feel the brand not demanded (Kimmel and Kitchen, 2014).

3.4.1.3 User-Generated Content as WOM Content

It is hard to mention WOM and eWOM without mentioning user-generated content (UGC), which is the main component of WOM and eWOM. Regarding UGC in brand-related communication, Christodoulides *et al.* (2012) modified the UGC definition by OECD (2007) with a brand-related focus and established that brand-related UGC is made available on publicly accessible media, demonstrates some creative work and is created without being influenced by professional routines and practice. Christodoulides *et al.*'s (2012) definition is suitable to micro-blog branding communication since UGC in this context is often created and transmitted via personal devices such as smart phones and tablets with low or none cost and creatively contributed by virtually anyone in a non-professional marketing way.

What characterises UGC primarily is its nature of being produced, designed, published, and edited by consumers themselves (Krishnamurthy and Dou, 2008). It is also the line to distinguish UGC from producer-generated content (PGC) (Cheong and Morrison, 2008). In the context of branding, PGC refers to content created by paid branding professionals to fulfill the branding objectives (Fill, 2002). On the contrary, UGC is created by ordinary end users of brands, who are not trained branding professionals. Cheong and Morrison's (2008) research also clarified the differences between UGC and PGC in terms of content believability. They concluded that UGC is a more credible source of information than PGC, because UGC in WOM is evaluated as more trustworthy (Murray, 1991).

Similar to other online content, brand-related UGC has its glory due to the advent of various Web 2.0 applications that enable ordinary consumers to communicate with a much wider audience (Daugherty *et al.*, 2008). As Daugherty *et al.* (2008) argued, the prevalence of UGC online is reasonable because this *'personal publication mechanisms are inherent to the structure of this information space'* (p.3). In such information space, brand-related UGC is often presented in the form of storytelling by consumers (Habibi *et al.*, 2014). The storytelling activities are proved to be the most often repeated rituals and traditions in social media (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010; Habibi *et al.*, 2014). Before Habibi *et al.*, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) had argued that storytelling is one of the most focal facets of brand community building and retaining. The stories shared legitimate and perpetuate the norms and values of the community (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Social media, in turn, provide consumers with an ideal milieu to conduct the storytelling activities (Habibi *et al.,* 2014).

Another particular feature of brand-related UGC as eWOM content is the creation and wide usage of jargons by consumers online. Jargon development is identified by Habibi *et al.* (2014) as an essential activity in social media based brand communication. Their findings echo Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) that jargons developed in brand communities transfers specific meanings among members. Their arguments are of essential importance to brands since those jargons can be seen as valuable assets to the brands. Due to the fact that those jargons are created and easily adopted by users, they pass a sense of belongingness to users along with the meanings created by the jargons. Ideally, brand awareness can be increased by using the jargons in branding since those jargons establish strong brand associations that are specific, relevant to and easily recalled by consumers. The ideal outcome fundamentally derives from peer effect discussed in sub-section 3.3.3.2 that consumers are more susceptible to content created by 'like-minded' people (Iyengar, Van den Bulte and Valente, 2010; Aral and Walker, 2012) and that peer influence is becoming stronger than ever before (Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Fill, 2011).

3.4.1.4 Emphasis of Service Industry over Goods Industry in Previous Research

Though WOM is widely evident in both service industries and goods industries, the influential power of WOM is much more recognised in the service context than in the goods context. Studies on WOM in service context outnumber those in goods context. Many researchers believe that it is due to two reasons (Murray, 1991; Harrison-Walker, 2001; Sweeney *et al*. 2012).

The first reason is that services are believed as a more important industry than goods industry in most developed countries. Services are dominating the economy in many developed countries (Sweeney et al., 2012). Globally, the service industry accounts for over 60 per cent of GDP whereas the goods industry accounts for slightly over 30 per cent (Central Intelligence Agency, 2012). The more significant position of service industries in economy may lead to higher volume of communication among consumers and between consumers and brands.

Secondly, services are intangible. The intangibility means that services are not covered by warrantee, are hard to be evaluated before purchase, and are unstandardized (Harrison-Walker, 2001; Murray, 1991). Therefore, compared to goods, services are of higher risk. Linking to the finding that a salient motivation for WOM communication is risk reduction when making purchase decisions (Arndt, 1967), WOM communication is believed to have more influence in a service context to reduce risk associated with such situations.

3.4.2 The Presentation

3.4.2.1 Richness of Content

The 'What' element of WOMM does not only involve the content, but also how the content is presented and perceived by message receivers. It is because the link between emotions and content dissemination is complex and cannot be explained by valence alone (Berger and Milkman, 2012). Anderson (1998) was one of the earliest academics who recognised the communicative components in WOM communication. He assumed that the vividness of WOM content affects WOM effect. Interestingly, even noticing so, he did not include vividness in his WOM measurement. Rather, he adopted Westbrook's (1987) approach of counting mentions for measuring WOM effectiveness. More recent studies, instead, have been increasingly laying attention on the importance of vocabularies used, emotions projected, body language used, and features of expressiveness in WOM message (Dichter, 1964; Kozinets *et al.,* 2010; Sweeney *et al*., 2012). The importance of how message content is presented was also emphasised by Mazzarol *et al.* (2007) and Sweeney *et al.* (2012) who highlighted richness of message content in WOM communication. Sweeney *et al.* (2012) followed Mazzarol *et al*.'s (2007) definition of richness of message content and wrote:

> Richness of the message content refers to the depth, intensity, and vividness of the message itself. Richness includes content aspects, such as the language used and the degree of storytelling or depth of information involved in the message. (Sweeney *et al*., 2012:242).

They noted that the richer the message content is, the higher the credibility is (ibid). This implies that in brand-related WOM, the more information is included in the conversation and the more vividly the information is presented, the higher the credibility of the content is.

The increased credibility is contributed by 2 outcomes of richer information. First, richer communication facilitates information transfer because the increased richness of content allows transmission of complex and tactic information (Sundararajan *et al*., 2013). Second, it is believed that trust among consumers during information transmission is fostered when more details are given. Therefore, in the context of brand-related eWOM, richer message content afforded by various media formats mentioned in Section 2.3.4.1.1, which allows brand-related content to appear in detail and in depth, is expected to enhance the credibility of the content and reduce equivocality in brand communication.

Also, richness of content is related to consumers' intention in communicating with brand-related stories posted in social media. De Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang (2012) supported this notion with their findings that vividness and interactivity of brand posts are important for consumers to react to brand stories in social media such as liking or commenting on brand-published content. Thus, richness of content is also linked to interactivity in regard to consumer response to brand related eWOM.

3.4.2.2 Strength of Advocacy

Richness of message content does affect the effectiveness of WOM. However, it is not the only factor that mediates the effectiveness of WOM. Strength of advocacy is another dimension of WOM measurement included in Mazzarol *et al*.'s (2007) WOMM framework. Strength of advocacy stands for how persuasive the message is (Mazzarol *et al*., 2007). Researchers have identified four factors that influence the persuasiveness of WOM messages, which are credibility, manner, involvement and usefulness of message content.

3.4.2.2.1 Credibility

First of all, persuasiveness is associated with the credibility of the content involved in WOM communication. WOM is perceived by consumers as more reliable and credible compared to other sources of communication because the majority of the content in WOMM is contributed by peers (Gruen *et al*., 2006). Consumers trust peer generated content more because they believe that other end-users convey more than just positive comment on brand-experience (Cheong and Morrison, 2008). As a result, WOM is regarded as of greater persuasiveness compared to BPC (brand-published content) due to higher perceived credibility and trustworthiness (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Mayzlin, 2006; Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011).

3.4.2.2.2 Manner

Besides source credibility, the manner in which WOM is conveyed also affects the strength of advocacy (Gabbott and Hogg, 2000). Manner is reflected in language, narratives and personal characteristics of the message giver. Kozinets *et al.* (2010) support this view by confirming that character narratives and communication context affect WOM impact. Any emphasis added to the message content affects the strength of advocacy (Gabbott and Hogg, 2000). Emotional appeals of the message giver are also found to reinforce the receivers' personal beliefs and values and lead to persuasive outcomes (Allsop *et al*., 2007). For instance, when delivered enthusiastically, the message is found more influential (Gremler, 1994).

EWOM is different from WOM on the aspect of content delivery since fundamentally they are produced and delivered in differentiated forms on differentiated platforms. One source of advocacy existent in WOM but missing in eWOM is the vividness inherent to face-to-face interaction (Herr *et al*., 1991). In eWOM, physical contact is eliminated. However, various information formats and myriad sources of information make up for the loss. For instance, video clips embedded in micro-blogs make up for the loss of physical contact in the digital platform since facial expressions, tones and pitches can also be presented and delivered in videos.

3.4.2.2.3 Involvement

The third factor that affects the strength of advocacy is the level of consumer involvement in the communication. There are two aspects of involvement: (1) consumers' product usage involvement and (2) consumer involvement in active communication.

Product usage reflected in WOM content positively affects strength of advocacy. As pointed out by Li and Zhan (2011), online consumers value opinions from reviewers who had brand experience. Consumers also require supporting evidence in the argument (ibid). This opinion is supported by Aral (2010) who observed that sustained use of products or service might increase the general awareness of the product/service amongst users' peers in social networks. For the same social contagion reason, discontinuation of product/service usage is likely to affect product/service adoption and diffusion amongst user's peers due to the negative impression peers would have on the user churn (ibid). More specifically, Lin and Burt (1975) held that whether usage volume shown in WOM reduces or increases contagion depends on whether the contagion process is mainly at the awareness boosting stage or evaluation stage. For diffusion of information at the awareness stage, light users are effective source of influence (Godes and Mayzlin, 2009); whereas at the evaluation stage, heavy users are more effective compared to light users (Iyengar, Van den Bulte, and Valent, 2010).

Consumer involvement in active communication also affects strength of advocacy. As noted by Arndt (1967), consumers who involve themselves deeper in WOM communication are normally early adopters of new products. It is also suggested that highly involved consumers are more likely to voluntarily speak for the brands (Bruhn, Schoenmueller and Schafer, 2012). It can be attributed to the accumulation of brand-related exposure. As explained by Aral (2010), consumers retain memory about previous exposure and would eventually adopt the service/product when the amount of their cumulative exposure exceeds a certain threshold. As in WOMM, when a consumer is highly involved in WOM communication, his chance of brand-related exposure increases and so does the probability of eventual adoption.

3.4.2.2.4 Usefulness

The last factor that affects strength of advocacy is the perceived usefulness of message content. This factor is only slightly touched by Sussman and Siegal (2003), who established that the effectiveness of WOM is mediated by the usefulness of the perceived content. When receivers find the content useful, the strength of advocacy is high and vice versa. Their finding indicates that the perception of strength of advocacy does not only depend on the content and the presentation but also on the message receivers' cognition.

Usefulness of WOM content can be moderated by consumers' presuppositions. Consumers' perceived value of the WOM content is related to their beliefs and feelings (Daugherty *et al.*, 2008). These beliefs and feelings sometimes are formed before consumers' exposure to WOM messages; therefore, presuppositions should be included in WOMM studies. It must be noted here that WOM is not necessarily the beginning of consumer decision journey on which consumers start to learn about certain brands. Xia and Bechwati (2008) supported this opinion and rightly argued that the influence of online articulation on consumer behavior can be moderated by consumers' feelings and opinions prior to viewing online WOM. They also found out that when there is consistency between presuppositions and WOM/eWOM content, the WOM/eWOM is perceived as more trustworthy and useful (ibid).

3.5 Third Element – 'Why' Consumers Do So

After answering the question of who the online users involved in WOMM are and what is involved in WOM, the third fundamental question answered is why online consumers create, disseminate or consume those content from two aspects: motivations for WOM creation and motivations for WOM consumption.

3.5.1. Motivations for WOM Creation

Although there are limited studies on brand-related eWOM, prior work has examined motivations for WOM creation broadly. Motivations for WOM/eWOM creation have been widely explored by a number of researchers from different angles (see Appendix 1). It is not hard to find out that though in different contexts, consumer motivations to create WOM/eWOM messages are highly similar.

3.5.1.1 Recognised Need from Others

First of all, creation of WOM content in both physical and virtual world is related to **creating information needed by others**. As pointed out by Grice (1969), sharing information and offering opinions to others in one's social network are the two main motivations for consumers to make utterance about a product/service. Allen and Perrault (1980) relates to Grice (1969) by stating that intention to utterance could be attributed to purpose of informing, warning, promising or asserting. It is then later supported by Fill (2011) who suggested that consumers use WOM recommendations to provide information to others. Besides recommendations, consumers also like to share disappointing experience with others (Chatterjee, 2011), which is an action to inform and warn others as suggested by Allen and Perrault (1980). Mazzarol *et al.* (2007) looked deeper on this aspect and suggested that consumers make product/service related utterance based on their **recognised need from others for information**. WOM messages can be categorised into two kinds: a piece of positive information to help or a piece of negative information to warn (ibid). According to Mazzarol *et al.* (2007), consumers' action in creating WOM is often activated by direct queries or prompts from one or more potential receivers (ibid). Besides inquiry from others, message givers' internal desire to give out help also triggers WOM creation (ibid). This again proves Allen and Perrault's (1980) statement presented above that consumers actively create WOM content to inform and warn others. As a result, recognised need from others facilitates WOM/eWOM creation and decides what is included in the message, which echoes Kimmel and Kitchen's (2014) very recent finding that recognised needs from others has significant influence on what is generated and delivered from one consumer to another. In this regard, recognised need from others affects, to some degree, the valence of the message content.

This motivation also highlights the social-oriented feature of WOM communication (Kimmel and Kitchen, 2014). This motivation is evident in brand communities in social media, in particular Facebook brand pages or fans pages about brands. In their groundbreaking study published most recently in 2014, Habibi *et al.* (2014) highlighted that consumers in such brand communicates feel their obligations to society to respond to others' UGC. In the case that users in the brand community request for assistance, the sense of obligations motivates community members to make contributions by providing such assistance. In such cases, consumers are doing the brand's job, that is, creating brand-related value. This links back to the value co-creation process discussed in Section 2.3.3.2.4. Consumers, in such cases, are consciously or unconsciously becoming a part of the brand by providing assistance to existing and potential brand customers.

This moral obligation connects consumers in social media-based brand communication closer. This closer relationship between community members in such online space not only benefits consumers but also the brands. On the one hand, consumers are pushed by this feeling of obligation to share information, to help others reduce risks associated with purchase, or to assist others in better using the products (Habibi *et al.,* 2014). On the other hand, it is highlighted by both McAlexander *et al.* (2002) and Habibi *et al.* (2014) that consumers' relationship with brand are enhanced as a result of their participation in brand communities. Therefore, critically viewing, the shared moral obligations to respond to recognised need from others tightens the connections among consumers as well as between consumers and brands, which benefit the brands in the long-run.

3.5.1.2 Incentives

However, help is not always given for nothing in return. As identified by many researchers, **rewards or personal incentives** also attribute to WOM creation (Katz, 1960; Herek, 1987; Abelson and Prentice, 1989; Clary et al., 1998). Later, Wasko and Farja (2000) argued that identified perceived benefits are the major motives for WOM communication in online communities. In fact, Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014) observed that almost 50 per cent of consumer activities in brands' social media pages involve various competitions with rewards. However, since those consumers are motivated by incentives of different forms, their connections with the brands are weak and easily attacked by competitors when the incentives are no longer available or contested with alternatives. Consumers motivated by incentives are witnessed to have low brand loyalty and brand love; thus, they may take the incentives while backfiring on the brands because incentives and brand loyalty is not positively correlated (Wallace *et al.,* 2014). However, as Wallace *et al.* (2014) pointed out, since this type of consumers offers lowest WOM for brands in comparison to consumers motivated by other factors, they should not be a big challenge for brands.

3.5.1.3 Desire for Self-assurance

Thirdly, WOM creation is motivated by **consumers' desire for self-assurance**. Consumers sometimes actively create WOM content about their purchase experience to seek support from others and to reinforce their purchase decision (Fill, 2011). This is in line with the ego-defensive concept in functional theories as explained by Clary *et al.* (1998). It is suggested that consumers share their experience with others to avoid internal insecurity and external threats (Herek, 1987; Abelson and Prentice, 1989) so that they can reinforce that they have made good decisions (Fill, 2011). Based on existing discussion of this motivation, it is clear that WOM driven by this desire happens either quite near or after the purchase point. Given the real-time and instantaneous feature of WOM communication in social media (Habibi *et al*., 2014) such as micro-blog, the context of this research, consumers' self-assurance can be easily achieved or destroyed with responses from others immediately or soon after the UGC is created. In the circumstance that self-assurance is not achieved consumers are likely to go for alternatives. This argument here is in line with Christodoulides *et al*.'s (2012) statement that consumers carry out communication for greater choice. It is also confirmed in a recent study that social media eWOM communication offers reassurance for consumers and increase their confidence in their purchase decisions (Ruane and Wallace, 2013). Therefore, though self-assurance is the objective of consumers to create UGC, it is not always the outcome of UGC created. For brands, it is the process that needs special attention because need for self-assurance occurs at critical brand touch points and failure of that triggers damage to brands.

3.5.1.4 Social Orientation

Consumer action in creating WOM is also recognised as **socially oriented**. Based on functional theories, WOM creation is identified as an activity to share interaction socially with other consumers in one's network (Clary *et al*., 1998). It has also been pointed out that via creating WOM message in online communities consumers obtain self-belongingness (Clary *et al.*, 1998). This social orientation derives from the affordance of

UGC that suits the consumers up with tools and opportunities to explore insights about other consumers (Burmann and Arnhold, 2008). Undoubtedly, by doing so, consumers can establish a forum in which they can request greater choice (Christodoulides *et al*., 2012). This social orientation proves that UGC creation not only has altruistic root but also satisfy consumers' personal demand for pragmatic options. In the specific aspect of brand-related UGC, it has been recognised that consumers use UGC to exert control over brands (Christodoulides *et al*., 2012). In this specific aspect, Christodoulides *et al.* (2012) hypothesised that the more empowering the brand is, the more likely its consumers and customers are involved in brand-related UGC creation. However, later their findings rejected this hypothesis and confirmed what is suggested by Habibi *et al.* (2014) that media affordances brought by technological advancements rather than brand empowerment are the core drivers for UGC creation in brand-related communication.

Social orientation as a motivation for WOM creation also manifests itself in shared consciousness and shared rituals and traditions among users, especially members in social media-based brand community. When users are socially connected in social media space, they demonstrate oppositional brand loyalty (Kuo and Feng, 2013). Also, this shared consciousness is believed to differentiate members in a brand community from outsiders (Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann, 2005). Brogi (2014) argued that because of this shared consciousness, consumers in WOM communication who abide by the consciousness marginalise those who do not. Their behaviour are restricted by shared rituals and traditions in such communities.

Shared rituals and traditions are observable in community members' communication that specific jargons are used (Casalo, Flavian and Guinaliu, 2010), that commonly interested information is shared (Habibi *et al*., 2014), and that a recognisable community identity is built and maintained (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Kozinets *et al*., 2010). Shared consciousness is also found to manifest itself in collaborative activities among consumers online when they address themselves as 'we' and 'us' even when they are talking about themselves individually (Habibi *et al.,* 2014). These most recent findings in Facebook fan pages again confirms what Kozinets *et al.* (2010) established when exploring blogsphere.

Brogi (2014) and Habibi *et al.*'s (2014) findings are extensions of Kozinets *et al.*'s (2010) argument to more contexts but with a narrower focus on brand-related communication. The shared consciousness by members in such communities, such as the brand pages in micro-blogs studied here, motivates consumers to carry out collaborative activities about sometimes for the brand. Thus, this social orientation controls why consumers generate UGC in WOM communication as well as what they generate. They apply the shared values and rules to define what is acceptable and what is not that consumers in such a context are either taken in as link-minded peers or marginalised through other's evaluation of what they do in WOM communication.

3.5.1.5 Self-expression

The previous two paragraphs highlighted that UGC creation is socially motivated. Sometimes, it is self-centred. Self-expression is also found as a motivation for UGC creation (Berthon *et al.*, 2008; Krishnamurthy and Dou, 2008). Brands can become vehicles for consumers' self-expression. Through piggy-backing on brands, consumers use WOM to draw attention to themselves and communicate who they are with brands and peers (Berthon *et al.*, 2008). This point has been proved in social media WOM communication that consumers are more inclined to articulate about brands that can assist them define their identity creatively (Christodoulides *et al.,* 2012).

Consumers motivated by self-expression are more communicative than others because of their self-expressive nature. Regarding this, these consumers are more important to brands than consumers motivated by other factors such as incentives. According to Wallace *et al.* (2014), these consumers, as nodes in online social networks, generally have much more connections than other nodes. Their large amount of out-degree information exchange (see Goldenberg *et al.* 2009) qualifies them as social hubs and the influential called by Aral and Walker (2012). Ideally, these nodes in online social networks can help disseminate brand-related messages further to a larger scale.

The context of this study micro-blog space is one of the social networking services that consumers express themselves with connections to brands and other consumers. Sina

Weibo is also a self-expressive media like other social networking services such as Facebook and Twitter (Wallace *et al*., 2014). Since brands have self-expressive function, brand-related actions by consumers display their brand choice to others (Wallace *et al*., 2014). Therefore, this display not only defines who the consumers are in a creative way as suggested by Christodoulides *et al.* (2012), but also depicts the brand accepted or rejected with consumers' self-expressed meaning and value. Wallace *et al.* (2014) commented that this type of consumers is more materialistic and also demonstrating genuine brand interest. Regarding this, such consumers' interest in brands will fluctuate with the self-expressive joy the brand-related eWOM communication brings them.

Intriguingly, Christodoulides *et al.* (2012) slightly touched that consumers are more willingly to engage with less-established brands for self-expression purpose. They suggested that it might be because small and less-established brands allow consumers to be more creative in the way they create brand-related UGC. Their suggestion is reasonable because it echoes many claims that social media and UGC are great tools for small and start-up companies (Harrigan, Ramsey and Ibbotson, 2012).

It is also found recently that social media drives consumption of certain products when WOM creation is motivated by self-expressive purpose. For instance, a recent study by Ruane and Wallace (2013) showed that self-expressive Facebook photos published by users are linked to the users' fashion demand. Once the clothes have been demonstrated in Facebook photos, users often resist wearing them often again. This behaviour can be explained by Christodoulides *et al.*'s finding (2012) that self-expressive consumers utilise social media WOM to define who they are in a creative way. Once the clothes are worn and shown, it will be deemed as not creative anymore. From this regard, social media do increase consumption of certain products that are particularly presented in eWOM to fulfill self-expressive purpose creatively.

3.5.1.6 Others

Apart from those above-mentioned motivations, other trivial factors have also been identified as motivations for WOM creation. Regarding one function that is highlighted in eWOM communication – reposting of eWOM messages, the action of reposting (which is also a kind of eWOM creation) is triggered by positive consumption of UGC that reinforces consumer attitudes (Daugherty *et al.*, 2008).

3.5.2 Motivations for WOM Consumption

3.5.2.1 Justification to Study WOM Receiver

In contrast to WOM production, WOM perception has not received much academic attention. Allsop *et al.* (2007) suggested that after the delivery of WOM/eWOM messages, receivers develop rational perceptions of the content. However, what is delivered is not always equal to what is perceived (ibid). Allsop *et al*. are not alone in making such a statement. Christiansen and Tax (2000) also emphasised that message encoding by WOM givers could be different from message decoding by WOM receivers. Furthermore, Eastin and Daugherty (2005) pointed out that media consumption represents deliberate and active behaviours in which audiences proactively seek content according to their internal motivations (O'Keefe, 2002). Thus, it is important to study WOMM not only from the giver's side but also from the receiver's side. Motivations for WOM and eWOM consumption are identified by different researchers from various angles (see Appendix 2). Though those studies were carried out with different methods in different contexts, similar findings were elicited.

