The Interaction Between Internet Celebrities and Their Audience Through Social Media Platforms – A Case Study on a Chinese Food Blogger

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ABSTRACT

As technology has continued to rapidly develop, normal people have taken advantage of the incredible opportunities for instant information exchange to become online celebrities. These individuals must adapt to their online identity and explore their own communication mode with their audiences. This paper will conduct a comparative study of Chinese food bloggers on the microblogging platform Weibo to explore their different interaction modes with their audiences. Through the collection of quantitative and qualitative data, different communicate modes are analysed in different respects. Internet celebrities are able to attract audiences by posting quality content, keeping regular updates and establishing intimacy with audiences. Besides, the importance of generating loyal fans and building personal brands through employing unique interact methods are also highlighted in the article.

***Keywords*:** *Internet Celebrities; social media; interaction*

1. Conditions and Researching Background

Celebrity culture is pervasive in nearly every aspect of society all over the world. The spotlight is constantly on celebrities while one is reading news, watching television or browsing on the internet. Celebrities, who can be loosely defined as individuals or groups of people with a special status and garnering fame and attention, were initially TV and broadcasting stars, athletes, wealthy people, and politic leaders (Inglis, 2010). Although not necessarily the leader of their respective group, they commonly have excellent abilities in certain fields with high recognition and many have become role models or opinions leader that are worshiped and followed by millions.

However, while celebrities came onto the screen, they did not arrive alone. At the same time, the audience in front of screens and other media is another group sitting on the opposite side of the relationship and responding to the actions of celebrities, even if the response is not obvious. During the early period of celebrities, as Horton and Wohl (1956) described, celebrities and audiences maintained "parasocial relationships" in which popular figures on TV were able to pass down information to their audiences through an illusion of intimacy. Conversely, the audiences are never able to transmit their real emotions and feedback to these distant celebrities.

As there are so many different forms of new media, it is difficult to capture the interaction modes between Internet celebrities and audiences with a single definition. This essay will mainly focus on Chinese Internet celebrities on the microblogging platform Sina Weibo as the research target. Weibo is a microblogging website popular in the Chinese market with a similar operating pattern to Twitter, its counterpart in many Western societies. Compared with traditional blogs, Weibo encourages users to post shorter message conveying concise information. According to Michelle and Uking (2011), Weibo is one of the biggest social media platforms with the capacity to share real-time information instantly through its distribution mechanism. Over 445 million active users choose Weibo as their main social media platform (Bylund 2018). Recent statistics also indicate that 59% of all Chinese citizens have access to the Internet, while 42.3% of Chinese citizens are Weibo users (CNNIC, 2019).

Nowadays, various forms of self-published media and Internet celebrities' economy on Weibo are developing rapidly. In 2015, the rise of online broadcasting and expanded networks resulted in an influx of capital flowing into the industry from advertisers and large established brands, giving rise to the "internet celebrity economy" and "e-commerce", characterised by high trading volumes over a short period of time. For example, "Papi 酱", one of the first internet celebrities who achieved fame for posting humorous and creative video content, earned 10 million yuan in individual investment in 2016 and has an estimated personal wealth of over 300 million yuan (Yu, 2017). Furthermore, cyber celebrities are not limited to a small group. According to 2018 China Online Celebrity Economic Development Insight, 588 million bloggers have more than 100,000 fans, representing an increase of 25% on 2017 (Wang, 2018). The above evidence indicates that internet celebrities are developing phenomenon in China, and that the expansion of this phenomenon is irreversible. Internet celebrities now also have significant economic and societal influence and unsurprisingly also draw immense attention from scholars both in China and abroad.

As a matter of fact, realising the potential profits to be made, many internet celebrities have developed their online identities into highly rewarding occupations and have engaged in the exploding development of e-commerce. Many have found a way to break away from traditional sales models based on renting brick-and-mortar store space and hiring sales. Instead, consumption activities can be easily transmitted through internet celebrities' publicity and executed through just one click on a website. For instance, in 2016, a popular fashion blogger "张大奕 Eve" sold more than 20 million products during a four-hour live streaming event (Guo, 2017). The profit model of potentially huge rewards within short time frames has also encouraged established industry actors to join in to optimise and share profits. Many companies collaborate with bloggers for brand advertisements, marketing companies designing popular brands for internet celebrities, and many other enterprises from different fields can profit from audiences' preferences.

