

China Turns to Tweeting: Exploring the Problematic use of Tweeting in China

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Abstract

Weibo much like America's 'Twitter' is a micro-blog used by the majority of the Chinese workforce. The recent Internet phenomenon appears to have millions users, many of whom appear addicted. Little scholarly work has examined the problematic use of Weibo. This exploratory study provides an amazing insight into the phenomenon, providing a much clearer understanding of Chinese' problematic use of Weibo. This unprecedented study analyzes a group of 500 Chinese tweeters across a critical 10 day period, and provided interesting analysis of over 370 tweets collected from Sina, the largest micro-blogging platform in China. The study suggests clear evidence of problematic use among the Chinese tweeters, both at work and home. Content analysis reveals four major themes: withdrawal, compulsivity, disregard of negative consequences, and intrinsic efforts to control personal use. The study provides unprecedented insight into the problem as well as suggesting possible aids in both diagnosis and intervention necessary to curb the micro-blogging addiction.

Introduction

Micro-blogging is a relatively new form of broadcast medium that enables users to exchange small elements of contact via text message, mobile phone, or the web. The most popular micro-blogging platform is Twitter, reporting over 145 million registered users.¹ However, the Chinese government blocked Twitter in 2009, and after that Chinese media companies have launched their own micro-blogging services, gaining popularity in China rapidly. The market leader of the micro-blogging service is Weibo provided by Sina, the largest Chinese-language infotainment web portal. The service started on August, 28th 2009 and reached 50 million users in October 2010.² On March 3rd, 2011, the total Sina Weibo users are over 100 million.³

All micro-blogging services in China are referred to as 'Weibo', which is the literal translation of micro-blogging. Chinese tweeters give it an affectionate nickname "Knitted Scarf" since it has the same phonetic sound as Weibo in Mandarin Chinese. The popularity of Weibo can be partially attributed to the use of such platforms by celebrities. A famous Chinese singer Faye Wang, who usually only speaks 6 or 8 words during her concert, tweets actively in Weibo. Other notable figures such as Kai-fu Lee, the founder of Google China, also regularly tweet and even published a book titled *Weibo Changes Everything* in January 2011. Both well-known celebrity figures have many followers (Lee ranks 11th in terms of followers on June 14th 2011) on Sina Weibo.

Much like Twitter, Weibo enables users to post short (140 characters or less) tweets or messages that are displayed on a user's Weibo page. The page is then publicly viewable to anyone, as a fan or not. Users create asymmetric contact networks that can grow quickly. For example, Lilly can become Tip's fan by following him, but Tip does not need to follow Lilly or become her fan. A user can also reply, search, comment, and retweet any message. The network does offer some privacy for mutual fans; in such circumstances the two can send private messages between themselves that are not posted publicly. Sina Weibo also incorporates new features that Twitter does not offer. One such feature is to allow users to upload images and videos directly into their feeds.

As one of the most popular Internet applications, Weibo appears to have become [addictive](#). The Chinese public is well aware of the pathological use of Weibo, and has linked it to behaviors such as anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorders that can lead to exhaustion and disengagement with society.^{4,5}

Chinese Congress officials have also expressed their concerns over this new type of Internet addiction.⁶ A new term has been coined to describe Weibo addicts: “Weibo Kong”. The word can also be used as a verb. The phrase “*I am Weibo Konged*” means “I am addicted to Weibo”. “Kong” comes from the English word “complex”, which means an exaggerated reaction to or preoccupation with a subject or situation. The term “Kong” also has the same pronunciation as the word “control” in Chinese so “Weibo Kong” can also be interpreted as being controlled by Weibo. The technical features of the Sina Weibo platform encourage the addictive behavior through the “virtual medal” design.

Users can get virtual medals by various means such as using their cell phones to tweet, being the first one to comment on other users’ tweets for ten times and tweeting with MSN instant messenger. Interestingly, one type of virtual medal is called “Weibo Kong”, which is awarded to users who post every day.

Although there has been much research interest on Twitter,^{7,8,9} little work has been conducted on problematic use of micro-blogging. The exploratory study seeks to build a rich understanding of problematic use of Weibo by analyzing users’ own tweets. In particular, we are interested in the symptoms of the problematic use. In this study, problematic use of Weibo is defined as the use of Weibo that may trigger psychological, physical, school and/or work related difficulties in a person’s life.