3.5.2.2 WOM Consumption Motivations

3.5.2.2.1 Risk Reduction

Risk reduction is most often identified by studies in different contexts across time. As identified by Arndt (1967), risk reduction is of the two major motivations for WOM consumption. He argued that consumers seek for WOM messages either to reinforce or to swift their presuppositions to reduce purchase related risks. Arndt's (1967) argument was later supported by Murray (1991) and Wagenheim and Bayon (2004). Both of their papers noted that consumers' expectation of reduced risk triggers WOM content searching. Their findings are also in line with more recent studies carried out by Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003), Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006), and Moore (2010). All of the three studies pointed out that consumers actively search for WOM/eWOM so as to reduce risks associated with their intended purchase so as to save decision time and make better choice.

3.5.2.2.2 Cost Reduction

Along with risk reduction is reduction of cost associated to the purchase. As pointed out by Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006), cost is another reasons consumers seek out for WOM. It echoes Hennig-Thurau and Walsh's (2003) suggestion that WOM consumption is for better consumer choice as cost is always highly concerned in consumer purchase experience. It is also one of the perceived benefits of information exchange in online communities as identified by Wasko and Faraj (2000) and Parameswaran and Whinston (2007).

3.5.2.2.3 Product Evaluation through Information Searching

Product evaluation through information searching has long been recognised as a motivation for WOW consumption. It was first found in the 1960s that consumers sought WOM for social support regarding their adoption or non-adoption decisions (Arndt, 1967). This idea was later developed by Murray (1991) and Wagenheim and Bayon (2004) who stated that consumers demand information from supportive others or unsupportive others to make product/service judgment.

In the digital context, consumer motivations for eWOM consumption are similar to those in the offline world. Consumers regard eWOM in social media as an information source to acquire pre-purchase information and to judge inspirations from offline marketing exposure (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006). More specifically, existing research found that consumers tend to particularly seek negative reviews since negative comments are perceived to be more informative and diagnostic than other comments and thus are more heavily weighted in consumer judgments (Herr, Kardes, and Kim, 1991).

Product evaluation in eWOM communication is also found to assist online purchasing. Ruane and Wallace (2013) recognised that Generation Y consumers seek social approval on social networking sites before shopping online. As consumers increasingly have less time but more tasks in daily life (Ruane and Wallace, 2013), e-Commerce websites become an efficient way to purchase products with minimal efforts and time (Mintel, 2012). Ruane and Wallace's (2013) findings then imply intertwined connections between social media eWOM and e-commerce shopping behaviour. Though their study is limited to one product category – fashion, the implication is worth investigation.

3.5.2.2.4 Consumer Learning

Consumer learning is another identified motivation for WOM consumption. As observed by Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003), consumers also seek product-related WOM online to better understand how to use a product. This opinion is also supported by Zhang and Watts (2004), who postulated that online knowledge management is a salient reason for consumers to carry out information related communication. More recently, Ruane and Wallace (2013) as well as Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014) both found that brands' social media pages that contain eWOM content are a source of inspiration from aspirational reference groups for consumption.

Consumer learning is not only about how to use a brand's offerings but also where, what and how to shop a brand. This type of consumer learning is more evident in brands that have online distribution channels. According to Ruane and Wallace (2013), relevant eWOM in social media is searched for purchase related information and used as guidance to complete the transaction.

3.5.2.2.5 Social Orientation

Besides all those motivations mentioned above, one salient motivation that is highly recognisable in eWOM communication is consumers' social orientation. Social orientation can be explained from two aspects. First, consumers have the instinct to be connected socially. Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003) informed that consumers engage themselves in WOM communication to be socially connected to their networks. By doing so, consumers obtain a sense of belongingness (ibid). Their argument is well supported by Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006) who confirmed that some consumers conduct WOM consumption activities simply to emulate others. The imitation behaviour indicates that those consumers want to be accepted by certain social networks for a sense of self-belongingness, which is often witnessed in brand communities that brands create on SNS (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Ruane and Wallace, 2013), for instance, brands' Facebook pages or Sina Weibo accounts.

Secondly, consumer social orientation is attributed to high level of trustworthiness associated to eWOM. There are two fundamental contributors to the dramatic trust shift from brand-published content to user-generated content. First is the loss of trust in traditional media sources such as television and advertisements (Edelman, 2011). Consumers' trust on traditional source of product-related information has been witnessed to drop continuously over the recent years (Edelman, 2011; Edelman, 2013). In the meantime, trust on peers in social networks increases. Reports have shown that influence and authority have been moved away to experts and peers (Edelman, 2013). Study also indicated that perceived trustworthiness is higher on information coming from others outside the immediate social networks for the reason that the information is seemingly disinterested (Duana, Gub and Whinston, 2008).

Micro-blog communication belongs exactly to this type of communication since most users are anonymous, not connected in real world and not hired by brands to create or consume eWOM in such a space. Thus, the features of micro-blog users fit the description of 'others outside the immediate social networks' and suggest higher trustworthiness of content created by them. That explains why consumers tend to search for and engage in eWOM communication rather than communicating with brands directly in some social media spaces. This implies that companies should shift their efforts to foster peer-to-peer dialogue (Anderson, 2010).

3.5.2.2.6 Subsection Summary

In a brief summary for this sub-section, users consume WOM mostly for either hedonic or utilitarian purposes. Utilitarian and hedonic values are derived from consumer activities of brand-related WOM consumption. This is not a new concept. In face, McAlexander *et* *al*. (2002) have argued so more than a decade ago. New findings in more recent studies such as Habibi *et al*. (2014) consolidated the idea and highlighted that consumers derive intangible social capital from their network of admirers or other consumers of the same brand.

3.6 Fourth Element – 'How' Those Activities Are Carried Out

All the three dimensions discussed before have been included in Mazzarol *et al.*'s (2007) WOMM framework. However, one dimension is missing from that and many other frameworks proposed to measure WOMM: the 'how'. Mazzarol *et al.* (2007) slightly touched the delivery of WOM messages in the framework with simple arrows (see Figure 12) without explanation. Neither did they deliberate on the dynamics of the message delivery process. Among myriad research on WOMM, Kozinets *et al.* (2010) is one of the most recent few that deliberated on the delivery process of WOM messages. The discussion of the 'how' element is then based on Kozinets *et al*.'s (2010) comprehension of WOMM evolution (Figure 15 below).

3.6.1 The Organic Interconsumer Influence WOMM

The organic interconsumer influence model of WOMM is most basic. It is the earliest and the simplest model proposed in understanding consumer WOM. Marketing messages are created by one individual consumer and delivered to other individuals without being interfered directly by the marketing professionals (Kozinets *et al*., 2010). As featured in this model, delivery of WOM messages relies on the interaction between individual nodes in social networks.

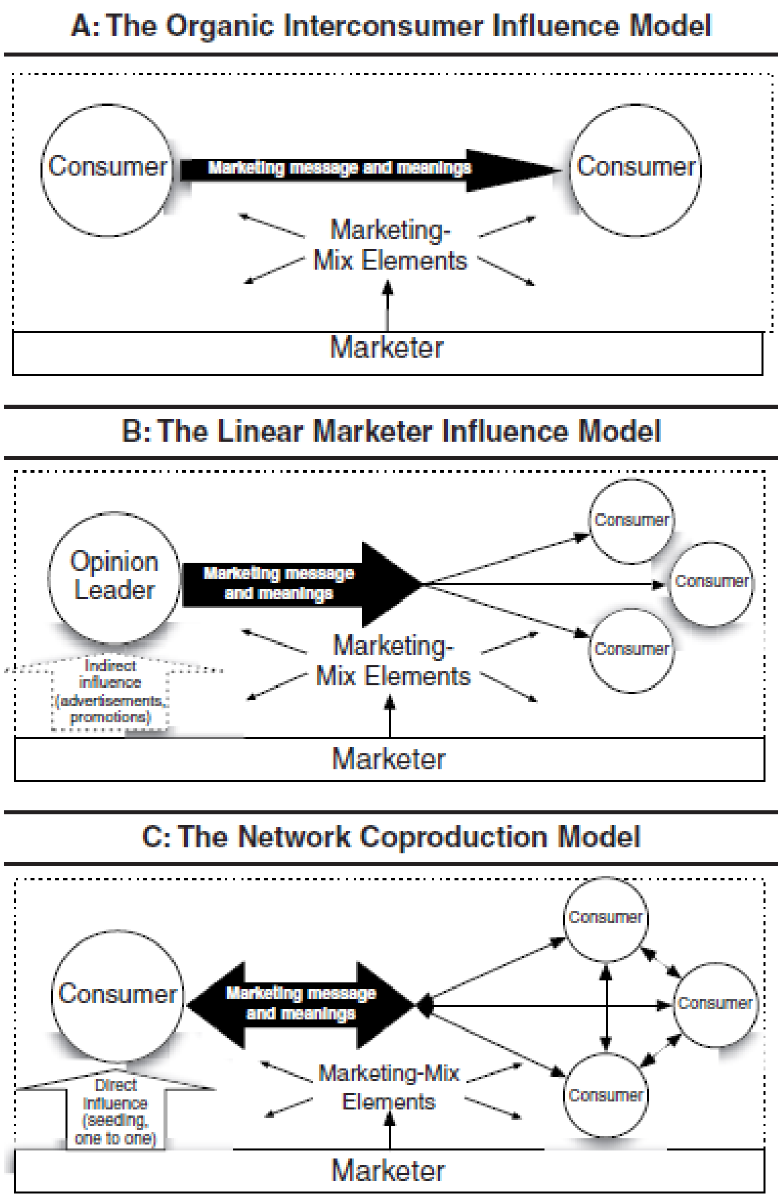


Figure 14 Evolution of WOMM Model, source: Kozinets et al. (2010:72)

3.6.2 The Linear Marketer Influence Model

A more advanced model compared to the organic model is the linear marketer influence model (Kozinets *et al.,* 2010) in which marketers influence consumer WOM through traditional means of marketing. Several characteristics of commercialised communication are identifiable in this communication model. First of all, it represents the opinion leader-opinion follower relationship as discussed by Katz and Lazarfeld (1955). This opinion leader-opinion follower relationship is much more influential than mass media when it comes to evaluation of services and goods. Opinion leaders' role in modern marketing communication is recognised and emphasised in this model that Kozinets *et al.* (2010) distinguished opinion leaders from general consumers (i.e. opinion followers) and highlighted their functionality of distributing information and exerting influence on average consumers. It is then the marketers' responsibility to identify opinion leaders in communication in order to harness the power of UGC in WOM communication because UGC created by opinion leaders, once established and disseminated to others in social networks, can be far-reaching and last long and have an impact on other consumers' purchase choice (Graham and Havlena, 2007). It is also essential to note here that this impact mentioned above is much harder to be controlled by brands themselves (Graham and Havlena, 2007). Vernette (2004) revealed that identifying and targeting opinion leaders through media is realistic. Sharing Kozinets *et al.*'s (2010) point of view, Cheong and Morrison (2008) also noted that brands can use mass media to influence opinion leaders and thereby indirectly affect consumers who turn to opinion leaders for details such as product information and recommendations.

3.6.3 The Network Coproduction Model

The most advanced model of WOMM communication so far covered in literature is the network coproduction model. The network coproduction model of WOMM is more applicable in today's digital world. It depicts 3 fundamental features of eWOMM: (1) the increasing influence of general consumers, (2) the extension of WOMM to digital platforms, and (3) the need for brand-consumer cooperation.

3.6.3.1 Increasing Influence of General Consumers

First of all, consumers are the leading actors and actresses in the network co-production model. As illustrated by this model, consumers are value creators. Their influence on each other in terms of offering information, assisting product/service evaluation, as well as helping judgement making is not only huge in volume but sometimes unstoppable by marketing efforts as discussed in the 'who' and the 'what' sections. The essence of the model is that general consumers become active dialogue participants and co-producers of value and meaning (Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Thompson and Sinha, 2008). Gladwell (2002, cited in Sweeney *et al*., 2012) shared similar view to Muñiz and Schau (2005) and Thompson and Sinha (2008). He emphasised that WOM belongs to every consumer rather than the influential few. Cheung *et al.* (2007) also supported this view by stating that typical consumers rather than opinion leaders comprise most part of WOMM interactions. These statements are in line with the sociological claim that influential people do not drive most social changes; rather, easily influenced people affect easily influenced others and hence social changes are accomplished (Watts and Dodds, 2007). Thus, implied by network co-production model, the value of an individual consumer does not stop at the individual level. Wallace *et al* (2014) has pointed out that not all consumers in brands' social media pages are created equal; therefore, even individuals have differentiated influence over brands. It has also been long recognised that a consumer's relationship with a brand is affected by the consumer's network structure (Douma, 2008; McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook, 2011; Lapointe, 2012, Parker, 2012; Wallace *et al.* 2014). A simplification of the network co-production model with a focus on consumer-consumer influence is shown in Figure 16 below. The value of an individual consumer to brands is:

the accumulation of his value being a fan /customer

+ the value of his influence over his peers plus

+ the aggregate value of his peers over their peers

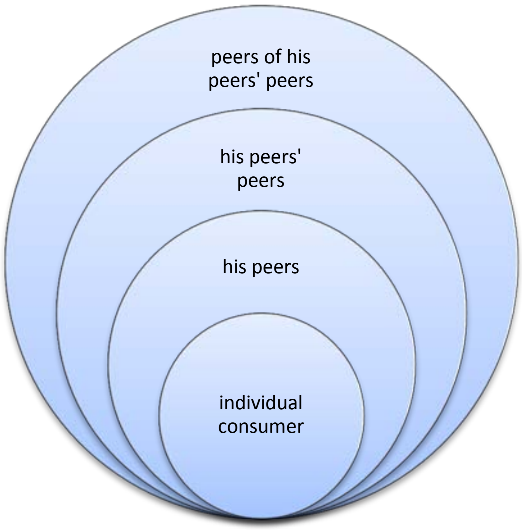


Figure 15 A simplification of consumer influence implied by the network coproduction model

Some might question whether the coproduction model is a reverse from the linear marketer influence model to the organic inter—consumer influence model since the importance of opinion leaders decreases and the significance of individual consumer increases dramatically as shown in Figure 15. However, it is not a reverse but a revolution (Dellarocas, 2003). It is a revolution in many aspects. First and foremost, there is a dramatic control shift from brand managers to the general consumers. Social media where eWOM communication is prevalent is critically characterised by UGC and user control over those content (Fill, 2011). Correspondingly, intervention from a third party, for instance, brand managers, is diminished on such platforms (Fill, 2011). Fill's (2011) argument is well supported by Daugherty *et al.* (2008) who indicated that the prevalence of UGC in social media represents a power shift within the marketing industry towards greater control in the consumers' hands. The role of UGC in swaying consumer behaviour reduces the power of traditional marketing communications; therefore, rather than relying on traditional marketing communications, companies should practice more social media activities so as to understand the impact of UGC on their brand image and to foster interaction with potential customers (Heinonen, 2011).

Furthermore, identified from Figure 15, some users are with core value to brands if they are what Goldenberg *et al.* (2009) called 'social hub'. Those consumers online with a large number of ties are understood as the influential in the linear marketer influence model. However, the notion that the influential are most powerful in affecting brand performance is rejected by findings that the power of those social hubs depends on whether communication flows out or into those hubs (Wallace *et al*., 2014). A greater number of out-degree information flow implies a greater influence of them over others' adoption of marketing messages (Goldenberg *et al*., 2009). Conversely, a greater number of in-degree information flow indicates the susceptibility of the nodes discussed in section 3.3.3.2.4 and their potential influence on market size (Wallace et al., 2014).

3.6.3.2 Extension from Physical World to Digital Realm

Secondly, the model fits today's digital marketing era since the interconsumer communication witnessed in the digital world is in line with what is proposed by this model (Kozinets *et al*. 2010). With the rocketing development of social media tools, WOMM has extended beyond the physical world and become prevalent in the digital realm. This extension of WOMM from physical to digital world is coined by Dellarocas (2003) as WOM revolution. It is a revolution powered by technologies and accomplished by consumers. Technological advancements have empowered consumers to become more powerful both individually and collectively. Consumers' power in exerting influence on others had been seen in WOMM before the digital era, and now it is witnessed in eWOMM prevalent on the Internet. With the advent of Internet and a plethora of Web 2.0 applications, WOMM extends beyond acquaintances and the influential few to connections people do not know physically but are bounded online by common interest (Fong and Burton, 2006). With the development of the Internet, eWOM travels at an unprecedented speed at a much lower cost (Li and Zhan, 2011). This new form of WOMM has gradually become a new and important venue for consumer opinions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Mayzline, 2006; Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011).

3.6.3.3 Indications for Brands

Thirdly, this new model is observed as quite effective in influencing consumers. Existing literature pointed out that various digital WOM platforms are characterised by wide dissemination and high level of acceptance, which suggest that customer articulation exerts influences on consumer buying action, on consumer communication behaviour and consequently on brands' market success (Hennig-Thurau and Walsh, 2003). The effectiveness of WOMM is also proved by many other studies. For instance, Rogers (1995) observed that WOM communication, rather than traditional mass marketing approaches, is the main force that drives innovation diffusion after the initial launching stage. Goldenberg *et al.'s* (2001) study based on stochastic cellular automata gathered similar conclusions, which illustrated that after 16 per cent of the market becomes informed of a product, weak ties between individuals are more influential than strong ties (ibid). This process is what was depicted by Kozinets *et al*. (2010) in the network coproduction model of WOMM (see Figure 15). Consumers, rather than the brands or marketing professionals, occupy the essential position in the value creation process. Their tool, which is also their weapon, is eWOM.

However, though peer influence is given significance by many researchers and practitioners, it is not always the optimal choice in branding practice. The effectiveness of social contagion of information also depends on two variables, the strength of ties as well as the stage of product involvement. On the one hand, strong ties between each dyad in the network increase the trustworthiness of content shared (Liu-Thompkins, 2012). On the other hand, since strong ties exist in networks of people with similar interests, it is seldom that novel information emerges in such networks (Gensler *et al*., 2013). According to these, in the stage to increase brand awareness, weak ties are more likely to be effective than strong ties in reaching an overall coverage in social networks; while in the stage of persuading and brand adoption, strong ties are more appropriate. Thus, from the specific perspective of CBBE, strong ties are appropriate to enhance brand image whereas weak ties are appropriate to increase brand awareness.

Besides the linkage in dyads in the network, eWOM's high effectiveness is also attributed to its high scalability (Chatterjee, 2011). In traditional WOM, one piece of information is transmitted from one individual to another as depicted in the organic WOM model. As regard to eWOM, communication is much more voluminous in quantity and lasts much longer compared to traditional WOM due to certain level of permanency of online content (Chatterjee, 2011; Hennig-Thurau *et al*., 2004; Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011). This broad reach of eWOM endues consumers with tremendous clout to influence brand image and brand perceptions (Urban, 2005; Reynolds, 2006; Jansen *et al*., 2009). Therefore, companies should increase their investment in eWOM branding activities so as to be where their customers are and do what their customers do.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of eWOM branding is contributed by the immediacy of eWOM communication. Social media tools facilitate timely communication among consumers and between consumers and brands. With the wide spread of technological advancements, particularly with the prevalence of smart phones and mobile social networking applications to which Sina Weibo, the context of this study, belongs, consumer touch points with regard to brand-related articulation can happen quite near the point of purchase (Barton, 2006; Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011). Thus, brand managers' attention is required to address this issue properly.

With the evolution of communication models, brand managers' work has been changed correspondingly. Thought Kozinets *et al.* (2010) called the change of WOMM models an evolution; its influence on brand communication is revolutionary as Kimmel and Kitchen (2014) rightly commented. Before social media marketing era, brand managers used to take absolute control over the mass-mediated brand-related messages (Anderson, 2010).

The rapid growth of social media applications can easily disrupt the balance. Brands are strongly recommended to take an integrated and interactive approach that involves eWOM to realise unique affordances of social media in increasing brand awareness while leveraging other channels of communication to move people along the conversation cycle (Lithium, 2012). Brand communication has been revolutionised into a more direct, instantaneous and expanded dialog (Kimmel and Kitchen, 2014). As illustrated in the network co-production model, marketing messages travel back and forth among consumers, which indicates that consumers are invading companies' marketing sphere as postulated by Berthon *et al.* (2008). For brands in the network coproduction model, their job is not identifying the influential few as in the linear influence model, but to find a way to engage themselves as well as consumers in the value co-creation process favourable to the brands.

Existing research has touched broadly on WOMM's effectiveness in marketing for products and services; however, eWOM branding is a subfield not covered by many. In order to respond to this limit, this study then focuses on this area.

3.7 Summary

This chapter presented review of relevant literature of WOMM, the fundamental element of eWOM branding, in four aspects: the 'who', the 'what', the 'why' and the 'how'.

The 'who' section demonstrated characteristics of online consumers and segmented them according to their online activities. It also discussed two influential relationships in WOMM, the opinion leader – opinion follower relationship and the peer effect influence. In digital eWOM communication, the influence based on the former relationship is decreasing while the influence based on the latter relationship is proved to be prevalent.

The 'what' section explained what is involved in WOMM into two parts, the content and the presentation approach. Understanding of WOMM content is based on Mazzarol *et al.*'s (2010) WOM framework. Valence is discussed as an essential dimension of WOM message that affects the perceived usefulness of the content. It also stresses that UGC is the major component of WOM communication, which indicates that brands need to invest where their customers are and engage in what they say about the brands. The communication aspect of WOM, i.e. the richness of content and the strength of advocacy projected in the content, is also emphasised in this literature review.

The ‘why’ section scrutinised motivations for creating and consuming WOM. The idea to present literature in this way is based on Harrison-Walker’s (2001) bilateral categorisation of people involved in WOMM into givers and receivers. Consumers create and consume WOM for different reasons, which indicates that brands should have differentiated strategies to pull the consumers to create/consume brand-related eWOM content.

The last section ‘how’ is a dimension that was missing from Mazzarol *et al*.’s (2007) WOM framework. The discussion of how WOMM operates is based on Kozinets *et al*.’s (2010) seminal work on WOMM model revolution, which depicts how WOMM has grown from the original interconsumer influence model to the network coproduction model. The network coproduction model emphasizes peer effect at a collective level and fits the eWOM communication in social media. General consumers’ influence in WOMM has dramatically increased. WOMM has extended from physical world to digital realm. All these features indicate a need for brands to be where the consumers are and engage in what they do so as to bring the conversation to a direction that is favourable to the brands.

Chapter 4 Research Gap and Research Questions

4.1 Research Gaps

Chapter 2 presented pertinent literature on branding theories and digital branding practice. It pointed out the lack of academic attention in micro-blog branding activities as well as a lack of academic attention into the Chinese micro-blogging service Sina Weibo, which is one of the top social media brands globally. With the key of the study to explore micro-blog branding activities, Chapter 3 looked deeper into WOM and eWOM theories since eWOM is the basic form of brand-related communication among consumers online. Based on the reviews of literature in those two chapters, a few research gaps emerged.