2. Attracting Audiences

Whether already a popular food blogger or up-and-coming one, in order to maintain the identity of internet celebrity all must consider one central issue, namely, how to attract greater audiences to their own blogs and transforming part of this audiences to a loyal fan base. To achieve this, three factors should be taken into account: the quality of the content, the frequencies of posts, and the exploration of the bloggers' own styles of interaction with followers or audiences.

2.1 Contents

Approaching blogging from various styles, popular food bloggers often need to think carefully about their blog content before publishing it. In this new information era, audiences are no longer provided with a set selection of options provided by traditional media broadcasters, instead, the audience now can take the initiative to choose their own preferred content. Thus, operating blogs that publish high-quality content is essential to attract and maintain fans.

The questionnaire results indicate that of the 275 respondents who claimed to have heard of food bloggers before, 72% preferred food eating bloggers (those who share the process of eating food), while 61% preferred to see content showcasing food bloggers' unique lifestyles. Content focusing on taste of food products and showcasing food history ranked third and fourth among the questionnaire respondents (52% and 42.9% respectively). As expected, the least popular food bloggers were those only sharing cuisine and restaurants (37.4% and 28.3% respectively). This is perhaps because this form is too traditional and now people are more likely to pursuing a feeling of freshness and a living style far away from their daily lives. Besides, with the advent of widespread modern loneliness among the younger generations, a sense of

belonging and companionship offered by food bloggers' sharing of eating food is understandably more attractive.

In terms of audiences' motivations for following food bloggers, 61% of respondents claimed they followed food bloggers for relaxation. Respondents indicate that they enjoy seeing bloggers lift "eating food" from a survival necessity to pursue something more spiritually relaxing and pleasant. The remaining 28% of respondents reported that they followed food bloggers because seeing their posts gives them the sense that someone was accompanying them.

In summary, audiences are becoming increasingly concerned about quality of content published by food bloggers. On Weibo, audiences can take the initiative and no longer need to wait in front of the TV to watch programming that they have no influence over. Instead, they are able to instantly change their decision to follow any one blogger, therefore food bloggers are facing increasingly fierce competition that is forcing them to create more interesting content, and to maintain a consistent style and characteristics.

2.2 Frequencies

To attract new followers while also avoiding showing up too frequently in front of their audiences, posting frequencies should also be carefully considered by food bloggers. Posting frequency is a key element of maintaining an appropriate distance from audiences.

Take "吃喝玩乐在北京" (Beer and skittles in Beijing) for instance: As a food recipe sharing blogger, she usually posts about food once or twice per day, and generally around lunch time or dinner time. When her followers see her posts during lunch time, it will elicit positive and friendly emotions, as if they are eating together with the blogger. In addition to the content related to food, this blogger also posts advertisements once or twice every few days. However, posting advertisements too often can also cause negative effects, for example with one Weibo user commenting: "There have been more and more advertisements, you are not like in the past when I first followed you".

To summarize, posting frequencies for food bloggers depend largely on the type of content they post and the unique characteristics they have developed. Like "密子君"(Mizijun), if the food blogger wants to create a friendly image, they need to post frequent updates, especially during lunch or dinner time, and maintain a good balance between ordinary content and advertisements. However, "李子柒" (Liziqi)utilises much lower posting frequencies and reduce advertisements as much as possible to create a more natural image which appears more explicitly separate to commercial elements.

2.3. Interactions

As discussed above, quality content and appropriate posting frequencies are not always adequate for a food blogger

wanting to become or maintain their status as internet celebrities. Popular food bloggers often need to foster a successful mode of interaction with their audience.

