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**Chinese Social
Media in
Influencers' era**

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前言

我的论文旨在全面分析社交媒体对中国社会的影响，尤其着重于社交媒体的商业性方面及其在营销策略中的使用。

我想研究在我们这个时代中的一个关键性的主题：社交媒体，商业贸易和虚拟的世界，这些都完美得反应在了现实中。虚拟和现实不再是两个截然不同的事物，它们相互融合并相互影响。

对于那些不是从事该领域并且不懂中文的人来说，中国社交媒体的格局可能显得晦涩难懂。我的论文想要探究中国社交媒体的大环境，并强调它与西方社交媒体的异同。

本文共分为三章。

在第一章中，我先探究了在西方和中国最受欢迎的社交媒体之间的相似之处。首先，你可以发现，尽管大多数的西方网站都被监管，无法使用，但在互联网领域，中国绝对不是一片荒芜人烟的“沙漠”，相反的，在其领域中，就像我们习惯的一样，社交媒体注册的人数非常之多：更多的社交媒体软件、网站和每天数百万的活跃用户通过他们最喜欢的工具：智能手机上网冲浪。

在随后的段落中，你可以发现，“我们的” Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram ... 被 QQ, 微博, 微信, 抖音以及其平台上提供的同样庞大的中国电子商务系统所取代，电子商店是社交媒体软件的一部分。用户可以：交流小技巧，阅读评论，发布照片与此同时也可以进行购买。

第二章旨在分析在日常生活中使用社交媒体所产生的社会影响和实践影响。

前几段分析了社交媒体在人际关系中的使用，最重要的是分析了随着现代化和对全球化的出现，中国社会的价值观如何演化和改变。

最后一段开始概述使用面向商业的社交媒体的特征以及在中国公司从社交媒体中获利的方式，同时关注了可能的风险和会陷入的陷阱。

在最后两个小节中，我探讨了两个奢侈品品牌在社交媒体营销策略的示例。

可以清楚地看出，Coach 以合适适当的策略脱颖而出，通过正确的方法实现了其目标：通过微博和有影响力的人进行推广，确定其正确的市场目标，之后发起促销活动来吸引追随者。

杜嘉班纳 (Dolce&Gabbana) 在 2018 年 11 月实施的策略不能说是同样成功，反而，实际上是在所有方面都失败了：对文化差异缺乏尊重 and 了解，缺乏敏感度，在中国市场运作想法的十分肤浅，如果没有精确的策略，就会给公司造成巨大的损失。

在第三章中，我将讨论概述近十年来有影响力的人物，在中国更精确地说，这些人被称为意见领袖 (KOL)。这些人物在社交媒体上有其个人空间，伴随着社交媒体的诞生，这些人通过以下形式的文章或帖子开始开设自己的博客，以记录自己的日常生活并发布某些特定的主题：文字，视频，照片。这些个性化的东西很快吸引了其他用户的注意力，逐渐增加了他们的名声，最终成为真正的网络红人。

在中国，那些希望在市场上确立自己地位，使自己的产品打开知名度并增加产品销量的品牌的营销策略中，有影响力的人（或者意见领袖）并不是处于次要的地位。而是赖以生存的主要手段，尤其是在品牌首次进入中国市场的时候。

成功的意见领袖是建立在有相互信任基础的固定团体上的人。意见领袖的可信度是他的王牌，实际上，他/她只会推荐他非常满意的产品，并且他要成为第一个购买者。

如中段和第 3 章的最后所述，中国最出名的人物是时尚领域的人物，比如说：丽贝卡，叶嗣 Gogoboi 和包先生 Mr. Bags。他们以其高度的活跃度和反应力在社群中闻名，并且由于一些令人惊奇的片段，甚至变得具有国际知名度。例如，丽贝卡在与汽车品牌 MINI 合作期间，通过她的微信公众号，在发布后的 5 分钟内就卖光了所有的产品。

包先生也是一样，就像他的名字一样，他专注于奢侈包领域。在微信电子商务领域他也有着疯狂的销售记录，并与 Givenchy, Tod's 和 Longchamp 等品牌展开了合作。