4.1.1 Lack of Conceptualisation of eWOM Branding

The first gap identified is the lack of thorough understanding of eWOM branding activities. The role of brand managers has dramatically changed due to technological advancements. Marketers are then required to be real-time multi-media publishers on a global scale (Edelman, 2010). As their roles evolve, it would be unwise and obsolete to not wonder the evolving role of brand managers. Existing literature has identified the scarcity of studies to better understand the profile of social media users and their respective online engagement with brands. Most existing studies referenced in Chapter 2 have explored or focused on marketing communications in general in the digital world, leaving specific branding activities uninvestigated. Even most recent studies that have slightly touched branding in social media platforms either explore the issue from the brand executives' perspective (see Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014) or generally suggest or assume the negative or positive impact of social media eWOM on brands based on consumers' attitudes towards positive or negative WOM/eWOM content (also see Gensler *et al*., 2013; Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014). The issue of eWOM brand is still in lack of academic attention and systematic investigation. Despite significant practitioner interest, the undertaking of scholarly, empirical eWOM branding research has lagged behind, resulting in a limited understanding of the concept and its scale to date. In fact, such an issue deserves traction. As articulated by Jansen *et al.* (2009), eWOM is an important aspect of an organisation's branding strategy and current usage of eWOM across different firms and different user groups shows a clear increasing trend of eWOM branding. More recently, Gensler *et al*. (2013) called on examination of brands' role in social media branding as to what the impact of brands acting as moderators, mediators and participants in brand-related communication is. These studies all suggest that since branding practice is confronted with challenges and new opportunities brought by social media, especially eWOM in social media, how branding is and should be practiced in such a medium is worth investigation.

Also, as Kimmel and Kitchen (2014) pointed out, existing research ignored the possible effects of eWOM on intermediate stages of consumer decision-making, during which accumulative brand knowledge is obtained and affected over time. Also pointed out by Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014) very recently, consumers' engagement in brand related eWOM in social media is still a gap that is not much explored. Thus, this study, as a novel one in this specific field fulfills the gap and makes contribution to the understanding of those possibilities.

4.1.2 Social Media's Influence on CBBE

Furthermore, though there is a large volume of online articles and consultancy reports on digital branding practice, very limited academic attention has been laid on how CBBE specifically is/may be influenced by social media eWOM branding activities. Existing coverage on eWOM branding activities are fairly general, praising the overall benefits brands can get and warning them the challenge of customer defection. Recently, researchers have begun to explore the influence of UGC and eWOM in social lmedia on CBBE (see Habibi *et al.*, 2014). However, as the same as McAlexander *et al.* (2002), Habibi *et al.*'s (2014) mere emphasis on the relationship network between consumers is *'current but not entirely complete'* (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002:39) to recognise the influence of social media networks on CBBE. As Sundararajan *et al.* (2013) commented, the analysis of social media network structure should be integrated with the analysis of content that flows through the network. According to Tsimonis and Dimitriadis's (2014) most recent study on brand strategies in social media, increasing brand awareness and enhancing brand image are major motivations for brands to adopt social media strategies. Their findings, however, are purely from the angle of brand executives and are merely summaries of brand executives' expectation. They have also suggested that social media are amplifiers of eWOM effect on brands but have not given empirical proof. Without systematic exploration of how brand knowledge can be affected by eWOM in social media, what they stated are merely expectations and assumptions.

How CBBE is affected in social media brand-related eWOM is the disparity between what is known and what is unknown. What is known is that brands are increasingly using social media as a part of their branding strategy (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014). Also, generally eWOM affects consumer attitudes and sometimes eventual choice. What is unknown is how social media networks, in other words eWOM affordances in various social media platforms, affect the content flow, the content consumption and the adoption of brand mentioned in the content. Therefore, to uphold brand communication in social media especially social networking systems such as Twitter, Facebook and Weibo, one should recognise the dual focus of research need in this specific field. First, researchers should not only emphasise the consumer-consumer relationships, but also delve into *'consumer relationships with the brand, the products and the marketers'* (Habibi *et al.,* 2014:124). It is through this can a more comprehensive picture of dynamic brand community relationships in social media can be drawn. Second, how those relationships affect the establishment, strengthening, and weakening of brand knowledge held by consumers should also be a focus. Therefore, this study explores eWOM branding activities based on both CBBE frameworks and social media eWOM (WOM) theories presented in Chapter 2 and 3.

4.1.3 Lack of Academic Attention in Micro-blog Branding Activities

The third gap identified is a lack of academic attention in micro-blog branding activities. Micro-blogging service is a platform that is under-researched in terms of its participation in eWOM branding activities. From a resource-based view, business context is now more turbulent than ever before for firms to configure their resources for competitive advantage as a result of the increased global competition, technological advancements, and more complex and shifting customer demands (Helm and Jones, 2010). As micro-blogging service is trendy at the moment, it would be worth asking whether micro-blog branding activities are resources that could help create competitive edge from a CBBE perspective. As stated in Chapter 2, Jansen *et al.* (2009) are some of the very few who have explored micro-blog branding activities. They chose Twitter as the study context and suggested that micro-blog as a branding tool is promising to increase competitive intelligence and to differentiate brands from their competitors (Jansen *et al.*, 2009). However, whether their findings solely on Twitter can be extended to other micro-blogging services has not been explored. Therefore, this study focuses on another world famous micro-blogging service, Sina Weibo and examine whether the findings by Jansen *et al.* (2009) stand across different micro-blogging services. However, this study is more than a study on valence as in Jansen et al. (2009). It sets the eye on a wider and more holistic picture as mentioned above – ***to explore micro-blog branding activities and how customer-based brand equity may be influenced by those activities***. The findings of this study are then expected to facilitate the development of more advanced eWOM branding tactics.

4.2 Research Questions

Based on the gaps identified, the current study explored how micro-blog branding activities affect CBBE. There are two research questions, one focusing on the function of micro-blog branding activities (hereafter MBB), and the other on the effect of eWOM features projected in MBB on CBBE of brands (see Table 5 below).

Table 6 Research Questions

Research Question 1:	Research Question 2:
How do micro-blog branding activities contribute to customer-based brand equity?	How do eWOM features projected in micro-blog branding activities influence the CBBE of brands?

Research Question 1 intended to explore the function of micro-blog branding activities in creating and sustaining customer-based brand equity. This research question includes sub-questions listed below:

- Brand awareness
    - RQ1: How does MBB change consumers' brand awareness?
- Brand image

- RQ2: What brand equity components are most identifiable and memorable by consumers?
- RQ3: In what circumstances do MBB activities create strong brand associations?
- RQ4: In what circumstances do MBB activities create unique brand associations?

RQ5: In what circumstances do MBB activities create favourable brand associations?

As shown in Figure 3 in Chapter 2 (also presented below), effective brand building communication is achieved when the gap between desired brand knowledge and current brand knowledge is filled in by communication (Keller, 2008). Thus, this study that aims to have a holistic understanding of MBB activities and how CBBE may be influenced by those activities will be achieved by answering whether the gap between desired brand knowledge and current brand knowledge is filled by the micro-blog branding activities.

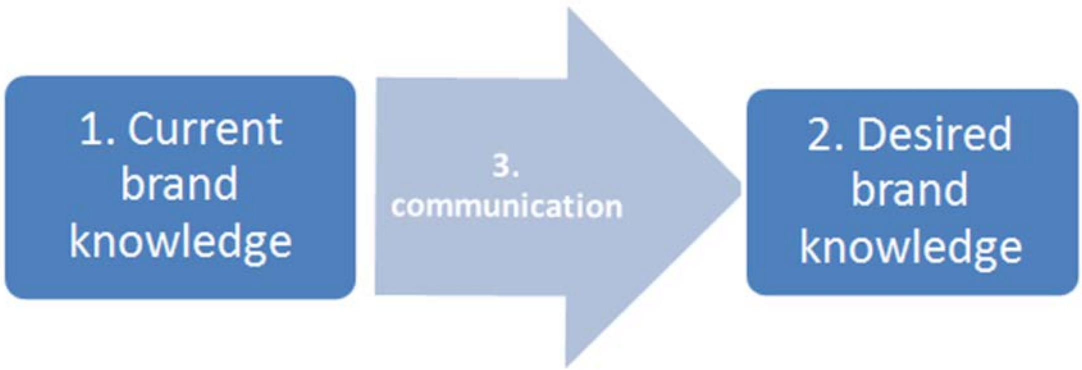


Figure 3. Simple model to test the effectiveness of brand building communication, same as in Section 2.3.1, source: Keller (2008:233)

Also, as summarised in Chapter 2, learning advantage, consideration advantage and choice advantage together attribute to the ultimate CBBE of salient brands. Therefore, the effectiveness of MBB activities also lies in whether the three advantages are created and maintained. In order to explore this, another set of sub-questions then inquire how MBB activities influence the competitive advantages brought by CBBE:

- RQ 6: How do MBB activities affect the learning advantage of a brand?
- RQ 7: How do MBB activities affect the consideration advantage of a brand?

- RQ 8: How do MBB activities affect the choice advantage of a brand?

Since micro-blog is a kind of eWOM communication, the effectiveness of MBB is connected to the features of eWOM. When discussing WOM effectiveness, Mazzarol *et al.* (2007) identified richness of content and strength of advocacy as two focal facets. Hence, Mazzarol *et al.* (2007) suggested a further research direction to investigate a possible disparity between WOM received and WOM valued. Following their research, Sweeney *et al.* (2012) came up with a short, practical WOM message scale appropriate in both positive and negative WOM cases. However, no measure of eWOM in terms of those two attributes has been proposed or developed so far. A number of researchers have claimed the urge to extend WOM conceptualisation to an online context (Brown *et al.*, 2007; East *et al*., 2008; Edelman, 2007; Sweeney *et al.*, 2012; Trusov *et al.,* 2009). This research than fulfils this gap with a specific perspective by exploring MBB with respect to richness of content and strength of advocacy. Sub-research questions about richness of content are listed below:

- RQ 9 How does the richness of content in MBB activities affect the CBBE?

Strength of advocacy is another construct emphasised in WOM conceptualisation. East *et al.* (2008) have suggested that the effect of WOM on consumers' decision making is based on two variables, the strength of tie between the giver and the receiver as well as the receivers' prior probability of purchase. As mentioned by Granovetter (1973), the most powerful links between consumers may not be the directional link from the influential to the average; rather, it may be the average weak ties. Thus, this dimension could be added into eWOM branding conceptualisation. Sub-question in relation to this issue is:

- R 10. How does the strength of advocacy in MBB activities affect the CBBE?

Also, though many studies have focused on receivers' change of perception on product /service, prior purchase intention, which is important in consumers' decision making process, seems to be ignored. In the subfield of branding efforts, prior purchase intention could be understood as presuppositions consumers hold towards brands.

East (2007) is one of the very few who added prior purchase probability into the measurement of WOM effect. East (2007) suggested that difference in prior purchase probability implies different space for WOM to shift the consumers' purchase intention. Having and not having prior purchase intention are two totally different situations when consumers engage themselves in WOM communication. Supposedly, from the branding perspective, having favourable presuppositions and having unfavourable presuppositions are two distinct situations when consumers engage themselves in MBB. Therefore, the effect of MBB on their attitudes and subsequent behavioural change could be largely different, which affects the attitudinal and behavioural brand equity suggested by Das, Stenger and Ellis (2009). Furthermore, since branding activities do not only occur online, the offline efforts received and perceived by consumers could also moderate the effectiveness of MBB activities. Consumers' offline brand experience also influences their presuppositions to the brands. Therefore, subquestion about presuppositions is listed below:

- RQ 11. How do presuppositions held by consumers affect the effectiveness of MBB activities?

Last but not least, since valence of eWOM and challenge of eWOM in harming brands have been mentioned previously in this study and emphasised by many existing studies, sub-question 12 then addresses the investigation of possible brand dilution in MBB activities.

RQ 12: Under what circumstances does possible brand dilution occur and what are the implications for brands?

Chapter 5 Research Methodology and Methods

5.1 Introduction

Sanders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007:5) defined research as *'something that people undertake in order to find out things in a systematic way, thereby increasing their knowledge'*. In this definition, they pointed out three major characteristics of a research: a clear research purpose, systematically collected data, and logical interpretation of those data. Chapter 4 above deliberated on the purpose of this study with Chapter 2 and 3 earlier supporting the objectives. This chapter then demonstrates how data to answer the research questions listed in Chapter 4 were collected and interpreted systematically.

The first question regarding research methodology and methods is what the systematic way for this study is. As Smith (1985 cited in Greene, 2007:19) mentioned, researchers became real and qualified by learning about the *'proper methods, properly applied'*. Today, given the multiplicity of perspectives and stances regarding social inquiry, researchers need to become knowledgeable about various approaches they would adopt in their work and for what purpose, or in service of whose interests (Greene, 2007). Therefore, being scientific is the foundation of any further inquires carried out.

5.2 Being Scientific in Social Science Research

Being scientific in researching social phenomenon involving human beings begins at choosing the appropriate methods. As suggested by Crotty (1998), individual's assumptions about the nature of reality, about knowledge accumulation inevitably shape how he understands the research questions and the research methods he subsequently chooses as well as how he interpret the findings. Thus, the presentation of how specific choices have been made starts from the discussion of philosophical paradigms.

5.2.1 Discussion of Paradigms and the Scientific Choice

A paradigm is viewed, according to Guba and Lincoln (1994:107), as *'a set of basic beliefs that deals with ultimates or first principles'*. Three defining questions of paradigms are the ontological question, which asks about the form and nature of reality, the epistemological question, which questions about what can be known and the relationship between the known and the unknown, and the methodological question, which inquires the appropriate methods to close the gap between the known and the unknown.

The importance of paradigm not only in social science research and more particularly in marketing research has been long pointed out. As Deshpande (1983) stresses, theories and methods are not separable since a scientist accepting a set of philosophical beliefs of a group of others also accepts the criteria for appropriate tools to conduct studies. The next few sub-sections are going to gradually narrow the discussion from theoretical ones to the one on methods.

5.2.1.1 Ontological Concern

Ontological concern enquires what the reality is (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012), defining what to be studied (Gill and Johnson, 2010). There are two aspects of ontology, namely, objectivism and subjectivism (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007) with the former suggesting that social entities are existent external to social actors and the latter suggesting that social phenomena are shaped from the attitudes and behaviours of social actors. In regard to this study, consumers are not like physical objects, because they are subject to environments around them, to be more precise, social interactions among them as well as interaction between brands and them. In such a study, the research aims to seek the subjective reality of the consumers in order to make sense of their motivations, intentions and subsequent actions.

5.2.1.2 Epistemological Concern

Epistemology concerns what can be understood as acceptable knowledge in the field being studied (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). Major perspectives are positivism and interpretivism (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). The philosophical stance of positivism is more consistent with that of the natural scientists (ibid) since verification of law-like generalisations is the aim of researchers who adopt this stance (Gill and Johnson, 2010). Interpretivism, on the other end of the continuum, emphasises rich insights into the complex world, which will be at loss if the study is subject to a series of generalisation testing and verification (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012).

In regard to this study, there is no law-like generalisations to be tested or verified since the author did not have at hand such generalisations obtained from existing literature or a framework that can be directly tested in a new context, which is the Sina Weibo brand-related eWOM communication. What is unknown here is consumers' motivations in participating in such activities, their intention of their activities and their subsequent behaviour, which all need interpretation of the author with reference to the specific context. Exploration of such elements requires interaction between the authors and people who carry out such activities since observable phenomena only cannot provide enough insights. As a result, interpretivism is more suitable in such a case in comparison to positivism since less is known to be enough to reduce phenomena to simplest elements for causality. Moreover, interpertivist perspective is asserted to be highly appropriate in marketing research as suggested by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012).

5.2.1.3 Methodological Concern

Interpretivism often uses small samples and in-depth qualitative investigation to collect data (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). Different from quantitative methodologists, qualitative methodologists attach more value to both the inner and outer facets of human behaviour. To them, human behaviour is the product of how people interpret the world surrounding them (Bodgan and Taylor, 1975). As a result, meaning interpretation is of essential significance in such investigation. Human behaviour, unlike objects in natural scientific studies, is not independent from meanings and purposes attached by human actors to their actions (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, when comparing qualitative and quantitative data, it is asserted that qualitative ones provide richer insight into human action (ibid). Similar to this, Guba and Lincoln (1994) also criticised quantitative methods as being too much focusing on generalisability, which is although more statistically meaningful have no implication on individual cases. In contrast, qualitative methods can help solve this ambiguity.

5.3 Specific Research Methods

5.3.1 Qualitative Research -- Why

Qualitative approach is chosen in this study. Flick (2011) suggested that there is no unanimously agreed definition of qualitative research and it is without any doubt no longer just simply 'not quantitative research'. After careful evaluation of various definitions, Creswell's was chosen in this study to present the stance of the author.

Creswell (2013:44), based on Denzin and Lincoln's (2011) elements of qualitative research definition, proposed a definition of qualitative research with greater emphasis on the design and conduct of qualitative inquiry:

> Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change.

Similar to Creswell, Flick (2011:x) suggested that the fundamental task of qualitative research is to *'unpick how people construct the world around them, what they are doing or what is happening to them in terms that are meaningful and that offer rich insight'*. Different from quantitative researcher, qualitative ones withhold the idea of setting-up a well-defined concept of what is being studied and then come up with a priori hypotheses for testing. Rather, concept and theories are developed within the research process (Flick, 2011).

Both the definitions are in line with the internal critique of the received view of hard science which emphasis either verification or falsification of a priori hypotheses. Different from natural science research, social science research lays much more emphasis on meaning and purpose of a phenomenon. As Guba and Lincoln (1994:106) pointed out clearly, '*human behaviour, unlike that of physical objects, cannot be understood without reference to the meanings and purposes attached by human actors to their activities. Qualitative data, it is asserted, can provide rich insight into human behaviour'*. The paradigmatic discussion presented above has presented the view of the author regarding the nature of the world and her choice to be more scientific in doing such a study implies that the choice of the methods in accordance to her believed philosophical assumption as well as the nature of the study falls into the qualitative research field.

The aim of the research is to explore micro-blog branding activities and how they may influence CBBE. Judging from the aim, this is a study to discover and generate theories based on phenomenon which is the objective that qualitative methods were purposely developed for (Reichardt and Cook, 1979).

this study is more focused on consumers' actual activities and how their activities affect their attitudes and following behaviours. As a result, it falls nicely in the scope of understanding '*how people construct the world around them'*, exploring *'what they are doing or what is happening to them in terms of that are meaningful and that offer rich insight'* (Flick, 2011:x), and interpreting *'the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem'* (Creswell, 2013:44) all presented and discussed above (see Table 6 below). Therefore, qualitative approaches are more suitable for this study. Once a suitable path is chosen, how to conduct a good research is the next issue to be solved.

Table 7 How the aim of the study fits the description of qualitative research

Research Aim	Corresponding parts of the definition of qualitative research
Explore micro-blog branding activities	*How people construct the world around them* *what they are doing or what is happening to them in terms of that are meaningful and*

	that offer rich insight
How they (those activities) may influence CBBE	*what they are doing or what is happening to them in terms of that are meaningful and that offer rich insight* *the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem*

5.3.2 Good Qualitative Research

The cornucopia of distinct concepts of what could be qualified as good qualitative research are in noticeable contrary to the relative consensus held by quantitative scholars. Thus, applying traditional popular criteria in quantitative research to qualitative research is illegitimate (Tracy, 2010); akin to *'Catholic questions directed to a Methodist audience'* (Guba and Lincoln, 2005:202). A number of researchers also heeded this dispute by suggesting that criteria for goodness in qualitative research must be affiliated to specific theories or paradigms (Denzin, 2008; Guba and Lincoln, 2005; Tracy 2010).

Ellingson (2008) likened good qualitative research to crystal, with various facets of the stories representing the aims, objectives, and needs of various stakeholders of the research, including participants, the academy, funding bodies, the greater society, and last but not least, the researcher. Furthermore, Tracy (2010:838) presented and explored eight key markers of quality in good qualitative research, including *'(1) worthy topic, (2) rich rigor, (3) sincerity, (4) credibility, (5) resonance, (6) significant contribution, (7) ethics, and (8) meaningful coherence*'.

However, despite of those criteria of high quality qualitative research, the answer to the question 'are there perfect qualitative researches?' is probably no. Fine (1993) made a courageous comment about the dark side of qualitative research in *Ten Lies of Ethnography*. He mentioned that researchers often pretend to do qualitative researches perfectly by masking research blemishes with efforts of being more kind, thorough, precise, candid, and fair (Fine, 1993). The problem that sits in the truth is that the researchers are in fact not as perfect as they pretend to be. Even though Tracy (2010) came up with a conceptualisation of eight criteria of good qualitative research, she does not agree with the idea of grasping too strongly to any listed rules of doing research. She even remarked that "*treating them (list of rules) as commandments rather than human made ideas is an act of delusion, suffering, and pain*" (Tracy, 2010:849).

In contrast to quantitative research that seeks precision, high-quality qualitative research is more likely appreciated for its rich complexity of abundance (Tracy, 2010). Queries about rigor in qualitative research include (1) whether there are enough data to support significant claims; (2) whether sufficient time has been spent in order to get interesting and abundant data; (3) whether the context and sample appropriate to the objectives of the study; and (4) whether appropriate procedures have been taken in data collection and analysis processes (Tracy, 2010).

Specifically regarding this research, all the four criteria mentioned above are met. First of all, the enough data have been collected to address the issue since data saturation appeared in the analysis process. Secondly, the context and samples are appropriate to the objectives of the study, which will be deliberated on later in Section 5.3.5. Thirdly, appropriate collection and analysis processes have been taken to ensure that the study is ethical and of high quality.

5.3.3 Research Methods of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research starts with the belief that methods and conceptual framework should fit into the field of study appropriately (Flick, 2011). Basic sources of qualitative information include interviews, observations, documents, and audio-visual materials (Creswell, 2013). Interview is chosen as the primary source of data for analysis in this study. A complementary source of data is the observation of micro-blog branding activities actually happening on Sina Weibo.

5.3.4 Interview

5.3.4.1 Definition of Interview and Knowledge Construction in Inter-View

Conversation is an old and traditional way of obtaining knowledge (Kvale, 2011). The origin of obtaining knowledge through conversation could date back to the ancient Greece, when Thucydides wrote about the Peloponnesian Wars with the interviews with war participants (Kvale, 2011). The term interview, though, only dates back to the recent century. Interview is in fact *'an inter-view, an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of common interest'* Kvale (2011:5). Academic interview is an inter-view where knowledge is constructed by interaction between interviewers and interviewees (Kvale, 2011). Academic interview is a dialogue that has a purpose of questioning determined by the interviewer (Kvale, 2011). Thus, interaction involved in academic interview goes beyond random interaction in which spontaneous exchange of views are involved. Interaction in academic interview bears the purpose of obtaining, exploring and understanding knowledge that could be thoroughly tested.

Epistemologically, qualitative research interview is a *'construction site of knowledge'* (Kvale, 2011:21). Kvale (2011:21) specifically put that,

> Knowledge is constituted through linguistic interaction, where the participants' discourse, its structures and effects, is of interest in its own right. The interview gives access to the manifold of local narratives embodied in storytelling and opens for a discourse and negotiation of the meaning of the lived world.

Therefore, interview is appropriate approach for the purpose of this study – to obtain, explore and understand certain knowledge (micro-blog branding activities and how they affect customer-based brand equity) based on the storytelling of appropriate samples (the interviewees) for a discourse and negotiation of the meaning of the phenomenon (micro-blog branding activities).