The questionnaire results indicate that the majority of audiences will interact with bloggers through comments (36%) and reposts (29%). On Weibo, the comments section functions like a chatroom and is a place for the blogger and their followers to discuss the content of the post and, in this way, cultivate a feeling of greater intimacy between each other. Reposting interactions, which could spread the blog contents to more audiences, were mostly generated through direct encouragement from the blogger.

From the blogs of "吃喝玩乐在北京"(beer and skittles in Beijing), it can be seen that the main interaction with the audience is to encourage them to repost sponsored posts by offering prizes, give-aways, and other benefits. As the blogger rarely interacts in the comment zone, no sense of intimacy is fostered between them and their followers, not to mention loyal fans. In some posts, there are relatively few responses from followers.

Having surpassed the era of "para-relationships" that prevailed during the dominance of traditional media platforms, online interaction nowadays can be seen as a significant tool for celebrities to maintain their fame and status. After all, it is preferences of the audiences and cooperating brands that can help keep maintain this identity.

3. Generating Loyal Followers

With respect to the identity of internet celebrities, if this identity is regarded as an occupation, above and beyond simply trying to gain popularity, food bloggers need to transform their fame into profit. To do so, celebrities need to sell products or services online, to customers who are in most cases drawn from their audiences and followers. Loyal followers would be most likely to become buy products, as they would have more trust in the bloggers and their products.

According to both the online survey and interview responses, the building of loyal relationships with followers is done mostly through interaction between two groups. As one interviewee pointed out, if she is interested in a blogger's posts, and has developed a regular habit of interacting, she is likely to have generated a cordial feeling with the blogger and even view her as a friend.

The evidence from the cases investigated above indicates that food bloggers and their loyal audiences have managed to establish emotional relationships through which they share happiness and sorrow together and, when confronted some challenges from critical voices, loyal fans consider themselves like friends who know the bloggers well. These loyal followers often stand at the front line with the blogger as their first tier of defence. When everything has settled down, this relationship is strengthened as the blogger and their loyal followers were united for the same cause.

4. Building on Celebrity Brands

In the final part of the online survey, respondents were asked what he or she expected to gain most if they were a food blogger. The answers varied, but more than half of respondents said they would get most from gaining recognition and companionship from fans, as well as gaining profit or rewards through their online identity. The interviewees also indicated that, with the support of so many fans, it should be easier for food bloggers to profit from this identity compared to normal people. However, they also recognise that food bloggers face stiff competition from many other similar bloggers and so they must forge their own unique characteristics to attract and maintain followers. Some popular and qualified celebrities have learned to build up their own celebrity brands by getting this balance correct.

For instance, when hearing "李子柒"(Liziqi), people are likely to imagine a plain girl wearing traditional clothes and carrying a bamboo basket to collect ingredients from the field, and instantly relate her with a traditional lifestyle. In addition to her identity as a food blogger, "李子柒" also portrays herself as an advocate for traditional Chinese culture, which is a second marketing opportunity for companies to potentially exploit. That being said, her celebrity brand represents traditional Chinese work and food, therefore all of her products share same characteristics. People will know that the products from her store are not only tasty to eat but also contributes to the preservation of traditional culture and knowledge.

5. Conclusions

Internet celebrities emerged in conjunction with the development of modern technologies and the increasing demand among consumers for spiritual entertainment. They have in turn facilitated the transformation and modernisation of traditional media and traditional views of celebrities. Weibo's simple operation method has lowered the bar to entry for normal people to create and instantly share information anytime, anywhere, giving them a possibility of becoming an internet celebrity.

Food bloggers, as an important and special group, have managed to create their own economies through the development of unique interaction modes with their audiences and have explored different methods of collaboration with related business. In their field, content remains the most important element for attracting and maintaining loyal audiences as no matter how the form of transmission changes, high-quality and original content always creates the foundation from which everything else follows. After turning audiences into followers, food bloggers should ensure they maintain appropriate posting frequencies and a moderate distance between themselves and their audience to maintain their interest.

Considering the fierce competition between food bloggers, the development of content must necessarily shift to a more creative and professional style while maintaining unique personal characteristics aimed at focused audience groups

in the future.

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