Methodology

Sina Weibo provides a search function for users to search the posts containing the keywords. Four keywords were chosen to search in Sina Weibo to select relevant posts: “Weibo Kong”, “Knitted Scarf Kong”, “Weibo addiction” and “Knitted Scarf Addition”. From the period November 22nd 2010 through December 2nd, 2010, one hour per day was devoted to data collection. Data collection was halted when no more emerging themes appeared. A total of 700 relevant tweets were obtained. Among the 700 posts, 366 of them are related to the problematic use of Weibo. Using a grounded research approach, two Chinese coded a sample of 100 posts together to create a set of coding categories. Four distinct categories representing symptoms of problematic use emerged: withdrawal symptoms, salience, negative consequences and desire to control Weibo use. Then each of them independently categorized the other 266 posts. Discrepancies were solved by discussion. Each category developed represents more than fifty tweets that conveyed a similar feeling. Forty six tweets were classified in more than one category.

Results

The content analysis reveals four distinct categories related to the problematic use of Weibo. The following section describes each category in detail.

Withdrawal symptom. Withdrawal symptom is defined as the unpleasant feeling states and/or physical effects that occur when a particular activity is discontinued or reduced.¹⁰ In this research, withdrawal symptoms were noted when subjects could not use Weibo. Overall 102 posts are related to the withdrawal symptoms. Users experienced strong negative emotions when they could not access the micro-blog platform for some reason. Several qualifying expressions of emotion are expressed in the following paragraph. However, it is necessary to explain several idiosyncrasies of the Chinese cell phone market. For many Chinese, access to data in the cellular network is via ‘general packet radio service’, a packet oriented mobile service. Cell phone users are charged based on volume of data, either as part of a plan or on a pay –as- use basis. In many cases, users reach their quota before the end of the month and their access to data is suspended, thus creating the forced withdrawal.

One user expressed her agitation when her cell phone ran out of data quota: “*My cell phone has no data quota available. How boring my life is without Weibo for two days! Am I a Weibo Kong already?*” Another user said: “*My cell phone has no quota. I cannot log on Weibo for a whole day... I am so nervous and restless. This day seems like a year. I am addicted to Weibo!*” One user lamented on his situation: “*Disaster tonight... No Internet connection in my hotel! What can a Weibo Kong do without Internet?*” On Dec 2nd, Sina Weibo was down for four hours due to server maintenance. When Weibo returned to normal operation, responses to the incident were overwhelming and many users expressed that they felt anxious, nervous or miserable. One user stated: “*Sino Weibo was down. My heart is burning with anxiety. This makes me realize how intolerable my life would be without Weibo. I am officially a Weibo Kong.*”

Salience. Salience occurs when a particular activity becomes the most important activity in people’s lives and dominating their cognition and behavior.¹⁰

In our study, 196 posts suggested the dominance of Weibo in users' life. Broadly, users commented that Weibo has become a part of their life, stating such things as: *"I have tweeted consecutively for 100 days. It seems that it becomes part of my life. I am now a 'Weibo Kong."* Another said: *"Tweeting becomes a habit; I am unconsciously controlled by it. This is not good."* Research suggests addictive behaviors are considered priorities in one's life. ¹¹Tweets referring to Weibo as "the first act" were quite common. Several users made comments such as: *".....Tweeting is the first thing I do when I wake up in the morning". "I forgot my cell phone at home today...so the first thing I did when I got home was to log on Weibo and read all the tweets .Have I become a Weibo Kong already?"* Another user tweeted: *".....Tweeting is the first thing I do when I start my computer. Am I addicted?"*

The ease of tweeting enables users to post tweet messages from virtually any location at any time of the day. Tweets similar to this are very typical: *"I am tweeting in my bathroom...how addicted is that? Now shower time!"* *"Still tweeting while playing Mahjong."* One user continued to tweet even while sick: *"Got up at 4am with diarrhea. The consequence of being a Weibo Kong is that you cannot stop reading Weibo posts even when you are having diarrhea or vomiting."*

Conflict. When people become addicts, conflicts occur between them and those around them or from within themselves that are concerned with the particular activity. ¹⁰ Addicts often have a disregard for these conflicts that may be associated with their behavior. ¹² Our study identifies 56 tweets that can be categorized into three specific conflicts associated with problematic use: health problems, decreasing performance in school/work and safety problems. To accommodate the excessive tweeting, users' sleep patterns are often disrupted. Many tweets are about the lack of sleep due to tweeting. One user said: *"Did not fall asleep until 5am and got up at 7am... still very sleepy. Addicted to Weibo and need to tweet no matter how sleepy I am."* Another declared: *"I will not sleep until I refresh my screen and read all the posts."* Sleep deprivation may cause mental exhaustion: *"I am exhausted but I cannot sleep. I am Weibo Konged."* One outcome of constant and repetitive tweeting is finger and wrist problems. Posts such as the following are common: *"On the way to home I have been tweeting all the time. My fingers are so stiff but still I cannot stop. Is that so-called 'Weibo Kong'?"* One user commented that his necks hurt as a result of staring at the screen to Weibo: *"Addicted to Weibo and now my neck hurts."*