5.3.4.2 Application of Interview in Qualitative Research

Though qualitative interview has a long history in social sciences, systematic literature describing and analysing qualitative interview as a research method occurred only a few decades ago (Kvale, 2011). The rapidly growing number of books and journals published about qualitative interview is an indicator of the thriving popularity of this method. For Sage Publications along, there was a growth in qualitative books from 10 in 1980 to 217 in 2002 (Seale *et al*., 2004).

Atkinson and Silverman (1997) termed the current age an 'interview society' as interviews have become part of the common culture; for instance, talk shows on TV. In the interview society, people are constructing the self during interviews (Kvale, 2011). Interview studies in the past have had influential impact on social practices and on how behaviours of workers and consumers are controlled (Kvale, 2003). Interviews could be an exciting way of doing strong and valuable research that blossom understanding of the lived world. However, interviews need a purpose that is worth achieving. As Kvale (2011) pointed out, spontaneous interview studies meagrely lead to worthwhile information; rather they are more likely to product common opinions in lieu of substantial knowledge. Therefore, this study, with a clear purpose, is not based on spontaneous interviews, but on well-planned procedures.

Popularity of qualitative interview in marketing research started in the middle of 20th century. In recent years, marketing of consumer products relies heavily on qualitative interviews, in particular focus groups, to assure that prediction of and control over consumer behaviour are maximised (Kvale, 2011). He also added that in today's *'experiential economy of a consumer society, where the sale of experiences and lifestyles is essential for the economy, qualitative interviews become a key approach in market research to predict and control consumer behaviour'* (Kvale, 2011:7).

Different from an everyday dialogue, a professional, academic interview is based on a clear purpose and its conduction involves specific approaches and technique. As Kvale (2011:9) remarked,

> The qualitative interview is a key venue for exploring the ways in which subjects experience and understand their world. It provides a unique access to the lived

world of the subjects, who in their own words describe their activities, experiences and opinions.

Therefore, interview is a uniquely sensitive and powerful method for capturing experiences of participants (Kvale, 2011). It was also used in recent study such as Ruane and Wallace (2014) to explore consumers' social media communication related to product consumption since consumers' stories elicited in qualitative interview offer valuable insights to their consumption experience (Thompson, 1997). Besides, Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014) used this approach to explore brands' expectations and practice in adopting social media branding strategies. During qualitative interviews, the central themes of the subjects' experiences and feelings are explored and interpreted (Kvale, 2011). Also, knowledge is constructed with the meanings of what is said as well as how it is said (Kvale, 2011).

5.3.4.3 Interview Methods and Techniques

5.3.4.3.1 Focus

Focus is achieved in qualitative interview research by particular themes. Unlike close-ended questionnaires, interviews are not strictly structured with standard questions. Unlike random everyday dialogue, professional research interviews are not entirely non-directive. Research interviews depend on the directions set by the interviewer in advance as well as the dimensions the subjects choose to drive the focus to (Kvale, 2011). Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007) simply divided types of interviews into standardised and non-standardised ones. Regarding how the interview takes place, it can be further categorised as unstructured interviews (which is also referred to by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007) as in-depth interview) and semi-structured interviews. Different from standardised interview, from which the data are normally subject of quantitative analysis (Saunder, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2007), in-depth interviews and semi-structured interviews from which data collected are subject to qualitative interpretation are often used in exploratory studies. The implicit nature of both the approaches to *'find out what is happening [and] to seek new insights'* (Robson, 2002:59) assists researchers to explore an issue of interest.

Given that this study is not a grounded theory one, which means that it is based on certain level of understanding of the issue inquired in the literature review (see Chapter 2 to Chapter 3), semi-structured interview instead of in-depth interview was used. Both close-ended questions and open-ended questions were asked to the interviewees (for questions, see Appendix 3). Close-ended questions collected answers to simple facts such as consumers' adoption of social media as well as their participation in social media branding activities. Open-ended questions then focused on (1) consumers' attitudes on MBB activities, (2) their responses to those activities, and (3) how those activities affect their perception of CBBE.

Besides open-ended questions often used in interviews, retrospective questions were also used to maintain the focus of research. Retrospective question was adopted in the interviews by asking the subjects their recent involvement in MBB activities and their attitudinal shift and behavioural change. Subjects' participation in MBB activities were then traced on Weibo and observed as a complimentary source of data to support subjects' story telling.

Retrospective question has been widely used in clinical study. Often-used in survey research, this specific data collection approach is described by Kendall and Lazarsfeld (1950:146-147) as:

> asking the respondents to recall what their attitudes were at some earlier period (generally prior to a crucial experience whose effect we are trying to study) … to reconstruct what would have been observed had there been a previous interview.

With the development of novel study methods, retrospective question has been compared to other novel approaches. Based on quantitative comparison, Johansen and Wedderkopp (2010) identified the best time period for retrospective data collection is within one month of the events that need to be questioned. Their research findings are in line with Severens *et al.*'s (2000) suggestion that retrospective data can be safely collected for up to one month after the critical moment of the events. After that time period, the veracity of the data collected declines significantly to an unacceptable level.

Following Kendall and Lazarsfeld's (1950) instructions as mentioned above, the author asked questions about consumers' brand experience before and after their adoption of micro-blogs in any forms of branding activities. The subjects were also asked questions concerning their most recently brand experience on micro-blog services, preferably within one-month time.

The benefit of retrospective method is apparent since when assessing respondents' behaviour, attitudes, and subjective experiences, self-report provides *'the only window on their inner states'* (Schwarz, 2007:11). As in this study, asking people to recall their experience could bring more accurate answers to their past behaviours in MBB communication compared to when asking them general questions like how they normal respond to eWOM branding techniques.

Retrospective question, though having its advantages in mirroring real life and real actions to real events, have its disadvantage. Neither Johansen and Wedderkopp (2010) nor Severens *et al.* (2000) is the only academic that has questioned the reliability and validity of retrospective self-reported data. There are numerous sources that question the quality of retrospective reports (Schwarz, 2007). It has been criticised for the possibility of bringing faulty and biased recall that is strongly coloured by subjects' current emotional state (Star, 1949 cited in Fink, 1960). Also, retrospective question has been questioned given the fact that people may not be able to describe the changes of their attitudes or behaviour accurately (Fink, 1960). Besides that, Schwarz (2007) rightly remarked that bias could also easily occur when the respondents' memory is the only source of data to be collected. In order to reduce this bias as much as possible, real-time data collection via semi-structured interview questions is also used not as an alternative but as a complimentary approach of data collection. Similar to the solution given and tested-out by Kendall and Lazarsfeld (1950) to add panel interview as an additional survey approach, one-to-one semi-structured interview with other relevant questions were used to elicit subjects responses and attitudes to MBB activities. Also, thanks to the comparative permanency of micro-blog content on Sina Weibo, subjects' involvement in MBB activities were traced and observed to complement the storytelling.

5.3.4.3.2 Following up Responses

In good practice of interview, the interviewers are not merely tape-recording sociologies, but actively follow up the interviewees' responses to questions and seek to *'clarify and extend'* what the interviewees have revealed (Kvale, 2011:4). Different from an everyday dialogue that takes place on a factual level, professional interviews seek to cover both factual and meaning levels. Kvale (2011) pointed out that it is more difficult to complete meaning construction that covers both factual and meaning levels as it requires the interviewers to be able to capture and understand explicit descriptions and implicit ones hidden between the lines. Regarding those hidden messages, the interviewers may try to capture them and send them back to the subject for either confirmation or disconfirmation (Kvale, 2011). This technique is used through probing

5.3.5 Data Collection in Interview Research

5.3.5.1 Sample and Sampling Technique

Denscombe (2003) mentioned that in the case of qualitative research a small sample size could be suitable given the nature of qualitative data. In line with this claim, Creswell (2013) also suggested that 30 is an appropriate threshold size for small scale qualitative study. Therefore, in this study, 50 interviews were conducted with participants for data analysis.

5.3.5.1.1 Who to Sample

Given the aim of the research to *'explore micro-blog branding activities and how brand equity may be influenced by those activities'* and the focus of brand equity on the customer-based perspective, online consumers who engage in MBB activities are the targets to be interviewed. Also, given the influential model of communication identified by both Fill (2009) and Kozinets *et al.* (2010) and the counter arguments by Granovetter

(1973) and Iyengar, Van den Bulte and Valent (2010) on peer effect, general users are again justified as the target of branding activities in micro-blog context and thus the targeted subjects in this study.

5.3.5.1.2 How to Sample

5.3.5.1.2.1 Sampling the Brands

Purposive sampling has been used to select the sample. Purposive sampling is a strategic method to recruit participants more suitable to answer the questions asked in the qualitative interview. There would be meaningless to ask random consumers since they might not have eWOM branding experience so that their answers bear no value or merely face value to the study. This is consistent to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill's (2007) emphasis that the researcher's logic for selecting cases for a purposive sample should be dependent on the research objectives.

Given Sina Weibo as the context of this study, the author went onto Sina Weibo and observed several micro-blog branding activities. Those activities were identified through active search for brand names of several industries. Given industries covered in existing research on eWOM, including the movie industry, fashion industry, IT industry, automobile industry, as well as grooming industry, these five industries were chosen as guidelines to help identify brands mentioned in micro-blogs. In order to ensure the time effect of the research, several most recently famous brands or brands that have been famous for a long time in those industries were chosen as key words to actively search for brand related micro-blogs.

In order to make sure the validity of data, salient brands that are actively digitally present were chosen and general users who involved themselves in brand related conversations in those brands' micro-blog accounts were sampled. Selection of brands was partially based on Interbrand's (2013) Best Global Brands Report 2013. This rank is based on a framework to evaluate the brand value (Appendix 4). This ranking was chosen for the reason that it not only included the financial power of the brands but also the role of brand and brand strength perceived by consumers, which is in line with the CBBE argument demonstrated in the literature review chapters.

Five brands, each corresponding to one chosen industry, were selected. The selection criteria are as follows:

(1) selected brands must appear on the Best Global Brands Report (Interbrand, 2013) list;

(2) selected brands must be in one of the five industries specified above,

(3) selected brand must have their micro-blog accounts on Sina Weibo.

As the selection process went on, the author found an exception must be granted to the movie industry since there were no movie brand in the ranking list. Therefore, one most talked movie brand on Sina Weibo was chosen based on Weibo's most talked movie-related topic rank (Sina Weibo, 2013).

In contrast to the four best global brands and the one most talked movie brand selected, another five brands that are not on the best global brands ranking list were chosen in order to avoid extreme case bias since the four brands are recognisably salient that any change in CBBE might be attributed to brand history rather than micro-blog branding activities. As a result, 10 brands across five industries were chosen (see Appendix 5 for the brief profile data about the ten brands). The selection of brands across heterogeneous industries also responds to the concern of homogeneous industry data collection in most existing eWOM research.

5.3.5.1.2.2 Sampling General Users

Purposive sampling technique was also utilised in sampling general user participants. Once the brands were selected, several users who participated in micro-blog branding communication on these brands' Weibo pages were sent the invitation to take part in the study. Also, random Weibo users who have involved themselves in brand-related conversation of those ten brands were sought by hashtags with the brands' name and then approached with invitation through internal message in Weibo. The sampling criteria for subjects are as follows:

(1) sampled subjects must have a Weibo account and
(2) Sampled subjects have involved in brand-related conversation of any of the ten selected brands in the past one months.

Apart from purposive sampling, snowball sampling was also adopted. Once one respondent agreed to participate in the study, s/he was encouraged to introduce the study to other people they knew that might be interested. However, those who were introduced the study must meet the criteria to be selected as subjects. Five subjects were sampled from each brand, which makes 50 general user type subjects in total. Both of the sampling techniques were used by other researchers in recent studies on consumer attitudes and behaviour on western micro-blog service Twitter (see Pentina, Zhang and Basmanova, 2013). Thus, the selection of these two approaches in sampling users on Chinese Weibo can be justified.

According to Creswell (2013), the threshold size of sample in small-scale qualitative inquiry is 30. Also, based on an analysis of 560 qualitative interview studies, the mean of sample size is 31 (Mason, 2010). More importantly, as Mason (2010) pointed out, it is the saturation of data rather than number of subjects that matters. While analysing the data, the author found and ensured that data collected from 50 subjects were enough in volume and sufficient in meaning to answer the research questions. Thus, the size of 50 was justified.

5.3.5.2 Audio Recording and Note Taking

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007) emphasised that non-standardised interviews are normally audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed into word-processed account. First of all, the author applied for the interviewees' permission to audio record the entire interview process with the author firstly briefly introducing the purpose of the interview and the interviewee agreeing to participate in such a study. The author is using this as another format of the consent form that is retained for further confirmation of interviewees' willingness to take part in the research shall any unexpected issue occurs.

As suggested by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007), note-taking was also applied during the interview process in order to mark down important and possibly meaningful hunches the author had as well as significant changes of tones, pauses and other peripheral data contributed by the interviewees. A note-taking example is shown in Appendix 6.

5.3.6 Data Analysis in Interview Research

Starting right after the data collection process is the data analysis process. Good qualitative interviews are focused on nuanced descriptions that picture the qualitative diversity and differences, rather than fixed categorisations (Kvale, 2011). Martin (1990) pointed out that close line-by-line data analyses could rigorously generate meaningful findings even when using just several lines of transcript. The number of lines in transcript is not the most important matter. The most important issue to consider is whether the data collected and analysed will substantiate meaningful and significant claims (Tracy, 2010). Therefore, high quality data collection alone does not guarantee high quality data analysis. How the data collected are analysed carefully and with appropriate approach is of key significance.

Based on Dey (1993), Healey and Rawlinson (1994) and their own experience, Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007) developed a table to clearly point out the differences between quantitative and qualitative data analysis (Table 6).

Table 8 Differences between quantitative and qualitative analysis, source: Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007)

Quantitative Data Analysis	Qualitative Data Analysis
Based on meanings derived from numbers	Based on meaning derived from words
Collection results in numerical and standardised data	Collection results in non-standardised data requiring classification into categories
Analysis conducted through the use of	Analysis conducted through the use of

diagrams and statistics	conceptualisation

Thus, in this research, qualitative data analysis of the interview content focused on the implicit and explicit meaning collected from semi-structured interviews and observation of recalled online dialogue. Various analysis tactics used are presented and discussed below.

5.3.6.1 Template Analysis

When using narratives and storytelling in collecting data, template analysis is a choice of analytical approach applied to analyse abundant data. Template analysis serves the same purpose in qualitative data analysis like grounded theory and interpretative phenomenological analysis do (Smith, 1996; Jarmen *et al.* 1997). The difference between grounded theory and template analysis lies in whether there exists the use of a list of a priori codes during the analytical process. The use of a priori codes happens in template analysis but cannot be found in grounded theory (Cassell and Symon, 2004). Though template analysis and interpretative phenomenological analysis both rely to some degree on a priori codes, the latter tends to examine individual cases before attempting to integrate full set of data (Cassell and Symon, 2004). Therefore, template analysis examines a larger number of cases compared to interpretative analysis that normally limits the number of cases within 10 (Cassell and Symon, 2004). In comparison, template analysis usually handles 20 to 30 cases (King, 2004).

Its greatest advantage in analysing qualitative data resides in its flexible nature compared to content analysis or interpretative phenomenological analysis so that it can be modifiable for the needs of any study in a particular area (Cassell and Symon, 2004). Being a frequently used analytical approach in healthcare qualitative research (Crabtree and Miller, 1999; King, 2004), its application in business and management research is still innovative and novel (Waring and Wainright, 2008), which implies challenges when applied in a different context. To prove that such an approach can also be well utilised in business context, Waring and Wainright (2008) illustrated in detail with two examples of how this analytical method is adopted in two business research, one about diffusion of innovation of ICT in education context, the other one about the adoption and expansion of ICT programmes in NHS administrative context. Both of the studies proved that though novel to the business context, template analysis, if used appropriately, could generate significant meaning to the research topic.

This research chooses template analysis as the analytic approach for several reasons. First of all, compared to content analysis which emphasises the frequency of codes mentioned, template analysis explores more deeply the relationships between codes, which are possible links between certain variables associated with the issue in question. Secondly, template analysis is more suitable for this study given the sample size. For the fact that this research studies a larger number of cases that is not feasibly applicable to interpretative phenomenological analysis, template analysis is chosen as the analytical approach. Thirdly, as emphasised by King (2004:257), template analysis works well when the aim of the study is to *'compare different groups of staff within a specific context'*. Though the aim is not comparing different groups of staff, the research process did involve comparison and contrast of different groups of online consumers based on their brand preference in online communication. The micro-blog communication is the specific context in this study according to King's (2004) argument. Therefore, the comparison and contrast of different groups of online consumers were believed to elicit a more holistic picture of the micro-blog branding phenomenon. In summary, template analysis helps provide a clearer, more organised, and final account of the study.

Template is of substantial importance in this approach. King (2004) and Cassell and Symon (2004) all agreed that there are several steps in developing a template. It begins with an initial template, which is then revised through the on-going process of analysis. King (2004) suggested that the initial template embarks on a list of a priori codes selected and summarised from the literature review. The list is then made fuller in order to well serve the purpose of the research with codes developed from the general question areas, prompts and probes used by the interviewer (King, 2004). The third step is the perfection of the template through the analysis of storytelling and narratives (King, 2004). The template is then applied to further analysis of data generated. Though the last step is coined the perfection of the template, it has been argued that there is never perfect template (King, 2004) since the analysis could be jeopardised by either too many and too detailed codes or too general hierarchical organisation of codes.

Following what has been suggested by King (2004), the author carefully conducted the analysis of collected data using codes summarised from previous research as a priori codes to form the initial template. Based on the list of a priori codes, probes and general question areas, an initial template was created and shown in Figure 17 below. New codes has been identified using two sets of coding techniques, one suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and the other one suggested by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007), both of which are deliberated on later in the next section. Hierarchical organisation of codes was then detected while coding when relationships both among codes and between codes and themes appeared.

MBB CBBE conceptualisation

1. Attitudinal equity
    - 1.1 learning advantage through cognizance
        - 1.1.1 unique brand associations
            - 1.1.1.1 exclusivity
            - 1.1.1.2 differentiability
                - 1.1.1.2.1 differentiability because of UGC
        - 1.1.2 high scalability
    - 1.2 consideration advantage through connection
        - 1.2.1 strong brand associations
            - 1.2.1.1 frequency of exposure
            - 1.2.1.2 intensity of exposure
                - 1.2.1.2.1 richness of content
                - 1.2.1.2.2 strength of advocacy
                    - 1.2.1.2.2.1 Trust
                        - 1.2.1.2.2.1.1 High Trust to UGC
                            - 1.2.1.2.2.1.1.1 Opinion leader-opinion follower trust
                            - 1.2.1.2.2.1.1.2 Peer effect
                        - 1.2.1.2.2.1.2 Lower Trust to BPC
                            - 1.2.1.2.2.1.2.1 Interactivity in MBB communication
                    - 1.2.1.2.2.2 Involvement
                        - 1.2.1.2.2.2.1 Usage imagery consistency
                        - 1.2.1.2.2.2.2 High Consumer involvement
                    - 1.2.1.2.2.3 Usefulness
2. behavioural equity
    - 2.1 choice advantages through affiliation
        - 2.1.1 favourable brand associations
            - 2.1.1.1 favourable attitudes
            - 2.1.1.2 favourable action
        - 2.1.2 immediacy of brand touch point
            - 2.1.2.1 information seeking while making decisions
            - 2.1.2.2 purchase link at brand touch point
    - 2.2 higher consumer confidence
    - 2.3 loyalty

3. others
    - 3.1 avoid brand dilution
        - 3.1.1 negative brand-related content
        - 3.1.2 inactive consumers
        - 3.1.3 brand value co-creation
        - 3.1.4 user imagery inconsistency

Figure 16 MBB CBBE Conceptualisation Initial Template, source: the author

5.3.6.2 Coding

The analytical process throughout the template analysis involves codes of various kinds and various level of specificity. Coding is of fair significance in analysing collected data. Besides the list of a priori codes that were generated from the literature review, broad question areas, probes and prompts, other codes are also developed, modified and integrated into the initial template.

The author first of all followed the coding procedure suggested by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007) to business students. The coding procedure consists of two general processes, categorisation of data and unitising of data (ibid). The author first of all classified data collected into meaningful categories. After that, in unitising of data, the author attached relevant units of data to the appropriate categories.

However, Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill's (2007) approach is a very basic procedure without specific deliberation on how different codes are developed, modified and associated. As a response to this concern, the author followed the routine of coding suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998) in integrating new codes with existing ones. Open, axial, and selective coding Strauss and Corbin (1998) are employed by the author. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), there exists a procedure in coding qualitative data from developing categories of information (open coding), relating the categories (axial coding), forming a story line that relates the categories (selective coding), to ending with a set of hypothetical theories.

In open coding, the author segmented the information to form categories about the phenomenon being studied, which is similar to categorisation mentioned before. Following that, the author selected one open coding to focus on and goes back to develop other categories around this core phenomenon. Axial coding happened next to open coding. In a more structured approach, the author drew diagrams of codes when needed to identify the core phenomenon, explore causal relationships, specify strategies, identify the context, and describe the consequences of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Though axial coding revealed what codes are related to core phenomenon, hierarchy of codes was not evident. In template analysis, effective template requires hierarchical organisation of codes (King, 2004). Thus, in selective coding, the author finalised the template with the help of those drawn diagrams to clarify the hierarchy of codes and developed propositions that describe the interrelationships of categories in the template.

5.3.6.3 Reflexive Qualitative Data Analysis

Except for template analysis approach applied in this study, reflexive qualitative data analysis was also applied at the same time. Reflexive qualitative data analysis was explained in detail by Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) as a highly appropriate approach to analyse qualitative data with appropriate theoretical, ontological and epistemological stance concerning qualitative inquiries.

The aim of qualitative data analysis is to hunt for '*concepts and themes that when taken together will provide the best explanation of what's going on in an inquiry*' (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009:77). The process of qualitative data analysis is highly reflexive rather than objective (Bruce, 2007) for the reason that themes and categories in the coding process do not appear on their own; rather, they are driven by the inquirer's ontological and epistemological positions, subjective perspective as well as chosen theoretical framework (Srivastava and Hopwood. 2009).

Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) pointed out that discussions on analytical reflexivity are scarce. Nonetheless, there have been some pieces of literature that addressed the issue properly. Patton (2002) provided a set of useful reflexive questions to be answered by the researchers. His question set includes questions that ask for self-reflexivity, reflexivity about previous studies, and reflexivity about the recipients of the findings. In a similar vein, Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) designed a framework comprising three basic questions (Table 7 below) explicitly engage with the data analytical process.

Table 9 Reflexive questions in qualitative data analysis, source: Srivastava and Hopwood (2009:78)

Questions	Objectives
Q1: What are the data telling me?	Explicitly engaging with theoretical, subjective, ontological, epistemological, and field understandings
Q2: What is it I want to know?	According to research objectives, questions, and theoretical points of interest
Q3: What is the dialectical relationship between what the data are telling me and what I want to know?	Refining the focus and linking back to research questions

With the framework adopted and applied throughout the analytical process, the author found it easier to narrow down the point of interest and identify major research findings. As pointed out by Srivastava and Hopwood (2009), answer to the third question helps to identify unsolved gaps in the study. In this sense, the interest will be more focused on the issue to be analysed rather than simply on phenomenon across the data set. Though Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) applied the iterative framework in pilot studies to refine the final research questions, the author applied the framework not to refine the research questions but to refine the exact focuses in data analysis and data interpretation in order to lay more weight on what is unknown based on what is known and what the author intended to explore.

The first question is in line with the template analysis process applied by the researcher in this study since the template analysis mainly deals with what the data tell the author. The literature review corresponds to the second question since theories from literature review answers the question of what the author wants to know. The dialectical relationship between the data analysed and the theoretical underpinnings is the unknown, refines the gap between what the author wants to know and what she has been told. Each time after the reflexive process, the author proceeded with further engagement with the data, bearing the new gaps in mind while coding more data and interpreting the hierarchical organisation of codes.

Given the nature of reflexivity in qualitative data analysis, iteration, not repetitive but deeply reflexive, is key to generating insights into the data and developing meanings. As pointed out by Srivastava and Hopwood (2009:77), reflexive iteration is *'at the heart of visiting and revisiting the data and connecting them with emerging insights, progressively leading to refined focus and understandings'*. For the purpose of generating more meaningful insights, each case of data has been visited at least twice.

5.3.6.4 Integration of Four Analytical Approaches

The author might be questioned for the integration of both template analysis and reflexive qualitative data analysis in the same study with both categorisation-unitising coding approach and open-axial-selective coding techniques. Rather than finding them conflicting against each other, the author found a balanced way to integrating these four approaches together in one study. How this has been achieved is shown in a diagrammatical format in Figure 18 below.

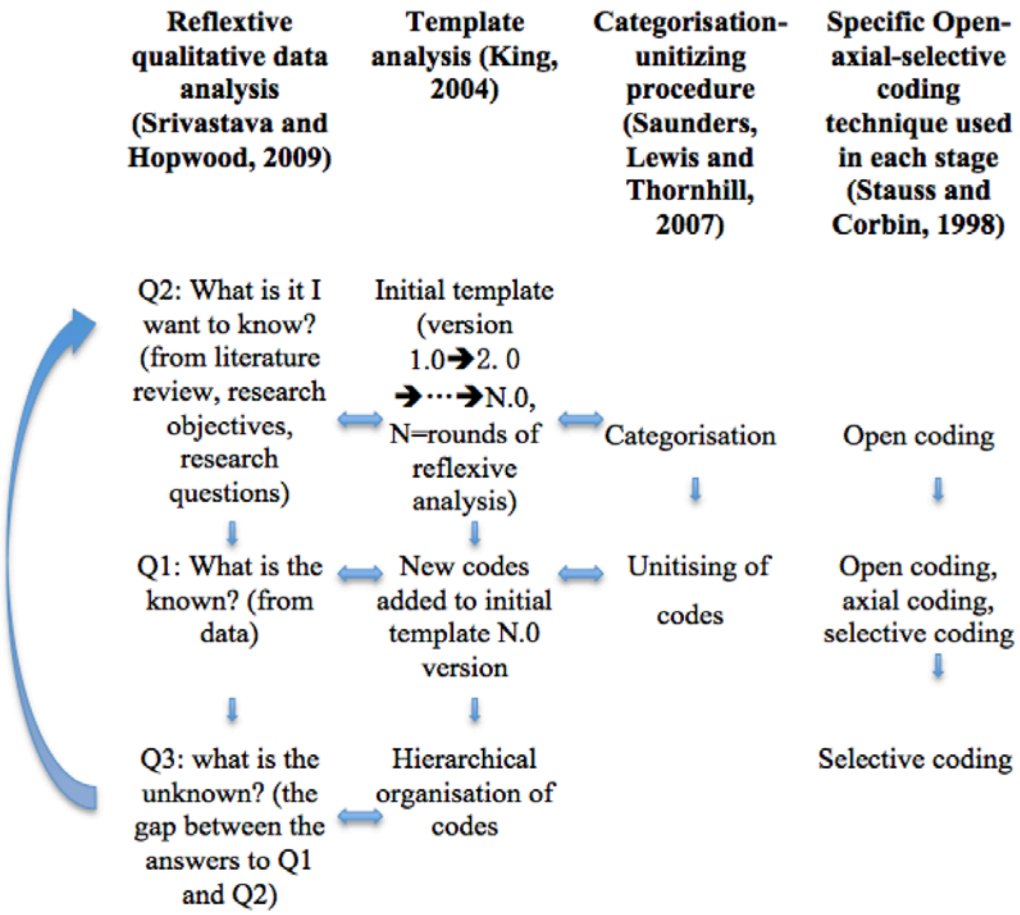


Figure 17 The integrated qualitative analytical process, source: the author

For the reason that initial template is generated from the knowledge acquired from the literature review and the author's personal experience, this process is in line with what the second question proposed by Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) asks for. Therefore, the author adapted the order of the three questions suggested by Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) to make it congruent with the template analysis process explained by King (2004).

As regard to the specific coding process, there is no conflict between the categorisation – unitising procedure and Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three coding techniques. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007) have also noted that template analysis involves categorising and unitising data in the analytical process. Data were broadly categorised (categorisation) and specifically coded (unitising) during template analysis.

As for the three coding procedures described and explained by Strauss and Corbin (1998), open coding is similar to the categorisation process outlined previously, as suggested by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007). The data collected by the author were disaggregated into conceptual units and attached with a label (the codes). The axial coding process refers to the process of analysing the relationships between codes emerged from the open coding process (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007). Since the author adopted a template analysis approach, the initial template of a priori codes was also included in the axial coding process. The third process, selective coding, which refers to the identification of central phenomenon and its peripheral categories (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2007), is similar to the hierarchical organisation of codes in template analysis. The hierarchy of codes on the initial template was rearranged when new codes were added into the template. The author found that opening coding was more likely to be used in the categorisation process whereas axial coding and selective coding more applied to unitising of codes.

5.3.7 The Interpretation of Qualitative Data Analysis

Data display approach suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) is integrated into template analysis in the interpretation process. The author found that hierarchical template is not enough to illustrate the relationships between high-level categories. Therefore, data display that is useful to illustrate the complex connections between themes was applied in illustrating the findings in diagrammatical form together with hierarchical organisation of codes within each high-level category. In order to better answer the research questions by integrating literature review with findings generalised, the author found integrating the hierarchical template into the CBBE chain summarised in the literature review section highly efficient in presenting findings with clear relationships between each theme shown.

However, it would be a mistake to think that display of data collected and analysed is all in the analytic process. The interpretation of data goes beyond descriptive summation to reach towards explanation (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014). Therefore, the interpretation of findings in this study does not only include the explanation of face value of the core and peripheral phenomenon, but also the examination and explanation of relationships between hierarchies of codes, answering what happens, why it happens, how it happens and any possible consequences. Also, the interpretation of findings referred back to the theoretical underpinning drawn in the literature review for a more holistic understanding of the issue based on existing knowledge in relevant fields of studies.

5.4 Ethical Concerns

Because knowledge production in interview research bases on interaction between interviewer and interviewees, it rests on the interviewer's ability to create an environment where the interviewees feel free to talk freely and safely about even private issues for further public use (Kvale, 2011). The knowledge construction process then calls for delicate balance between knowledge pursuit and ethical respect for the participants.

One common misunderstanding of ethical issues in qualitative research is that they only occur in the process of data collection (Creswell, 2013). Ethical issues in fact pervade the entire research process. As Creswell (2013) pointed out, they expand in scope as researchers become increasingly sensitive to stakeholders' needs involved in the research. As the research process unfolds, various ethical issues occur and interwove, require careful attention from the researchers. Two major ethical issues in qualitative research are whether the participants are deceived and how confidential the information is kept. Creswell (2013) mentioned the disclosure of purpose of the study as the first issue to be concerned in the ethical respect. In this research, the purpose of the study was disclosed to all the participants prior to the data collection on a consent form as suggested by Creswell. The form indicated that all participants who agree to participate in this study were voluntary and also the research would not place any undue harm on the participants. The participants were not deceived about the nature of the study and they were appraised for providing data to the researcher. The second ethical issue mentioned by Creswell (2013) is data confidentiality, especially the anonymity of participants. In order to ensure confidentiality of the information about the participants, the author protected the privacy of the participants by masking names with labels such as subject 1 and subject 2.

5.5 Limitations of the Methods

This study used qualitative research methods to generate theories about the phenomenon at issue. However, qualitative research methods are not existing without drawbacks. Quantitative methodologists questioned and criticised qualitative researchers about low reliability due to low generalisability and the probability to be replicated as well as the lack of work contributing to the accumulation of knowledge (Deshpande, 1983). Although, shades of meaning have been the focus of qualitative inquiries, such a polemic above is tend to be inimical to the development of marketing knowledge since theory verification is an important part of overall accumulation of body of knowledge (ibid). A solution brought quite early is the triangulation of methods to make up for the drawbacks of each set of methods in doing research. By using quantitative methods in later research to verify the findings in this study, it helps raise reliability and validity of the inquiry of the research questions.

5.6 Summary

This chapter explains the methodological stance the author chose to rely upon – being scientific. Qualitative interview with 50 participants was chosen given the nature of the research to explore and understand social phenomenon. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and audio recorded. Transcripts were then analysed by using both template analysis and reflexive qualitative data analysis approaches with both Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill's (2007) two-step coding method and Strauss and Corbin's (1998) structured coding method. Next chapter then presents findings and discussion.

Chapter 6 Findings and Discussion

6.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter first of all presents the findings in a diagram, which is an integration of final template (see Appendix 6) and the CBBE chain. Following that, the findings are presented in detail and discussed in the order of:

The presentation of findings follow the order of themes in the template rather than the order or research questions as the research questions are guidance for interview preparation and probes and the author found the presentation of findings more consistent if following the natural order of themes as illustrated in the final template.

6.2 Final Template

The final template based on the analysis of the data is shown in Appendix 6. Besides the themes pointed out in the final template, strong, favourable and unique brand associations are found throughout the establishment of the three advantages. Therefore, the CBBE chain summarised in Section 2.2 is modified and presented in Figure 19.

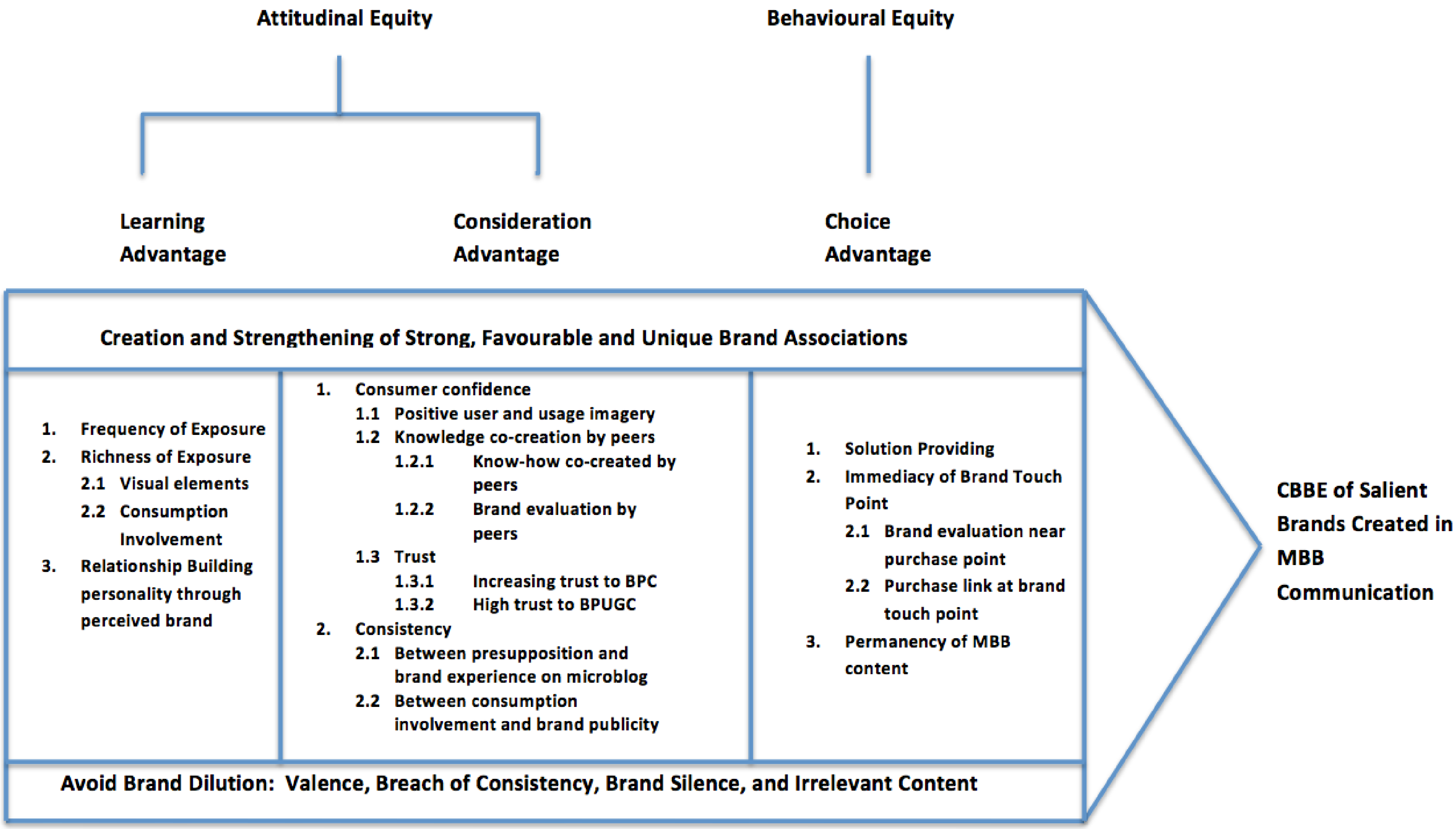


Figure 18 CBBE of Salient Brands Created in MBB Communication, source: the author

6.3 Brand-published Content and Brand-published User-Generated Content

The author found that a discussion of the three types of content in MBB communication decided by the creator characteristic should precede the presentation of findings of three advantages that brands obtain from MBB communication. The reason is that the differences between UGC, brand-published content (BPC), and brand-published user-generated content (BPUGC) are the foundation of many other discussions presented later.

6.3.1 Differences between UGC and BPC

The difference between UGC and BPC mainly lies in the content focus. Reflected in the interview, UGC is more personalised with consumers' view of the brand based on their previous brand experience. On the contrary, BPC contains more general information aiming at increasing brand awareness and enhancing brand image. This difference was identified in all interviews when the subjects were asked to describe their perceived differences between UGC and BPC. Below are two extracts regarding the differences between those two types of brand-related content on Weibo.

> *'I think they are different in details. The user-generated ones are mostly comments and recommendations about the movie. The brand published ones are with more details of the movie and story itself. Also more about the actors and actresses' [subject 36, Tiny Times]*

And,

> *'Consumer-generated content is more about the review of products or recommendations. Or sometimes people would say that though Mentholatum's products are cheap they are not quite effective… Brand-published content is more about new product launch and brand endorses promotion' [subject 15, Mentholatum].*

This finding is in line with what was suggested by Fill (2002) and Cheong and Morrison (2008) that UGC is created by ordinary people who have not been trained professionally as marketers or brand managers, while BPC is created by paid marketing professionals to fulfil the branding objectives (Fill, 2002) and therefore the focuses of those two types of content are largely different as shown in the two extracts above.

Both these two types of content are found to help create strong memory of the brand. The subjects' answers to which type of content make them remember the brand deeper were not skewed to either side. The amount of memory stimulated by such exposure is in fact influenced by the stage of brand involvement. In the stage of brand awareness, BPC is regarded as more memorable. However, in the stage of evaluation, UGC is recognised by subjects as leaving a clearer trace in the mind. The difference here can be explained by different content focuses stated above as UGC is generally about comments and recommendation while BPC is generally about product promotion and brand image construction. As pointed out precisely by subject 38,

> *'…from the brand-published ones, I am more aware of the product portfolio. But from user-generated feeds, I am more aware of the effectiveness of the products' [subject 38, L'Oreal].*

6.3.2 Micro-blog – Brand-Published-User-Generated Content (BPUGC): blurring line between UGC and BPC

However, there is a blurring line between UGC and BPC in the micro-blog context. Due to the reposting affordance in micro-blogs, brands could repost favourable brand-related user-generated content. The author found that many subjects have entitled this kind of content 'brand-published content' in the interviews. Theoretically, this kind of content belongs to neither user-generated content nor brand-published content. According to Krishnamurthy and Dou (2008), what characterises UGC primarily is its nature that the content is produced, designed, published, and edited by consumers themselves. In a similar vein, BPC should be produced, designed, published, and edited by brands themselves. However, what is identified in this study is a kind of content that has gone through both of the processes. Figure 19 illustrates an example of such content. It is produced, designed and published initially by consumers and then re-published perhaps after editing by brands to brand followers. It falls into what Christoph (2010) called sponsored or non-sponsored user-generated branding content that was mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis. However, it is hard to tell whether the original user-generated content is sponsored or non-sponsored if the user does not mention about this feature specifically in the content. The author then coin this type of content with a new term: brand-published user-generated content (BPUGC hereafter). This new term emphasises the user-generated nature of the content but also points out the importance of brand that publishes the content to its audience on its brand micro-blog page.

Figure 19 One example of BPUGC taken from L'Oreal's Weibo page

Image Source: http://weibo.com/lorealparis?stat_date=201404#_rnd1433155733169

BPUGC is found the most effective among the three types of micro-blog brand-related content in affecting CBBE positively. Table 8 below illustrates a comparison of the focus of the three types of digital content based on the observation of micro-blog communication and the subjects' retrospective answer to question 3 in the interview.

Table 10 Comparison of Content Focuses

	Content Focus	Examples
UGC	• Product evaluation • Comments on brand	• *'L'Oreal hydra fresh genius toner, one bottle, two textures enabled by micro-*

	experience (both satisfactory and unsatisfactory ones) • Recommendation • User imagery • Usage imagery • Asking the brand for solution	*crystal technology. Quite tender and moisturising whilst keeping my skin non-oily. Great solution to fake caky face before I put on the foundation. Lov'in it recently.' (UGC about L'Oreal)* • *'My Samsung Note 3 is burning these days and the battery dies quickly, why is so? How much is a genuine Samsung Note 3 battery? @Samsung @SamsungChina' (UGC about Samsung)*
BPC	• Value proposition explanation • Functional benefits of products • Purchase links	• *'30 Yuan off! Special offer on Xiaomi Bluetooth speaker. Small box, appalling sound, upgraded and latest Bluetooth 4.0 design. Now 99 Yuan [purchase link]' (Xiaomi BPC)*
BPUGC	• Customer testimonial • purchase link	• *'Lip Fondue lip mask is this Mentholatum fan's magic wand to reduce lip lines. How do other Mentholatum fans think of this little tool? (Emoji shy) share with me, please (Emoji smile) repost @Mademoiselle_Jolie I am totally surprised @Mentholatum ! Do you why this Lip Fondue is twice as expensive as that advertised by Shuqi? Because it is really a magic wand to reduce lip lines. If you think Kiehl's lip balm is moisturizing enough, this is super sticky. Too moisturizing for day use, great lip mask at night. Strongly recommended!' (Mentholatum BPUGC)*

Customer testimonial in BPUGC covers all the available types of content in UGC. The few differences between UGC and BPUGC are (1) publisher and (2) purchase link. In BPUGC, the content publishers are still the brands rather than peers of the consumers who read micro-blog feeds. Secondly, BPUGC sometimes contains direct purchase links in the feeds.

In the interview, when the subjects talked about BPUGC, they all seemed to have positive attitudes towards the brand. They described the brands that repost UGC as *'useful'* [subject 5, Hunger Game] and *'helpful'* [subject 30, Samsung]. In those interviews, the author found that those brands were generally liked by the subjects for that the brands were perceived as willing to share customer experience with a wider audience.

6.4 Learning Advantage

6.4.1 Frequency of Exposure

The strength of brand associations is found to be related to two factors – the frequency of exposure and the intensity of exposure. Both the factors are found linked to online consumers' susceptibility. As pointed out earlier in the literature review, message receiver's susceptibility is the receiver's likelihood to be influenced (Aral and Walker, 2012). Suggested by data in this study, frequency of exposure to micro-blog branding content as well as the intensity of the exposure is positively related to consumers' susceptibility. For instance, subject 11 said that:

> *'I found that some products were used in different how to create looks feeds and as a result I have a deeper memory of how those products look like as well as how to use them in different occasions.' [subject 11, L'Oreal Paris]*

As demonstrated in the extract presented above, due to repeated exposure to the products' appearance and directions of use, certain brand associations such as product packaging and functional benefits are strengthened. The finding here added details to Foster, West and Francescucci's (2011) argument that brand familiarity is affected by social media activities. Brand familiarity is increased due to frequent exposure to detailed and specific brand associations as mentioned above. Once the brand associations are strengthened and repeatedly pushed to the consumers, consumers' brand awareness increases as suggested by Keller (1993) and Foster, West and Francescucci (2011). Given that brand awareness is an important element of brand knowledge (Keller, 1993), this increase of brand awareness also contributes to increased customer-based brand equity.

Suggested by Aral (2010), when consumers' memory about previous exposure exceeds a certain threshold, behavioural changes are about to occur. In this specific context of micro-blog communication, consumers are exposed to frequent exposure of brand-related content both initially published by the brand (BPC) or initially published by the users and then reposted by the brand (BPUGC). In such case, consumers' memory of the brand continues to build up till a critical point when the amount of memory exceeds the threshold. At the critical point, the brand associations are strong enough and favourable to put the brand into the consideration set. As a result, consideration advantage of the brand is obtained.

6.4.2 Richness of Exposure

6.4.2.1 Visual Elements for Details

The second factor that contributes to the learning advantage of brands in MBB communication is the richness of exposure. The 'richness of exposure' idea is adapted from the 'richness of content' concept from WOM conceptualisation by Mazzarol *et al.* (2007) and Sweeney *et al.* (2012) as well as Sundararajan *et al.*'s (2013) supportive argument on information richness theory. Previous studies on richness emphasised the depth, intensity and vividness of WOM message (Sweeney *et al.,* 2012) and also pointed out the positive linkage between richness of content and message credibility (Sunararajan *et al.,* 2013). However, their research did not state clearly the depth, intensity and vividness of what elements in WOM message that may affect brands. This study explores deeper this aspect and found visual elements empowered by social media affordances and the consumption involvement of brand offerings two significant dimensions of richness of exposure that affects consumers' learning on brands.

It is found in this study that visual elements assist the establishment and maintenance of both product-related and non-product related brand associations in two ways.