Another conflict related to Weibo usage is its negative impact on work and academic performance. Users expressed concerns about problematic use of micro-blogging related to work and academic performance. One student wrote: *"I think I must be Weibo Konged recently, I want to log on to Weibo even though my homework is not finished. Is this good or bad?"* Another said: *"The name Weibo Kong cannot even describe me, I am poisoned by Weibo, tweeting non-stop. Forgot my ambition already!"* One college student commented: *"I just realized today that I only have twenty days for the Level 6 English exam. I am so addicted to Weibo that I did not even read a page of the books I bought back in September (Author's note: September is three months ago)."* Further, users seemed to suggest the use of Weibo may affect their cognitive capability. One user stated *"I'm so addicted to Weibo even though I think it does great harm to people.... The constantly changing and short snippets of information make one's cognitive thought incoherent. It seems people become more sensitive and emotional while using Weibo."*

Problematic tweeting can lead to accident or even present safety problem. One user noted missing the bus stop when tweeting: *"Forgot to get off bus since I was busy tweeting. I really should not be so addicted."* One user almost had an accident: *"Wow, I almost got hit by a motorcycle when I was crossing the street today! I did not pay attention because I was tweeting."* Users appeared to be aware of the consequences of problematic tweeting, yet continued to do so. One user wrote: *"I am tweeting while I am driving... this is scary... I could have had an accident... I am addicted to Weibo."*

Desire to control the use

Self-control plays an important role in addictive behavior. People realize that the long-run harm caused by an addiction outweighs its short-term benefits, but people are often engaged in addictive behavior despite an expressed desire to quit. ¹³ Our study finds 58 posts expressing users' desire to control their Weibo usage as well as their unsuccessful attempts to quit. Many users made statements suggesting they knew excessive tweeting was bad, but had no solution. One user tweeted: *"I do not want to be a Weibo Kong! I do not want to be Weibo Kong! Go to sleep now!"* Others cried for help to their fellow tweeters: *"Weibo is highly addictive and I am falling in love with it. What should I do?"* *"Help! I am Weibo Konged!"*

Users also intended to control their use by making commitments and consciously distance themselves from Weibo including turn off the Internet connection. One user made a resolution: “.....*I am not going to use Weibo until January 25th, 2011.*” Another user tried to cut back the Weibo use: “*Weibo is addictive. ...I have been trying to leave Weibo for a few days in the past month...*” A student user controlled her use by turning off the computer: “... *will have an exam in a month so need to study more. Tweeting is so addictive. I will turn off my computer for a while. Fight!*” However, users also commented on their unsuccessful self-control: “*Weibo is so addictive that my eyes cannot leave it when I am awake. Always reminding myself that I need to have more self-control, but it is so hard to give up.*” One user even cancelled his Weibo account but re-opened it: “*I cancelled my Weibo account but now I am back and even became a Weibo Kong.*”

Conclusion

This research presents an exploratory study on the problematic use of Weibo by Chinese users. By using users' own tweets, the data suggests that many Weibo users show patterns of addiction allowing the platform to become the top priority in their life, degrade their work and school performance and present safety problems. This research explores several symptoms of problematic use of Weibo including withdrawal, salience, conflict and efforts to control the use. Our research suggests that users are aware of the problem and are consciously taking steps to control the problematic use. When analyzing the posts, we noticed that users often metaphorically describe themselves as being addicted to opiates, or being poisoned by a drug. For example, one user stated: “*Being a Weibo Kong can make one stupid. It is like being addicted to opiate.*” Another one posted this message after she got a Weibo Kong medal after tweeting 100 consecutive days “...*I am poisoned by Weibo for more than three months.*” The negative connotations of these metaphors seem to reveal cognitive dissonance of the users suggesting an insatiable desire to use the new media, juxtaposed with a clear desire to bring this attachment to an end.

The study is one of the first steps to examine the problematic use of Weibo in China. It should be noted that due to the exploratory nature of this study, no quantitative and rigorous answers are provided on questions such as whether the users are addicted to Weibo and how prevalent Weibo addiction is in China. Tweets are just snapshots of users' thoughts so it is difficult to assess the degree of addiction. Future studies can examine the Weibo addiction by using other methodology such as surveys or interviews. Another possible research stream is to conduct longitudinal study about the actual Weibo usage by examining the frequency of the posts of the users.

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