Firstly, visual elements complement verbal explanation in micro-blog feeds. As suggested by Anderson (1998), vividness of WOM content affects its effect. Later, the importance of words, emotions, body language and expressiveness in WOM message have been recognised by many (Kozinets *et al*., 2010). In the context of this study, visual elements used in the micro-blog feeds are found to greatly enhance vividness and depth of the message sent out. Photos and video clips used in the micro-blog feeds are recognised by consumers to strengthen their understanding of the brand they follow on Sina Weibo. As subject 28 told the author, photos and video clips embedded in the micro-blog feeds were the elements that he paid most attention to. Also, as subject 38 further described, visual elements connect the brand and the consumers more closely since those visual elements provide the consumers with more details of the functional, experiential and symbolic benefits of the brand, which are not always easily expressed and understood in texts:

> *'Detailed description of how to use the products. Sometimes there are pictures of how to use certain products. Sometimes there are videos of how to use certain products to care acne skin. I like those photos and video clips. It makes me feel that the brand is not only selling products for profits but helping me with my skin problem' [subject 38, L'Oreal Paris].*

These benefits are also achieved when visual elements are used by consumers in creating user-generated branding content. For instance, subject 49 shared her experience regarding a deeper memory of the brand when visual elements were used in user-generated brand-related content:

> *'I will remember the content more deeply when the content is in the format of photos. I have a better memory of images rather than texts. Also, I feel like that though some of the users share their usage experience with their photos, their faces in the image, I don't remember their faces. But I do have a vague memory of the logo of the brands' [subject 49, Mentholatum].*

The complementary functionality of visual elements in micro-blog feeds is not only confined to adding details and increasing brand recall; it is also increasing the credibility of the content. A typical example is the experience shared by subject 7:

> *'Like the example I mentioned before, the magazine model example. I am interested in the products but I am not really 100 per cent sure about the product effectiveness since she's (the creator of the micro-blog feed) a model and she does advocate products and brands for profits sometimes. I saw other people questioning how much she got paid for taking those photos and posting those feeds. I have the same concern, too. But she made a good argument with photos to prove the effectiveness. I will give it a go' [subject 7, Mentholatum].*

Illustrated by this example, though trust to the message creator is relatively low due to the fact that the creator was assumed by the consumers as a professional marketer, the overall credibility of the whole feed is high. The visual elements used to prove the functional benefits mediate the doubt to the creator's motives for UGB creation. This implies that when brands are using sponsored-UGB as explained by Christoph (2010), visual elements illustrating clearly the functional benefits of the brand can lower consumer resentment to celebrity or professional marketer advocacy and increase the credibility of the UGB. This argument is also well supported by information richness theory that detailed information content fosters trust between actors (Sundararajan *et al*., 2013) that positively affects message receiver's perception of brand-related content exposed to.

Based on the observation of real communication on those ten brands' account pages on Sina Weibo, it is found that visual elements are widely used in micro-blog branding activities especially when user imagery and usage imagery are involved in the content. With the user imagery and usage imagery, functional and experiential benefits are delivered to the consumers. Meanwhile, when usage imagery is included in the visual elements, packaging of products and logos are presented to micro-blog feed receivers. In this way, the symbolic benefits are achieved and brand recognition is enhanced. The implications for brands are:

(1) Brands should include visual elements in their branding feeds to illustrate the functional, experiential and symbolic benefits;
(2) When reposting content generated by paid influential, visual elements should be added to offset the decrease of perceived trust towards the content.

Secondly, visual elements may motivate consumers to further consume the micro-blog brand-related content in more detail. For instance, subject 28 said:

> *'When the text tells about very specific content in the photos, I will click on the photos and enlarge them and have a look' [subject 28, Hunger Game].*

Also, subject 39 said:

> *'Brand-published one is the one that I remember deeper. Probably because the content is more vivid with pictures and sometimes video clips.' [subject 39, Mi Mobile].*

Therefore, as a result, visual elements used in micro-blog feeds bring to the brand further and detailed consumption of micro-blog content. This advantage of visual elements should be taken of by brands that are both on and will be on micro-blogs to communicate with their existing and prospect consumers.

However, the assumption that richer information content may also facilitate interactivity between consumers involved in the communication (see De Vries, Gensler and Leeflang, 2012) is not evident in the present study. It might be because the contexts of these two studies are different, one on Facebook, a social networking website, and the other one on Sina Weibo, a social networking micro-blog service. It may also be attributed to the differences between western consumers and Chinese consumers. However, since Chinese consumers have been found to be more of critics than their western counterparts in existing research, Chinese consumers ought to be more interactive and responding to such rich content. Instead, all subjects interviewed revealed no intention of spontaneous communication with the message sender or reposting it to their personal networks. Though reasons for the unfulfilled interactivity cannot be confirmed in this study, one thing can be confirmed and must be emphasised to brands is that Facebook and micro-blog service Sina Weibo are different in this aspect. Thus, brands that adopt or intend to adopt both channels need to work out a way to increase the interactivity in micro-blog brand-eWOM.

6.4.2.2 Consumption Involvement

The second dimension of exposure richness is the consumption involvement in the micro-blog feeds. As pointed out in the literature review, product usage reflected in WOM content positively affects strength of advocacy (Aral, 2010; Li and Zhan, 2011). According to them, sustained product usage increases the general awareness of the product among users' peers in social networks. For the same social contagion reason, discontinued usage though increases the awareness harms the reputation of the products and creates negative product image (ibid). In the MBB context, consumption involvement including user imagery and usage imagery create deeper brand memory in message receivers' minds thanks to increased degree of storytelling and depth of information in the content. As emphasised by Mazzarol *et al.* (2007) and Sweeney *et al.* (2012), the richer the message content is, the higher the credibility of the WOM. Therefore, the findings support what was suggested in the literature review chapter that in brand-related micro-blog communication, the more vividly the information is presented, the higher the perceived credibility is.

The level of consumption involvement also affects the CBBE advantages. As subject 13 said in the interview:

> *'One of my friend said in her Weibo that the design of the t-shirts (NPC's t-shits) is really spectacular. Nice, a little bit over priced but fine. I know that she bought three last summer and she is going to buy another 2 this year. We are going to shop at NPC together next week. I am looking forward to it' [subject 13, NPC].*

From this example, it can be seen that heavy consumption involvement in micro-blog feeds strengthens the brand associations created (such as spectacular design in the above example) and increases consumers' knowledge of the brand.

Referring back to product usage discussed in the literature review, whether usage volume enhances or depresses product contagion relies on whether the contagion is focusing on awareness or evaluation (Lin and Burt, 1975). According to subjects' retrospection on their MBB communication experience (including the above presented example), light consumption involvement (light users of brands' offering) brings the brand learning advantage. Increased consumption involvement reflected in narratives that indicate repeated purchase brings the brand consideration advantage. It is also found that in some cases, heavy consumption involvement with strong advocacy for the brand articulated by the micro-blog feed creator brings choice advantage. These findings are in line with Lin and Burt's (1975) argument. They are also supported by existing research that at the awareness stage, light users are effective source of influence (Godes and Mayzlin, 2009) whereas at the evaluation stage, heavy users are more effective than light users (Iyengar, Van den Bulte, and Valent, 2010).

6.4.3 Relationship Building through Perceived Brand Personality

The last dimension of learning advantage obtained through micro-blog branding communication is the relationship established through perceived brand personality during the communication between consumers and brands on micro-blog. Brand personality is defined by Capon and Capon (2010) as *'a set of enduring and distinct human characteristics associated with a brand'*. By treating brands as human beings, it is smoother for consumers to establish a relationship with the brand. Perceived brand personality in MBB communication has its own features.

First of all, different from the offline world, brands in the online space are humanized in branding communication. All the brands on micro-blog are communicating with consumers in the form of human conversation. In this way, brand personality is more obvious and more directly perceived by consumers. All subjects in the interview could easily describe the brand they follow on Weibo as a person without hesitation. This ease indicates certain level of brand familiarity, which contributes to brand recall. The easier it is to describe a brand as a person, the more familiar the consumer is with the brand.

Brand personality is also an important variable that affects consumer attitudes and behaviour. As suggested by many, strong and clear brand personality is an important concept that helps differentiate brands in a product category (Plummer, 1984), increases consumers' brand preference (Fournier, 1998), influence brand recall (Ramaseshan and Tsao, 2007), as well as affect brand associations (Freling and Forbes, 2005). It is later confirmed that brand personality positively affects CBBE (Valette-Florence, Guizani, and Merunka, 2011). Therefore, the clear and strong brand personality reflected by the humanised brands' micro-blog accounts certainly are positively linked to CBBE of those brands by increasing brand awareness and enhancing brand image.

Secondly, differences and similarities are both found in subjects' description of the 10 brands. Differences are found within the same industry while common grounds are identified across business sectors.

One common ground across business sectors is that the size and history of the brand affect perceived personality. As pointed out in the methodology chapter, this study included both well-established global brands and small domestic brands. It is found during the analysis of the transcripts that world-renowned brands are commonly associated with professionalism. For instance, BMW, Samsung, L'Oreal Paris, and Louis Vuitton were all described by subjects as professional in their own business sector:

> *'The MB account of L'Oreal Paris, umm, I feel like it is a friend. A bitter older than me. Very knowledgeable in beauty products. Professional beauty experts. However，not quite talkative. (lol)' [Subject 2, L'Oreal].*

> *'Samsung is the world renowned expert in making mobile phones. I trust the brand and I trust its Weibo account. He is continuously publishing knowledge in his specialised field. I am a fan of hi-tech and I feel I am talking with a buddy who works in the circle' [Subject 18, Samsung].*

On the contrary, small, domestic brands are associated with friendship, more inclined to a girl-next-door or boy-next-door type of friendship. For instance, movie brand Tiny Times and mobile phone brand Mi Mobile are perceived as friends with common interests rather than experts in the business fields. Besides, several subjects described Mentholatum as friends whom they grew up together with:

> *'She's girl, at my age. Knows what I like and what I don't like… it's probably because I have been using it since I was in middle high' [Subject 49, Mentholatum].*

This common ground is also a salient disparity between each pair of brands except for the pair of movie brands. Big and small brands in the same category are perceived by subjects with totally different personalities. Big brands are regarded as more professional and small brands are regarded as more down-to-earth.

However, trustworthiness to both big and small brands does not seem to be affected by brand size, but rather by MBB content. When the brand is perceived as honest, it is regarded as trustworthy no matter the size of the brand.

Another common ground is that when purchase link is put frequently in BPC, subjects either described the brand's account as a sales associate or admitted, when given certain probe during the interview, that they did feel sometimes they were talking to a sales person. Apart from the convenience brought by the immediacy enabled by purchase links in the MBB content, the sales person personality annoys the consumers, as observed during the interview. The subjects showed that when the purchase links constantly appear in micro-blog feeds, they perceive strong pushing and persuasion, which, instead of boosting their desire to purchase, reduces it:

> *'I like the NPC brand, but it's publishing too many purchase links. It's like an e-commerce website now. I don't feel much about communication but persuasion. It feels like a sales person constantly asking you to buy something, if you know what I mean' [Subject 13, NPC].*

This finding is in line with the recent finding by Valette-Florence *et al.* (2011) that brand promotion when high in volume is negatively associated with brand equity because consumers are more likely to attach negative impression to the brands. Therefore, though purchase link is effective in creating choice advantage because of the immediacy of MBB exposure at brand touch points, it should be used cautiously to avoid consumer resentment.

6.5 Consideration Advantage

Two variables are found to affect brands' consideration advantage: consumer confidence and consistency. Consumer confidence is a new variable discovered in the analysis (it was not in the initial template) and moved up to the highest order of themes during the analysis. Consistency is also a new variable found. Consumer confidence is generated and accumulated in MBB communication. Consistency is reflected in the conversation in micro-blog space. The higher the consumer confidence and consistency in brand-related micro-blog content, the greater the consideration advantage.

6.5.1 Consumer Confidence

6.5.1.1 Positive User and Usage Imagery

The first factor that increases consumer confidence is positive user and usage imagery. Positive user imagery and positive usage imagery created by both brands and consumers increases consumer confidence in the brands. As discussed earlier, consumption involvement reflected in micro-blog feeds is mainly user imagery and usage imagery created by consumers themselves. Subjects are found to evaluate the value of the micro-blog feeds by evaluating user and usage imagery shown in the content. When the user and usage imagery is positive, consumers' confidence to the brand is high and when the user and usage imagery is negative, consumers' trust to the brand reduces. Take the mobile phone brand Samsung for an example; subject 31 said that his desire to buy an iPhone was eliminated by a negative comment on the screen size of iPhone. He then read several feeds about Samsung's big phone screen and decided to purchase a Samsung instead. Many other subjects showed that when they saw negative user-generated branding content, they started to have concerns about the issue mentioned by other users.

This sheds light on peer effect in social media as an influential variable. This effect that is strongly suggested by many (see Granovetter, 1973; Watts and Dodds, 2007; Iyengar, Van den Bulte, and Valente, 2010) is found to be mediated by the congruence between user/usage imagery shown in micro-blog feeds and consumers' personal brand experience. Under the circumstance that they have had brand experience, they compare their personal experience with UGB in micro-blog space. It is found that when the congruence is high, consumer confidence to the brand is high, which indicates enhanced CBBE since brand associations are positive and strong. On the contrary, when the congruence is low, consumer confidence to the brand is low, which indicates weakened CBBE since brand associations are not strong or favourable.

6.5.1.2 Knowledge Co-creation by Consumers

In this study, knowledge co-creation, especially the one by peers which was identified as a motivation for WOM creation (Grice, 1969; Abelson and Prentice, 1989; Fill, 2011), is found as a variable that contributes to consumer confidence.. There are two channels of brand knowledge construction: (1) the communication between brand and consumers and (2) the communication among consumers themselves. In the aspect of communication among consumers themselves, two ways of brand knowledge construction are found.

6.5.1.2.1 Know-how Co-creation by Peers

The first way of brand knowledge construction is through the know-how knowledge created and shared by peers. Below is an extract from subject 15's interview transcript.

> *'So I commented on the reposted feed and asked where I could buy the range. I haven't got a reply from Mentholatum, but another user replied me and told me where to buy the products.'[subject 15, Mentholatum].*

Consumers' willingness to respond to other consumers' need has been long recognised as a motivation for WOM creation (Allen and Perrault, 1980; Mazzarol *et al*., 2007; Fill, 2011). As illustrated in the extract above, the user who replied to subject 15 responded to subject 15's need for a place to shop the brand. In this case, the brand stayed inactive while peers are active in creating brand-related knowledge. Subject 15 is not the only case where this kind of knowledge co-creation is found. Among the five pairs of brands from 5 different industries, this type of knowledge co-creation is commonly seen in grooming brands and high technology brands. An explanation here is that products in those two sectors require further usage direction and assistance compared to the other three sectors studied in this research. Subjects also found the usage guidance and assistance created in the communication with peers reliable, trustworthy and useful.

6.5.1.2.2 Brand Evaluation by Peers

The second way of brand knowledge construction is through brand evaluation by peers. In this case, peers are actively sharing in micro-blogs with others their brand experience. Some brands actively repost positive and favourable evaluation on their brand page, increasing followers' exposure to favourable content. As subject 3 mentioned in the interview:

> *'Sometimes it [the brand] also reposts other users' experience. Those experiences are quite useful for me because their experiences are like product reviews from which I could know whether the product suits my skin type or not.' [subject 3, L'Oreal Paris]*

Product evaluation in the feeds that can assist readers' pre-purchase judgement motivates them to consume carefully such content. Discussed in the literature review, this motivation is supported by Murray (1991), Wagenheim and Bayon (2004), Christodoulides et al. (2012) and Ruane and Wallace (2013). What is different in the micro-blog context is that consumers may not proactively seek product evaluation; however, they are still exposed to such content due to the reposting affordance of micro-blog. The implication for brands is that brands need to actively monitor micro-blog communication and repost selectively positive brand evaluation to consumers who follow the brand's account in order to enhance brand image via consumers' exposure to positive, strong and favourable brand associations.

6.5.1.2.3 Factors that Affect Knowledge Co-creation

One essential factor that affects the knowledge co-creation is the **homophily** identified on both the eWOM giver and the eWOM receiver's sides. Brand associations are found to be strengthened when there is homophily between the eWOM giver and receiver. For instance, subject 33 indicated that her knowledge about the functional benefits of the brand increased because of the common grounds shared by her and the user who initiated brand-related eWOM content: *'the thing is, I have long and very dry hair as well, just like the user' [subject 33, L'Oreal Paris]*. During their communication about the functional benefits of the brand, those benefits were strengthened. In the eyes of other users who are exposed to such strengthened associations, the brand associations are not only strong but also favourable because the brand is providing a solution to certain consumer needs and the solution is recognised and positively commented by peers. In this case, even though other consumers are not directly contacted by brands or peers with recommendation, the strong and favourable brand associations will put the brand in the consideration set or even make it the choice when a relevant need occurs.

Knowledge co-created is also a form of **reward** to consumers who participate actively in brand-related conversation on micro-blog. This study found that consumers regard knowledge, especially know-how information, as a kind of reward from MBB communication. This opinion has been briefly touched by Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003) that consumers seek product-related eWOM to better understand how to use a product. What adds to the understanding of knowledge co-creation by this study is that consumers actively seek brand-related knowledge when a purchase cue emerges in their minds.

Consumers also respond to peer-contributed knowledge online to reinforce their brand-related presuppositions. The presuppositions can be a positive or negative previous brand experience. When the knowledge exposure is in accordance with the presuppositions, consumers' attitudes and feelings are strengthened. It is supported by previous studies that WOM creation is motivated by consumers' desire for self-assurance. Consumers sometimes create WOM content actively to seek support from others and to reinforce their purchase decisions (Fill, 2011). It is also in line with the ego-defensive concept in functional theory as explained by Clary *et al.* (1998). Through the process of comparing one's own presuppositions with others' experience, consumers' ego is defended and the 'self' protected from internal insecurity (Herek, 1987; Abelson and Prentice, 1989). In this way, consumers can confirm again that they have made a right decision.

On the other hand, when **the knowledge exposure is conflicting with the presuppositions**, consumers may choose to either ignore the exposure or respond to the exposure by contributing to knowledge co-creation with peers through commenting, reposting or both on micro-blog. In either way, brand associations perceived by consumers are strengthened, which indicates stronger brand image from the perspective of CBBE. For instance, subject 10 illustrated her contribution to knowledge co-creation in the interview with a specific example:

'The customer commented on the cleansing foam that my sister is using currently. She commented positively on the product and showed photos of the cleansing foam. She said that she quite likes the smell of the product. So do I. So I commented on the reposted feed and said I like the smell of the cleansing foam too' [subject 10, Mentholatum].

In either situation, consumer confidence towards brand awareness and brand image is strengthened. When the brand image is positive and favourable to the brand, higher consumer confidence then is likely to increase the consideration advantage and choice advantage of such a brand. In the circumstance that purchase has been made, consumer's choice is re-assured by the positive and favourable brand image reflected in such brand evaluation by peers as suggested by Ruane and Wallace (2013). However, when the brand image perceived is negative to the brand, brand dilution is likely to occur (see section 6.7).

6.5.1.3Trust

Trust is third variable found to increase consumer confidence. Unlike existing research that emphasises trust to UGC, this study recognises increasing trust to BPC and high trust to BPUGC in micro-blog space.

6.5.1.3.1 Increasing trust to brand published content

Intriguingly, the data in this study suggests high trust to BPC when the brand possesses a strong personality as a professional expert in its business field. The link between a brand personality and consideration advantage of CBBE is witnessed in the data. More importantly, the data also shows that what strengthens this connection is the increase of trust to the BPC on Sina Weibo due to one brand characteristic reflected in the micro-blog activities –providing solutions. Consumers see brands' micro-blog accounts as incarnation of professional solution providers. During communication with the brands that act as humanlike virtual entities (Pentina, Zhang and Basmanova, 2013), consumers are increasingly anthropomorphising brands and attaching social meanings to those brands. Although the micro-blog accounts of those brands in different business sectors were pictured by subjects with different genders and different characteristics, they are commonly commented by online consumers as providing solutions demanded. For instance, one follower of movie brand on Sina Weibo described movie brand (Hunger

Game) account as *'a buddy in the movie forum'* [subject 5] who provided him with stories about the movie and photos of the leading roles. Later in the same interview, the subject stated that he found the photos and video clips shared in the micro-blog feeds most interesting and attractive since that content satisfies his demand of being more knowledgeable of the movie [subject 5]. Similarly in the case of subject 7, the subject described the micro-blog account of Mentholatum (brand 2 in skin care sector) as

> *'a female best friend forever. It shares with me the methods and products that I could use to treat my acne. It shares with me other people's experience of treating acne problem skin, which I have as well'*.

And in the case of subject 2, the consumer of L'Oreal Paris, where she described the brand's micro-blog account as

> *'a make-up artist, best of the kind. She's quite knowledgeable on what she knows and what she does—making people beautiful. She is honest. Making good recommendations on what I need to buy and what I need to do with those products'*.

What are common in those three cases when the users were asked to describe the personality and characteristics of the brand micro-blog account is that the brands are all depicted as quite knowledgeable in their respective field: (1) movie account brand as die-hard movie fan, (2) skin care brand as female best friend who knows a lot in caring problematic skin, and (3) cosmetics brand as make-up artist. While attaching the role of experts to those brands, consumers naturally endow the brands' micro-blog accounts with social meanings of professional entities in their respective industry. Trust towards these perceived professional entities helps foster favourable relationships between the brands and the consumers as trust is an essential element of relationship initiation and maintenance that foster commitment and loyalty (Pentina, Zhang and Basmanova, 2013).

6.5.1.3.2 High Trust to Brand Published User-Generated Content

As for high trust to BPUGC, it has been presented at the beginning of this chapter when the blurring line between BPC and UGC was mentioned (see Section 6.3).

6.5.2 Consistency

6.5.2.1 Consistency between Presuppositions and Brand Experience on Micro-blog

Consumer confidence then brings consideration advantage to the brand through building favourable brand associations. The effect of consumer confidence towards brand's CBBE elements on consumers' behavioural change is mediated by consumers' presuppositions. According to Daugherty *et al.* (2008), usefulness of WOM content can be moderated by consumers' presuppositions because consumers' perceived value of the WOM content is related to their feelings and beliefs before the exposure to the WOM message. Xia and Bechwati (2008) also supported this argument and emphasised the positive correlation between consumers' presuppositions and usefulness of WOM content consumed. In this study, the eventual consumer attitudes to the brand are a combined result of presuppositions and micro-blog branding communication. Presuppositions are found to moderate the effect of micro-blog branding communication on consumers' behavioural change.

According to the stories shared by the subjects interviewed, user and usage imagery are the two elements of CBBE that exert the greatest influence on consumer presuppositions. As subject 38 and subject 39 shared with the author, satisfied user and supportive evidence of product quality as well as effectiveness consolidate favourable brand associations:

> *'I will take the user experience as a user endorsement of the brand's offerings even though the user may not have been paid to share his experience. Of course, for beauty products, if the users are not beautiful or when the cosmetics do not really make them beautiful, I don't think I want to buy those products ever' (laugh) [subject 38: L'Oreal].*
>
> *'Of course I am more confident in the brand when I see photos of satisfied customers showing their consumption in Weibo photos. The more satisfied experiences I see, the more confident I am about the brand' [subject 39, Mi Mobile].*

This great influence can be theoretically explained that product usage reflected in eWOM content positively affects strength of advocacy. First of all, consumers value opinions from users whose product usage experience can be witnessed in eWOM. In the context of micro-blog branding communication, strength of advocacy is then affected by the amount of brand experience seen by message receivers. Also established by Aral (2010), sustained use of product/service witnessed in WOM increases the awareness of the product/service while discontinued use affects adoption due to negative impression made. In MBB communication, continued brand experience then enhances brand image since continued usage indicates effectiveness of products/service. Meanwhile, discontinued usage may dilute the brand value due to negative impression to the content disseminated on micro-blog. For instance, subject 31 stated that his favourable presuppositions to Samsung Note smartphone were eliminated by a piece of negative comment created by one user in his micro-blog network:

> *'I was about to buy the Samsung Note 1 and I then saw that a friend in my Weibo network said he did not want to use Note 1 anymore and changed back to his old iPhone because Note 1 was, according to his original words, incredibly slow' [subject 31, Samsung].*

Consistency between presuppositions and online exposure to other's brand experience also creates favourable brand associations, strengthens consumer need, and leads to choice advantage eventually. Take luxury brand Louis Vuitton as an example. As subject 48 said during the interview, in her presupposition Louis Vuitton is of unparalleled high quality among first tier luxury brands available in her city. The exposure to other consumers' attitudes of and consumption involvement of the brand confirms and reinforces her presuppositions. User imagery and usage imagery she has been exposed to are mostly positive that her confidence towards the brand is high. She eventually made a purchase and quoted someone else's words in the online branding communication to describe her purchase – *'money well spent' [subject 48, Louis Vuitton]*.

6.5.2.2 Consistency between Consumption Involvement and Brand Publicity

The second aspect of consistency that mediates the effect of consumer confidence on consumers' behavioural change is the consistency between consumption involvement reflected in micro-blog content and what is shown in brand publicity. As discussed earlier, presuppositions before exposure to MBB content mediates the effect of MBB on consideration advantage of the brand. Consumer journey offline does not stop at the point of online brand exposure. Rather, from that point, consumer journey becomes one that combines online and offline experience.

Exposure to consumption involvement mostly happens online. Exposure to brand publicity occurs both online and offline. Congruence between the brand image perceived from consumption involvement in the online space and the brand identity publicised by firms enhances CBBE. Brands of which the consistency is maintained are believed by consumers as trustworthy brands and put into the consideration set when a demand occurs.

On the other hand, once the consumption involvement is conflicting with the brand publicity, consumer trust towards the brand will be impaired. For instance, subject 25 said,

> *'I judge whether the brand is trustworthy based on whether the online content published by the brand is consistent with my experience. I mean I understand that brand is always wanting to boast about their products so it is acceptable when the brand is speaking positively about its products. But, if the brand is speaking about the product way too positive than I perceive offline with my own experience, I wouldn't trust the brand' [subject 25, BMW].*

6.6 Choice Advantage

6.6.1 Solution Providing

Once the learning advantage and consideration advantage is achieved, the last step left in creating salient brands is obtaining choice advantage. It is found that the ultimate goal of online consumers in following brand accounts and actively participating in MBB communication is to find a solution to their respective problems. For instance, grooming brands' followers are not merely looking for product information, but more importantly how to use those products to create better skin and prettier look. Their problem is related to consumer learning, which has been identified as a motivation for WOM consumption (Hennig-Thurau and Walsh, 2003; Zhang and Watts, 2004). Fashion brands' followers seek information to reduce the risk associated with online purchasing and to enhance self-assurance of their purchase decisions. Their problem is related to risk reduction, which has also been identified as a major motivation for WOM consumption. Mobile brands' followers are searching information about how–to tips and comparing different phone models in the aspect of functionality. Their behaviour is carried out for the functional benefits of the brand. It is associated back to the product evaluation through information searching recognised as a motivation for WOM consumption (Murray 1991; Wagenheim and Bayon, 2004). Movie brands' followers mainly talk about the storyline of the movie, where about to watch it and other movie related messages, such as the leading roles, the actors and actresses and etc. to show their preference to the movie or share their viewing experience with peers. Their problem solutions are more inclined to social orientation issues as explained by Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006; Edelman, 2011). Automobile brands' followers are looking for better mortgage plan and promotional events for new cars. For them, solutions they seek on micro-blogs are mainly about cost reduction, another WOM motivation as identified by Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006) and Parameswaran and Whinston, 2007).

According to Capon and Capon's (2010) explanation of three benefits of the brand to consumers, the above stated outcomes of micro-blog branding communication are put into the three benefit types (see Table 9 below). Consumers learning and product evaluation through information searching are related to the functional benefits of the brands. Cost reduction and risk reduction are related to the economic benefits of the brands. Social orientation is related to the psychological benefits of the brands. No matter what the industry is, the brands' followers on micro-blog are actively seeking a solution to their own problems, be it related to functional, psychological, or economic benefit that can be provided by the brand.

Table 11 Benefit types of MBB communication outcomes, source: the author

Benefit Type	
Functional Benefits	Grooming brand: how to create better skin and prettier look Mobilephone brand: compare different models for functionality; seek how-to information for deeper consumption involvement

Psychological benefits	Movie brand: to feel connected to other movie lovers; to share with other their own experience and opinions Fashion brand: to enhance self-assurance of purchase decision
Economic Benefits	Automobile brand: information about better mortgage plan and promotional events Fashion brand: reduce the risk associated with online purchasing

As illustrated above in Table 10, consumers who follow the brand on micro-blog all have their own problems. Those problems can be an explicit demand (such as better mortgage plan) or a dormant need (such as self-assurance for purchase decision). The problems are the antecedents of MBB communication between consumers and brands as well as among consumers. What brands should provide consumers with in MBB communication are solutions to their various problems. As Van Laer and de Ruyter (2010) pointed out, when brands react to consumers in social media space, brands need to ensure that content and presentation approach both respond directly to the brand-related content generated by consumers. In this specific context of MBB, problems, both explicit and implicit, are brand-related UGC and brands should respond with BPC that addresses those problems. Therefore, it is essential for brands to monitor and analyse the content published by consumers before reacting to and communicating with them. Otherwise, attempts to communicate and efforts in creating and publishing content in micro-blog space may not be effective branding tools at all.

The idea that problem solving is the most salient factor to influence brands' choice advantage in the consideration set is linked closely to the definition of brand and branding. As summarised in Section 2.2.1, brands are promises they attempt to and successfully deliver to the consumers (Braun, 2004; Kapferer, 2008). Therefore, as perceived by the consumers, brands ought to be problem solvers with the promises they give if they are chosen when a demand occurs. As proved by the content of micro-blog communication, consumers who either respond to brand-published feeds or communicate with other consumers in micro-blog space actively have certain problems related to the functionality of the product offerings, non-product related brand attributes (such as price and packaging), or the experiential and symbolic benefits of the brand.

Their actions following their participation in MBB communication then address those problems. MBB communication, though may not be solely the reason for the purchase decision, plays important role in pushing the consumers to make the choice. In summary, choice advantage given by micro-blog communication is based on solution provided in the communication to solve both implicit and explicit problems the consumers have.

Furthermore, consumers' perception that MBB communication helps solve problems and their personal problem solving experience in micro-blog space creates favorable brand associations. As emphasised by Capon and Capon (2010), favourable associations are associations desired by the customers and delivered by the brands. In this sense, solutions provided to solve the obvious and dormant problems experienced by the consumers are desired by the customers and delivered by the brand, exactly in accordance with the explanation of favourable brand associations by Capon and Capon (2010).

Last but not least, though consumers in micro-blog space are connected by personal relations, their participation in micro-blog branding communication is primarily caused by their desire to seek relevant solutions to their respective problems. As Gensler *et al.* (2013) argued, the relationships in social-media based brand communities are weaker than in other online brand communicates given the large scalability and huge amount of users accessible to the communities. Thus, consumers in such a context are loosely linked and it is the solution rather peer connection that keeps those consumers active in MBB communications. For instance, subject 1 pointed out that:

> *'For product review with photos and comments on product quality, I believe peers are more trustworthy, especially people who have similar skin condition like mine. Because their comments would be more useful to me.'[subject 1:L'Oreal]*

As illustrated by the extract, the most significant reason for the increased trustworthiness is the similarity between the publisher and herself, which indicates appropriate solutions to her own problems. This is in line with the argument made in this study that solutions provided in micro-blog content connect consumers closer with brands and brands' other users. Similarities between content creators and readers, though is not the major reason for brand choice and brand adoption, catalyse readers' decision-making process. This can be explained by the fact that personal similarities cause increased attachment and higher reciprocity in conversation (Ren *et al*., 2007). Thus, when MBB receivers find high similarities between themselves and MBB givers, they perceive the content trustworthier and the brand mentioned more personally relevant, which projects strong brand associations.

This also sheds light on the crucial importance of solution providing in the last stage of advantage formation in creating CBBE since once consumers feel their problems solved by certain actions after their participation in MBB communication, they will carry out corresponding actions. It is also the ideal level of social media maturity explained by Van Luxemburg and Zwiggelaar (2012) that brands make conversations actionable through co-creation and collaborative activities with consumers for problem solving. It is ideal brand practice. According to Kimmel and Kitchen (2014), this type of eWOM communication eliminates divisions between brands' internal and external stakeholders and establishes a truly cooperative network between brands and consumers.

6.6.2 Immediacy of Brand Touch Point

Immediacy of brand touch points is the second variable that affects brands' choice advantage. It is reflected in two ways: brand evaluation near purchase point and purchase link at brand touch point. Though listed in the initial template, information seeking while making decisions is removed from the final template.

6.6.2.1 Information Seeking while Making Decisions

Given the widely accepted argument that brand communication can be quite near the moment of purchase (Edelman, 2010), it was assumed in the initial template that information seeking while making decisions is playing an important role in affecting consumers' behaviour. However, during the interview, the author found that though information seeking can be quite near or even right at the moment of purchase, consumers are not likely to seek product/service evaluation with hashtags or keywords on micro-blog. Instead, most of them (the subjects) stated that they would actively search for evaluation in general search engines such as Google and Baidu[6]. One explanation is that even though immediacy is one unique feature of social media communication (Alani, 2010; Galdwell, 2010), this micro-blog affordance is not recognised by consumers as a way for risk reduction at the moment of purchase. Thus, information seeking while making decisions is taking out from the final template.

6.6.2.2 Brand Evaluation near Purchase Point

Though consumers do not actively search for brand-related content near or at the moment of purchase, natural exposure to brand evaluation near the purchase point affects greatly brands' choice advantage. First and foremost, it has to be made clear that information seeking while making decisions or near making decisions is distinguished from exposure to brand evaluation near purchase point. The former is an active micro-blog branding content consumption behaviour, whereas the latter is a passive one. Referring back to what has been discussed in the literature review, online consumers are not necessarily as active as they are assumed to be (Pinkerfield, 2007; Heinonen, 2011). Previous research on eWOM creation indicates that though consumers are given great opportunity to contribute to eWOM content, only a small number of them create the majority of the online UGC (Heinonen, 2011). It is triggered by the differences in interests and resources consumers possess (Courtois *et al*., 2009). However, inactive consumers in this sense are not meaningless to brands. Quite oppositely, as suggested in the literature review, passive content creators can still be active receivers of eWOM. Proved by cases in this study, a large proportion of subjects implied that though they did not proactively create brand-related content or actively seek brand-related content using hashtags or keywords, they often consume brand-related content passively. Most of the subjects do not actively participate in branding communication more than once a week. However, they all passively consume micro-blog branding content at least once a day. This fact is in line with the passive nature of the majority of online consumers suggested before. This nature then makes brand evaluation near purchase point more important than active information seeking near decision-making moment. As stated by a considerable number of subjects, they had experiences of making purchase through the link embedded in the micro-blog feed where brand evaluation was presented in the same feed:

[6] Baidu.com is the biggest Chinese search engine.

'The biggest influence I guess is the purchase link next to the photos. Honestly, I sometimes buy the clothes right after I saw the photos of the clothes through the link in the feed' [subject 9: NPC].

Their behaviour can be explained by their motivation for passive consumption of micro-blog branding content. As pointed out by many, one significant motivation for WOM consumption is risk reduction (Ardnt, 1967; Wagenheim and Bayon, 2004; Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006). Thanks to fact that purchase links are sometimes embedded in eWOM content, consumers' self-assurance of purchase intention is reinforced when they are exposed to positive content right before or at the moment of purchase.

6.6.2.3 Purchase Link at Brand Touch Point

As mentioned earlier, purchase links in brand-related micro-blog feeds allow consumers to make purchase decisions and finish the transaction immediately after exposure to brand-related eWOM. In this sense, purchase links help brands to shorten the consideration process and reach the choice advantage quickly. The reason that this 'trick' works is that higher degree consumer convenience orientation in contrast to risk aversion encourages consumer to select online channel to make relevant purchase (Kollmann, Kuckertz, and Kayser, 2012). Immediately after exposure to positive brand-related eWOM, consumers are more likely to take advantage of the convenience that purchase links bring and make decisions in a timely manner. Generally, consumers weight benefits against cost in information search and purchase making (Shih, 2004; Kollmann, Kuckertz, and Kayser, 2012). These benefits are usually associated with risk aversion, convenience, and service preference (Chiang, Zhang and Zhou, 2006). In this sense, consumers can benefit in two out of the three aspects. As mentioned above, brand evaluation near purchase point in Weibo lowers the associated risk of the purchase decision since peer trust, trust to brand, as well as problem solving provided by brand-related eWOM content together increase consumer confidence in the brand and the offering. Thus, by using the purchase links directly within Weibo, consumers do not sacrifice lower perceived risk for convenience; rather, they capture both benefits in contrast to service that might be offered offline. Convenience oriented consumers may want to complete the transaction right after evaluating brand-related eWOM s/he has exposed to because, as Kollmann, Kuckertz and Kayser (2012) suggested, it saves time and efforts.

However, as revealed before, brands that actively and frequently use purchase links in their feeds are perceived by consumers as sales-person accounts rather than brand communication ones. In the subjects' minds, those accounts are then not providing solutions online but proactively persuade consumers to make purchases. Under this circumstance, consumers naturally grow a sense of brand aversion, as suggested by the application of game theory in social media marketing (see Anderson, 2010). When consumers are reluctantly exposed to too many purchase links posted by a brand, their trust to the brand in believing the brand's capability of providing problem solutions reduces as they perceive the brand's Weibo account more as a sales person rather than a friend or an expert. As a result, such brand aversion lowers the effectiveness of purchase links in MBB eWOM in encouraging consumers to make purchase so as for the brands to achieve choice advantage.

Managerial implications of this finding are industry-specific. Since it is also found that the effectiveness of purchase links on MBB-created choice advantage is mediated by perceived risk of the purchase decision made as well as convenience of immediate online shopping at the sacrifice of service, industries that target consumers of higher convenience orientation and lower risk reduction orientation can use purchase links often. For instance, in the circumstance of low involvement low risk products such as skincare, hair care, fashion clothes and movie tickets, purchase links are quite effective. On the contrary, industries where consumers prior risk reduction and service to convenience, purchase links should be avoided. For instance, regarding high involvement and high-risk products such as high technology electronics and automobiles, purchase links should be seldom or not used by brands on micro-blog.

6.6.3 Permanency of MBB Content

Furthermore, brands do not only benefit from the immediacy but also from the relative permanency of micro-blog content. Micro-blog content benefits from the permanency allowed by Internet storage (Jansen *et al.,* 2009). The content once created is saved in the online space unless deleted by the creator. Because of this relatively permanent feature of micro-blog feeds compared to physical WOM, consumption involvement has a much longer effect on consumers' attitudes towards brands mentioned. For instance, as subject 33 told, brand-related micro-blog feeds not only create brand associations with more details and much more knowledge, but more importantly can be bookmarked and retrieved when necessary:

> *'..sometimes I even bookmark the feed in case I need that information later' [subject 33, L'Oreal Paris].*

6.7 Brand Dilution

It has been pointed out in the literature review that brands may also be harmed by eWOM on micro-blog services due to increasing consumer power and decreasing brand control, in which cases that brand dilution may happen. It is found in this study that brand dilution triggered by micro-blog branding activities are likely to happen under 4 circumstances.

6.7.1 Dilution due to Valence

First, brand dilution happens when positive brand presuppositions are affected by micro-blog branding content such as negative comment or complaint. Existing studies of WOM effect have clearly pointed out that valence is effective in affecting consumer attitudes. Bombauer-Sachse and Mangold (2011) further emphasised that even strong brands with great brand knowledge are not immune from detrimental effect of negative brand-related articulation. The findings in this study suggest that in MBB communication, positive brand-related articulation is found more influential than negative articulation. It is unlike previous suggestions that both types are equally effective (see East, Hammond, and Wright, 2007) or that negative one is more influential (Arndt, 1967; Sweeney *et al.*, 2012). The interpretation of the finding is that consumers who are following the brand's micro-blog account have certain problems that need certain brand knowledge to solve. Therefore, the problem solving demand is an important motivation for them to take part in brand-related communication on micro-blog. Most problems identified earlier in the choice advantage section are related to functional, psychological or economic benefits of the brand rather than negative comment searching. Therefore, the presuppositions held by micro-blog users are either neutral or positive. In this circumstance, their presuppositions are more likely to be strengthened rather than reversed.

Another reason is that on brand accounts' micro-blog pages, all initial feeds published are controlled by the brands rather than consumers. Furthermore, it is found that Chinese consumers do not often search for brand-related articulation on micro-blog with hashtags or keywords. Thus, the chance that micro-blog consumers encounter negative content is not high. The most likely circumstance under which consumers are exposed to negative content is negative content published by other users. Subjects interviewed also stated that under such a circumstance, sincere engagement from the brand normally establishes positive impression to the consumers.

6.7.2 Breach of Consistency

Second, brand dilution happens when either of the two types of consistency is breached. As stated earlier in Section 6.5.2 with the very examples of subject 31 and subject 25, breach of the two types of consistency dilutes the brand's customer-based equity due to the negative brand image created.

6.7.3 Brand Silence

Third, brand dilution happens when slow response or lack of response is recognised by consumers. This finding is in line with Yan's (2011) finding that social media communication is a total wasted opportunity when the so-called communication is only a one-way channel. When sincere engagement is not achieved proactively by brands, they may be harmed due to negative impression that brand silence gives to consumers.

Interestingly, according to the subjects' experience, consumers are fine to be slow in responding to brands or ignoring the brands on micro-blog totally; however, they are reluctant to feel being ignored by brands. As subject 40 pointed out during the interview, brand silence is sometimes not tolerated by consumers:

> *'When I asked the movie account some questions and they are not responding at all. I feel ignored and not satisfied. I may then turn to other sources rather than the brand's (weibo) account' [subject 40, Tiny Times].*

Subject 40 also mentioned that when the brand's micro-blog account is not an available source of information, other sources are considered. Consumers' behaviour of shifting from official brand accounts to other sources, most of which are UGC, is triggered by the asymmetry of information. Brands used to have most control over brand-related information; however, consumers now can have access to a wide range of other information sources, including content created by themselves. Also revealed in this study, most subjects do not actively search for brand-related UGC using hashtags or keywords on micro-blog even though they have higher trust towards such UGC. This is in line with what existing literature has established that though consumers are given rich opportunities to contribute to digital content online, most of them are listeners and observers (Pinkerfield, 2007). Therefore, for brands that adopt micro-blog strategy, keeping active is essential to enhance CBBE among users who follow the brands since the brand account is the major channel of brand-related information to those users. For brands that desire to be salient, it has to avoid being silent.

It is also found that consumers with greater brand knowledge defend the brand they follow on micro-blog. Strong and favourable brand associations create greater brand knowledge, which increases brand familiarity. It is found that under the circumstance when brand is jeopardised by negative comments from users, consumers who have greater brand knowledge sometimes stand out willingly to protect the brand by questioning the credibility of the negative content with their own positive experience. For instance, when some Weibo users reviewed Mi Mobile negatively, its followers defended the brand by posting images and stories of usage experience to illustrate the experiential and functional benefits of the brand. The difference between offline defence and online defence is that in online circumstance consumer defence of the brand against negative comments can easily reach the brand if consumers mention the brand's official account (@brand official account) when posting positive content. The brand's official micro-blog account can then post the positive UGC for an ideal effect of BPUGC as discussed earlier in this chapter.

6.7.4 Irrelevant Content

Irrelevant content is fourth factor that may cause brand dilution. It is found during the research that content not related to subjects' obvious or dormant problems are deemed as irrelevant. For instance, Samsung Electronics' account frequently updated with news of its celebrity endorser Rain (a Korean pop-star). All five subjects but one who is a die-hard fan of Rain regarded those frequent updates as irrelevant and *'(reading it is) a total waste of time'*. They also expressed their hatred to frequent updates of irrelevant content. This finding confirms Anderson's (2010) game theory discussion in social media marketing that lose-lose scenario occurs when brands intentionally increase exposure to consumers whereas consumers intend to ignore those exposures. Irrelevant content frequently published by brands puts brands in exactly the lose-lose scenario where brands attempt to increase the exposure of brand-related information to consumers but consumers deem the information as deviant and ignore it subjectively. Also pointed out by Erdoğmuş and Çiçek (2012), relevancy is a crucial element that affects brand loyalty strengthened by brand-related communication in social media. Based on their questionnaire survey with 338 subjects, they concluded that companies should keep themselves updated with what consumers are interested. Findings in this research are consistent with theirs. During the interview, it is found that highly relevant content deemed by subjects is closely related to the problems that need to be solved and solutions recognised by the subjects are associated with the functional, psychological and economic benefits of the brands.

6.8 Other Findings – Motivations for MBB Activity Participation

Besides those findings mentioned above, some other findings are also interesting and presented below.

6.8.1 Sympathy

Consumers are found highly likely to participate in MBB activities when they sympathise what they are exposed to in such a context. When subjects found common grounds with eWOM creators, they were likely to respond to the message by commenting and/or reposting. This is in line with the motivations for WOM creation identified in previous studies --informing and warning others (Allen and Perrault, 1980; Mazzarol *et al*., 2007) as well as social-orientation (Grice, 1969; Herek, 1987; Abelson and Prentice, 1989; Clary *et al*., 1998).

Sympathy also contributes to the behavioural equity of the brand. As pointed out by some subjects, when they found their positive brand experience similar to others', there is a high probability of repeated purchasing intention:

> *'When I find my experience is similar to other people's experience online, I will repeat purchasing the products' [subject 7, Mentholatum].*

Although this repeated purchase intention has been more found with grooming brands and fashion apparel brands and less with phone, movie and automobile brands in the interview, the author attributes the difference here to the different length of product life cycle in those industries. Product life cycle in phone and automobile industry is much longer than that in the grooming and fashion apparel industry. Besides, product life cycle in the movie industry is comparatively too short and repeated purchase behaviour in this industry is less seen.

6.8.2 Online Offline Synergy

6.8.2.1 Offline Brand Exposure as a Motivation for Online Connection

Offline brand exposure is identified in this study as a motivation for online participation in MBB communication. A small amount of subjects stated that they were initially pushed by offline branding activities to follow the brands' micro-blog accounts. The benefit of connecting with consumers in this way is that consumers have already had some level of brand knowledge before exposure to MBB content. Consumers' activity of following the brand's account also shows that they are somewhat interested in the brand. Therefore, certain level of learning advantage is obtained even before the online connection is established.

Mazzarol *et al.* (2007) pointed out that perceived quality and satisfaction are antecedents of WOM creation. In this case of micro-blog branding communication, offline brand experience is seen as playing a similar role. Generally, high perceived quality of the brand's offering and satisfaction to the offline brand experience facilitate consumer's desire to be connected with the brand online. Thus, satisfactory brand experience in the offline world can be regarded as an antecedent to proactive connection with brands on micro-blog. Some subjects interviewed were found to have actively sought connection to brands in micro-blog. In all those cases, certain level of favourable brand knowledge before active online connection with brands was detected. For instance,

'The brands I have followed on the MBB are mostly the brands I prefer to purchase offline, it will let me to know more about the brands on MBB activities' [subject 43, Louis Vuitton].

and

'I followed the brand during an offline event I remember. I like the brand generally. It's a very good brand for students. Cheap but at the same time kinda effective. It's effective for me, anyway (laugh)' [subject 46, Mentholatum].

In those cases where offline experiences precede online brand connection, certain level of learning advantage has been achieved, which further stimulates consumers to seek more information and/or establish a relationship with the brand online.

6.8.2.2 Loyalty as a Motivation for Online Connection

Furthermore, because loyalty is related to positive repurchase intention but no evidence of such is witnessed in WOM creation, there is disagreement in previous studies on whether brand loyalty is an antecedent of WOM/eWOM activity (Gremler and Brown, 1999; Mazzarol *et al*., 2007). However, in the case of micro-blog branding communication, brand loyalty is revealed as an antecedent of MBB communication. Passive exposure to brand-related content after active subscription to brand micro-blog account is a part of micro-blog branding communication. Many subjects admitted that their loyalty to the brand and preference to the brand existent offline are the reason why they followed the brand's micro-blog account for information updates. Take subject 47 as an example, his active subscription for updates published by the brand (Hunger Game) is because of his loyalty to the brand formed offline:

> *'Personally I like the movie. I followed the Sina Weibo account after I watched the first movie of the Hunger Game and I have been expecting the second one for so*

long. The movie is quite inspiring and I am expecting more of it' [subject 47, Hunger Game].

Thus, brand loyalty and preference is a reason for following behaviour and thus an antecedent for MBB communication. It is also reflected in subject 11's interview:

'I have been suing the products of this brand for years and I want to know more about its offerings. I am interested in how to use the products to create different looks. That's something I wouldn't get from other brands' [subject 11, L'Oreal].

The implication here for brands is that the success of MBB communication is associated with consumers' brand experience in the physical world. High perceived quality and satisfaction stimulate consumers' desire to be connected to the brand in many accessible channels, among which micro-blog is one. Brand loyalty established offline based on satisfactory experience also pushes the consumers to online connection. It is then strongly recommended that invitation to online connection is sent to consumers after brand touch points offline. Regarding the five sectors covered in this study, it can be achieved in offline new product launch events (mobile phone brands and fashion brands), sample give-away (grooming brands), test drive (automobile) and movie trailers.

6.9 Building salient brands

Referring to the four steps in building salient brands illustrated in Table 1, the first two steps are easily identified in MBB communication.

First of all, the first step of building salient brands, association encoding, is achieved through building a unique personality of the brand. All of the subjects interviewed were able to easily give a description of the brand micro-blog account as a person, which indicates a clear brand personality held by the consumers.

The second stage, linkage formation, which answers the question of what the brand is about, is achieved in MBB communication through brand-initiated MBB content describing both product-related and non-product related brand associations with the assistance of texts, images and video elements.

The third step, response evoking, is recognised in this study as not completed by brand alone but generally by UGC reposted by brand (BPUGC). Online consumers are more likely to respond to UGC due to their need to socialise with other people and their need to express themselves.

The fourth step, relationship management, is not always recognisable in current MBB communication. The lack of converting process from brand response to an active and intense loyal relationship between online consumers and brands are due to three reasons. First and foremost, as demonstrated previously, brands that have micro-blog accounts are regarded by followers as mostly inactive in communicating with general consumers. Secondly, presuppositions held by consumers severely moderate consumers' behavioural equity. Thus, even when the consumers' attitudinal equity is positive and favourable to the brand, perceived brand presuppositions may mediate the choice advantage, especially when exposure to brand-related content on micro-blog suggests a brand image conflicting to those presuppositions. In this particular circumstance, brand dilution is likely to occur.

When wrapping up very briefly whether micro-blog branding communication builds salient brands, Gill and Dawra's (2010:189) description of what salient brands do is a benchmark to address the issue. Gill and Dawra (2010:189) stated that salient brands *'help managers to relish higher margins, greater customer loyalty, less vulnerability to competitive attacks, better customer response to communications, and more cooperation from trade and other intermediates'*. In this regard, MBB communication takes advantage of micro-blog affordances including large scalability, immediacy as well as user interactivity, through which it contributes to the establishment of salient brands. During MBB communication, consumers are sometimes acting as intermediates to co-create brand meaning by providing solutions, suggestion and evaluation of brand's offerings to others both known and unknown. In doing so, consumer confidence to the brand is increased, which suggests greater consideration and choice advantages possessed by the brand.

Chapter 7 Conclusion and Limitations

7.1 Limitations and Further Research Suggestion

7.1.1 Scalability of Micro-blog Branding Communication

Due to the interpretative nature of the data generated, analysed and presented, the high scalability achieved by consumer reposting activity could not be identified in the subjects' response to interview questions. Though the factor is listed in the initial template due to recent findings of existing studies on information contagion in social media, it was not able to generate a pertinent finding based on the data gathered. Therefore, it is regarded as a limitation by the author. Further study in MBB communication can pursue this lead and test the hypothesis that brands' learning advantage is enhanced by high scalability of brand related communication through consumer reposting activity with quantitative approaches.

7.1.2 Neglect of Consumer Retraction from Micro-blog Branding Communication

This study lacks an understanding of the possibility of consumer retraction from MBB communication and its possible influence on brand dilution. 'Unlike' a brand on Facebook as Wallace *et al*. (2014) highlighted is a typical example of such behaviour. As Anderson (2010) pointed out, such consumer defection may be caused by conflicts between consumer interests and brand social media strategy. With micro-blog's large scalability, consumers' expression of their retraction may cause big challenges to brand managers. Thus, future studies can explore circumstances when consumers retract from once involved MBB communication for the design and implementation of strategic approaches to avoid possible brand dilution triggered by this reason.

7.1.3 Lack of Consideration of Cultural Dimensions

This study pointed out in early stage that it uses China's Sina Weibo, the 5th most valuable social media brand, as the study context because of the popularity among Chinese consumers and its global fame. However, cultural dimensions of Chinese consumers based on Hofstede's multidimensional framework was not taken into consideration in this particular study. The choice was made because the categorisation approaches by both Foster *et al.* (2011) and Wallace *et al.* (2014) discussed in section 3.3.2 are enough to understand Chinese consumers on Weibo for the purpose of this study to explore how MBB communications on such a platform affects CBBE.

Different cultural values and meanings of consumers are gradually catching attention of academics in understanding their usage of social media applications. A most recent study by Gong, Stump and Li (2014) examined the influence of culture on consumers' use and access of social networking sites globally and concluded that effective online marketing strategies for brand management and media choice should be accommodated to cultural differences. Thus, future studies can explore deeper from this angle to hypothesise and test the best approach to manage branding communication on China's social media in terms of keywords, best time and best elements to use. After all, with globalisation, China is too big a market to ignore.

7.2 Conclusion

7.2.1 How MBB communication Contribute to CBBE

Except for the limitations, the study has a considerable amount of contribution to current knowledge of digital branding in social media.

First and foremost, it answers the inquiry how micro-blog branding communication affects the customer-based brand equity. Strong, unique and favourable brand associations are created and strengthened in micro-blog space with the assistance of various content formats that are not possible to be applied in physical world. For instance, certain large amount of visual elements and the depth of consumption involvement illustrated by micro-blog narrative, images, and video clips are not imitable in physical word-of-mouth marketing.

Clear brand personality is also established on micro-blog space since brand accounts constantly communicate with consumers in the form of a person. Under such a circumstance, brands are humanised on micro-blog. Personal characteristics are more obvious and directly presented to consumers who are communicating with the brands on micro-blogs. Consumers spontaneously treat those brand accounts as human beings with personal characteristics. The branding communication process is smoother in this sense. It is also found in this study that while brands across different business sectors may have similar characteristics, such as professional, nice and friendly, brands within one business sector may be perceived by consumers as having different characteristics due to their different size and history. Except for movie brands, big and well-established brands in other four industries studied are commonly perceived as experts in the field while small and newly established brands are regarded as friends. This different perception is also partly due to the narratives used by those brands. It is found in observation that big brands communicate with consumers in a way that authenticity is established while small brands communicate with consumers in a way that is more likely to be friend chat. Besides, it is also found that repeated and constant usage of purchase links in branding communication generally arouse consumer resentment, making consumers treat brands as active sales staff, which is not ideal for the establishment of strong and favourable brand associations.

Thirdly, consumer confidence gained in MBB communication is found to be an essential variable that leads to brands' consideration advantage. Consumer confidence is affected by three factors: (1) positive user and usage imagery, (2) knowledge co-creation by peers, and (3) increasing trust to BPC and BPUGC.

When user imagery and usage imagery shown in micro-blog feeds are positive, consumers confidence in brands increases. It is also found that when user and usage imagery is in congruence with consumers' personal experience, consumer confidence boosts.

Consumer confidence is also affected by knowledge co-creation activity by peers. Both know-how knowledge and brand evaluation in micro-blog space are deemed as reliable, trustworthy and useful. Brand evaluation created by consumers is found to mediate the effect of consumer confidence on brand's consideration advantage. When brand evaluation created by others are in accordance with consumers' presuppositions, their presuppositions are reinforced and their confidence increased. On the contrary, when brand evaluation is conflicting with presuppositions, consumer confidence is low and more details are required to make a judgement whether the brand should be put in the consideration set.

Besides positive user and usage imagery and knowledge co-creation, trust also affects consumer confidence. Different from existing literature that emphasises trust given to UGC, this study finds increasing trust to BPC and high trust to BPUGC.

Fourthly, consistency between presuppositions and brand experience on micro-blog as well as consistency between consumption involvement reflected in MBB communication and brand publicity are identified as significant variables that influence brands' consideration advantage. Consumer brand experience does not exist only physically or virtually. It is a combination of both. Therefore, when consumer presuppositions generated from previous brand experience online and offline are in accordance with their exposure to MBB content, those presuppositions are strengthened and favourable brand associations are established. On the contrary, when presuppositions are fighting against MBB exposure, consumers will grow doubt about brand associations perceived, which then lowers the possibility of the brand being put in the consideration set.

Consistency between consumption involvement and brand publicity also affects brands' consideration advantage. When consumption involvement projected in MBB content is not in accordance with what is publicised by brand in advertisements, consumer confidence to such brands is eliminated, which considerably lowers the consideration advantage.

The last and most important advantage achieved by MBB communication is the choice advantage. The most important variable found to affect this advantage is solution providing, the major motivation for either active or passive MBB consumption. It is found that consumers who either actively or passively participate in MBB communication all have problems. Those problems can be explicit such as the desire to reduce risk and cost associated with purchase, and the wish to learn more about the brand and the brand's offerings. Or they can be implicit such as the psychological demand to be socially connected to others. MBB communication between brands and consumers as well as among consumers provides them with solution to those problems. Consumers also establish and maintain strong and favourable relationship with brands on micro-blog since they regard those brands as problem solvers to their personal problems. Solutions provided during the MBB communication are associated to one or many functional, economic and psychological benefits. Once a solution is taken, it is highly likely that the brand is chosen as the solver of the problem. Thus, choice advantage of brands is obtained.

7.2.2 Effect of MB Affordances on CBBE Construction

Apart from the above-summarised findings in how MBB communication enhances CBBE to increase brand saliency, this study also identifies how eWOM features projected in MBB communication affect CBBE in several aspects.

First of all, the frequency and intensity of consumer exposure to brand-related content on micro-blog enabled by various functionality of micro-blog communication such as posting, reposting, responding, and saving is found to increase perceived brand familiarity. This increased brand familiarity contributes to enhanced brand awareness. Once the brand awareness reaches a critical point, the amount of brand memory exceeds a certain threshold and makes brand associations not only strong but also favourable that the brand is considered when a certain purchase intention occurs.

Secondly, richness of exposure increased by micro-blog affordances positively affects the credibility of micro-blog brand-related content, which then increases the strength and favourability of brand associations as well as brand recall. There are two dimensions in richness of exposure: the visual elements used in feeds and the consumption involvement reflected in MBB content. Visual elements such as images and video clips give the consumers more detail about the functional and experiential benefits of the brands. Thus, consumers' brand knowledge is enhanced. Visual elements with brand logo and brand names also increase consumers' exposure to brand-related elements and thus increase brand recall. Consumption involvement reflected in micro-blog feeds strengthens brand associations created by the feeds and affects the contagion process. The amount of consumption involvement is associated with the stage of contagion. It is found that in the stage of awareness contagion, light consumption involvement brings the brand learning advantage; whereas in the stage of evaluation, increased consumption involvement brings consideration advantage. In some cases, heavy consumption involvement such as repeated purchase behaviour brings choice advantage.

Thirdly, immediacy of brand touch point on micro-blog should be recognised, valued and utilised by brands. Immediacy has been emphasised in existing research since information seeking can be quite near consumer purchase point. This study; however, points out that micro-blog users are not likely to seek with hashtags or keywords for brand-related content on micro-blog when a purchase intention occurs. It is due to the fact that consumers have not yet recognised the affordance of hashtag or keyword searching to reduce purchase-associated risks or cost. Rather, they still turn to big search engine such as Google and Baidu for help. Therefore, information searching while making decisions is taken out of the model.

Intriguingly, though consumers do not actively search for brand-related content near or at purchase point, they are passively exposed to brand evaluation near purchase point on micro-blog. While most consumers online are passive rather than active, their passivity explains why brand evaluation near purchase point is more important than active information seeking near purchase point in the model. It is found that passive exposure to brand evaluation on micro-blog quite near or at the purchase point affects consumer choice to a great extent.

Purchase link embedded in the micro-blog branding feed also reflects the immediacy of micro-blog communication. This study found that moderate use of purchase links in micro-blog feeds shortens the consideration process and helps brands to reach choice advantage quickly. The effectiveness of purchase links is associated to the perceived risk of the purchase decision made. When the risk (economic, functional, and psychological) is low, the effectiveness of purchase links is high; and vise versa.

The last influence that exerted by micro-blog affordances on CBBE is the permanency of MBB content. Since micro-blog feeds are relatively permanent compared to offline WOM, such brand communication can be saved, retrieved and re-experienced once needed by consumers. This enhances brand awareness by increasing brand recall.

Besides the findings to answer the two sets of research questions, the study also find 4 circumstances under which brand equity may be diluted. The first circumstance is negative branding content on micro-blog. Though it is found that positive brand-related content is more influential than negative one in micro-blog space given certain amount of brand knowledge held by brand followers on micro-blog, brands still need to engage sincerely when negative comments appear. The second circumstance is when consistency either between presuppositions and micro-blog brand-related exposure or between consumption involvement on micro-blog and brand publicity is breached. Under either circumstance, consumer confidence to brands reduces and consideration advantage and choice advantage is harmed. The third circumstance, which may also be the worst one, is brand silence. When brands choose to be silent on micro-blog space, they are not merely wasting an opportunity to communicate with consumers but ruin their brand equity since consumers want authentic, open, transparent and communicative brands on micro-blog. The last circumstance is frequently published irrelevant content posted by brand accounts. Under this circumstance, consumer resentment to overwhelming information emerges and they may choose to ignore brand-published content even though the content may be relevant.

7.3 Final Summary

Four steps in building salient brands as suggested by Keller (2008) are met during micro-blog branding communication. Strong, favourable and unique brand associations are created and maintained by branding communication in micro-blog. Brand awarenss is increased and brand image enhanced during micro-blog branding communication. This study, from the customer-based brand equity perspective, proves what Harris and Rae (2009) anticipated that micro-blog would be quite successful in marketing practice.

This study is the first one to study micro-blog branding communication from a customer-based brand equity perspective. It answers the call for research in user-generated branding and digital branding by Christoph (2010) and Kimmel and Kitchen (2014). The model created and presented in Figure 19 should be used by brands as a guidance to manage their micro-blog branding communication in order to enhance customer-based brand equity to build salient brands.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Motivations for WOM Creation, source: the author

Motivations for WOM creation					
Katz (1960) Herek (1987) Abelson and Prentice (1989)	Grice (1969)	Allen and Perrault (1980)	Clary et al. (1998)	Chatterjee (2011)	Maxham and Netemeyer (2002)
• Get rewards • For knowledge management • Value-expressive purpose • Ego-defensive purpose • Social function	• Share information • Offer opinion	• Inform • Warn • Promise • Assert	• Personal incentives • Understand the environment • Self-esteem in online community • Self-belongingness • Sharing the interaction socially	• Share disappointing experience	• Extreme satisfaction • Extreme dissatisfactio n
Mazzarol et al. (2007)	Daugherty et al. (2008)	Fill (2011)	Bruhn, Schoenmueller and Schäfer (2012)	Wallace *et al*. (2014)	Ruane and Wallace (2013)
• Recognised need from others for information • Serendipidity • promotion	• Attitude reinforced by positive consumption of WOM	• Provide information • Support and reinforce purchase decisions made	• High level of consumer involvement in brand related communication	• Utilitarian for incentives • Self-expression purpose	• Self-expression • Re-assurance

Appendix 2 Motivation for WOM Consumption, source: the author

Motivations for WOM consumption				
Ardnt (1967)	Grice (1969)	Murray (1991) Wagenheim and Bayon (2004)	Herr, Kardes and Kim (1991)	Wasko and Faraj (2000) Parameswaran and Whinston (2007)
• Seeking for support socially for adoption/non-adoption • Risk reduction	• Information seeking	• Risk reduction • Product/service judgement (support from supportive consumers/unsupportive consumers)	• Negative review seeking for more diagnostic and informative comments	• Perceived benefits of information exchange
Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003)	Zhang and Watts (2004)	Stafford, Stafford, and Schkade (2004) – social media activities	Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006)	Duana, Gub and Whinston (2008)
• Information seeking (for saving decision time and making better choice) • Social orientation • Sense of belongingness • Consumer learning • Remuneration	• Online knowledge management	• Entertainment • Information • socialisation	• risk reduction • cost reduction • pre-purchase information acquisition • offline marketing exposure judgement • easy information access • unplanned behaviour • it is cool • imitation of others' behaviour	• higher trustworthiness towards information outside immediate social network

Motivations for WOM consumption				
Jansen et al. (2009)	• Shao (2009) Courtois et al. (2009)	Moore (2010)	Wallace et al (2014)	Ruane and Wallace (2013)
• higher trustworthiness towards eWOM	• information • entertainment • social interaction	• risk reduction in marking purchase decisions	• Utilitarian for incentives •	• Inspiration for consumption • Information seeking to guide purchase

Appendix 3. Interview Questions

Interview Questions

Date of Interview:

Place of Interview:

Brand the interviewee follows on Sina Weibo:

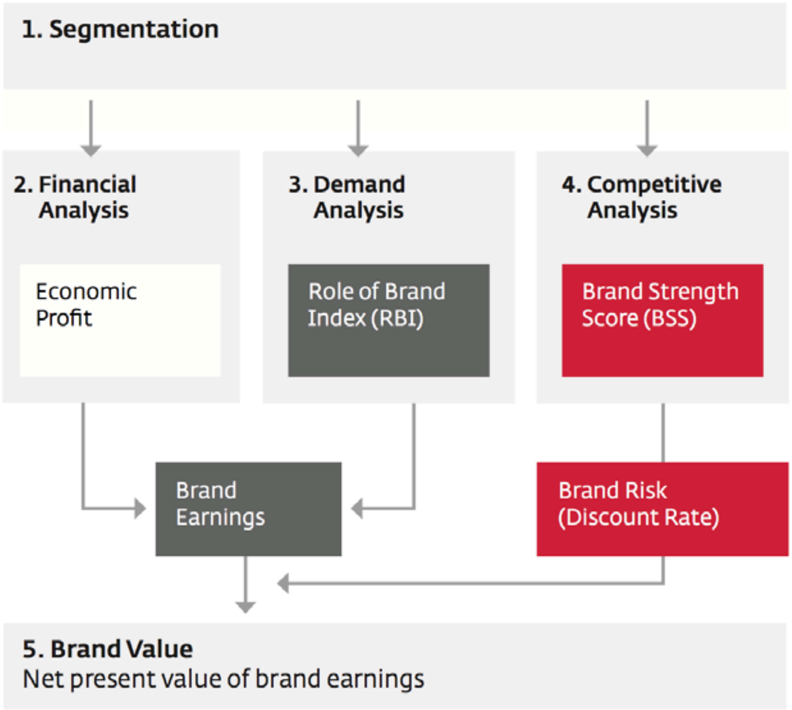
Interviewee number:

Questions:

1. I have noticed that you have been following ____'s Sina Weibo account, would you please describe the brand to me?
2. Would you please also describe the brand's Sina Weibo account to me, imaging it as a person?
3. Would you please share with me your most recent participation in brand-related micro-blog activities on Sina Weibo relevant to the brand we just talked about?
4. For instance: *(here after were used as probes when the interviewee hesitated for a long time, not knowing clearly what to say or confused about the question asked)*
    a. creating actively brand-related content
    b. reading brand published content on Sina weibo
    c. responding to brand published content on Sina Weibo
    d. reposting brand related content on Sina Weibo through your own account
    (5) others? Please specify
5. Why do you follow this brand on Sina Weibo?
6. What content published by this brand account are you most interested in?
7. Do you see the brand differently before and after the exposure to brand related content on Sina Weibo? If so, what are the changes, please specify.
8. How have brand-related micro-blog activities affected your knowledge of this brand?
9. How does _____ (the brand)-related content on Sina Weibo influence your choice when making a ____ (the product category) purchase?
   e.g. How does L'Oreal-related content on Sina Weibo influence your choice when making a cosmetics, skincare, or haircare purchase?
10. As regard to content, what kind of microblog feeds influences your knowledge of the brand most?
11. Have you actively searched for ___ (the brand) related content by using hashtags or other keywords in Sina Weibo?
12. How do you see the difference between consumer-generated content and brand-published content relevant to _____ (the brand)?
13. Comparing brand-initiated and consumer-initiated content, which one gave you a deeper memory of the brand? And how?
14. How is your relationship with the microblog feed sender affect your interest towards the content? Would you please raise an example to illustrate your point?
    (probe: think about when the creator of the content is the brand/the influential/peers like you)
15. There are sometimes user experiences included in microblog feeds. How do you find it affecting your knowledge of and attitude towards the brand?
16. How does your offline brand experience affect your attitudes towards the brand's Weibo activities?

17. Have there been any circumstance under which that you find the microblog content not trustworthy?
18. Is there anything else about ___ related microblog activities that you would like to share with me?

Appendix 4. Brand valuation framework



source: Interbrand (2013:6)

Appendix 5 Selected Brands and Their Profile Data

Industry	Brand	Number of Fans	Number of Posts
Fashion	Louis Vuitton	550,252	851
	NPC	179,410	5158
Technology	Samsung	2,549,629	5,819
	Xiaomi	1,950,401	7480
Automobile	BMW	810,154	4,160
	SUZUKI	2,712,330	6144

Industry	Brand	Number of Fans	Number of Posts
Movie	 Hunger Game	86,443	1017
	 Tiny Times	71,928	160
Grooming	L'Oréal	915,465	8037
	Mentholatum	539,125	2903

Appendix 6 Final Template

1. **Attitudinal equity**

   1.1 learning advantage through cognizance

   1.1.1 frequency of exposure

   1.1.2 Richness of exposure

   1.1.2.1 Visual elements for details

   1.1.2.2 Consumption involvement

   Online consumer susceptibility

   1.1.3 Relationship building through perceived brand personality

   1.2 consideration advantage through connection

   1.2.1 Consumer confidence

   1.2.1.1 positive user and usage imagery

   1.2.1.2 knowledge co-creation by peers

   1.2.1.2.1 know-how co-created by peers

   1.2.1.2.2 brand evaluation by peers

   Mediated by presuppositions

   1.2.1.3 Trust

   1.2.1.3.1 Increasing trust to BPC

   1.2.1.3.2 High trust to BPUGC

   1.2.2 Consistency

   1.2.2.1 Consistency between presupposition and brand experience on microblog

   1.2.2.2 consistency between consumption involvement and brand publicity

2. **behavioural equity – Choice Advantage**

   2.1.1 Solution Providing

   2.1.2 Immediacy of brand touch points

   2.1.2.1 brand evaluation near purchase point

   2.1.2.2 purchase link at brand touch point

   2.1.3 permanency of MBB content

3. **Avoid brand dilution**

   3.1 Valence

   3.2 Breach of Consistency

   3.3 Brand Silence

   3.4 Irrelevant Content