意见领袖的运作领域是无限的，在最后一段中，我重点介绍了其中的一些领域，例如：美妆，葡萄酒艺术和乡村生活。

在美妆领域中有一个特别的人物，李佳琦，一个以现场直播而出名的男孩，他在直播中展示和推荐口红，并在不到一年的时间内取得了令人难以置信的成就与关注度。在与巨头阿里巴巴的创始人马云（Jack Ma）进行的一次的挑战中，能在现场直播中卖出最多口红的人将成为赢家，李佳琦的胜利是压倒性的，而马云（Jack Ma）方却只有十几个人买了口红。

醉鹅娘是中国葡萄酒领域的领导者，因为红酒在中国餐桌上仍是新事物，因此她教授正确的方法以将酒与菜肴结合起来是至关重要的，并且成为了想向中国出口贸易的酿酒厂的公司之间的基本纽带。

李子柒与先前所述的人物不同，她是一个博客作者，并拥有数百万的关注者。她的视频在四川农村拍摄，在那里开展所有农业劳作。她的视频以古典的音乐为背景，从不说话，但展示了她工作的所有步骤：播种，摘水果，养小鸡。真正地回归到了原始和古老的中国传统。她的视频之所以受到关注，是因为在观看视频时，观众摆脱了紧张的社会节奏，能从中获得极大的放松。她的成功也来自西方，其 YouTube 频道拥有 800 万订阅者。

李子柒还拥有一家电子商务商店，在那里她出售自己在视频中使用的工具和穿着的复古风格的衬衫。

这篇论文旨在分析所有与中国当代社会使用的社交媒体有关的因素和特征。

Introduction

My job of thesis aims to analyze social media impacts' on Chinese society in all areas, making more specific remarks on their commercial aspects and their correct usage in marketing strategies.

I wanted to focus about crucial issues of our time: social media, commerce and online world, that is perfectly mirrored in the real one. Virtual and real world are not two separate things anymore, but they come together and influence one another.

Chinese social media landscape could seem mysterious to those who are not experts of the field and don't know Chinese language. My paper wants to investigate the broad context of Chinese social media, pointing out differences and similarities with Western ones.

This essay is split into three chapters.

In the first chapter, I pursued a parallelism between most trendy Western social media and the respective ones in China. In the first instance, we found that that even though the presence of censorship in China, Chinese internet doesn't represent a "desert" at all, but, on the contrary, its paradigm owns much higher numbers than the ones we are used to: many more social media, websites and millions users daily active online through their favourite instrument: smartphone.

In the following paragraphs, we see that "our": Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram are replaced by: QQ, Weibo, WeChat, Douyin and the broad Chinese e-commerce system that provides on its platforms, both a social media part and an e-commerce one. Users can: exchange opinions, read reviews, post pictures and, at the same time, complete purchase processes.

The second chapter aims to analyze social media usage within interpersonal relationships and, especially, how Chinese traditional values have been reshaped and changed, with the rise of modernity and the opening to the world.

The last paragraph starts to outline the characteristics of business oriented social media usage and how companies can benefit by using them in their strategies, being aware of potential risks and failure that wrong strategies could lead.

In the last two subparagraphs, I take on two examples of social media marketing strategy undertaken by luxury brands.

It follows that, the American brand Coach, thanks to an adequate and designed strategy, that involved the use of valid instruments such as: promotion through blogger and influencer, respecting the target market and launching prices and contests, successfully entered Chinese market.

The strategy undertaken by Dolce&Gabbana in November 2018, was a total failure: ignoring cultural distance barriers, absence of sensitivity and superficiality in thinking that they could operate in Chinese market without a precise strategy, led big troubles to the brand company.

In the third chapter, I describe the figure of influencer, better known in China as KOL, key opinion leader. The natural habitat of this personalities is social media and they are people who, with the rise of blogs, started to set up personal accounts on which they used to discuss about their daily lives and/or about certain topics, through the use of: articles, videos and photos. Since the very beginning, they started to catch other users' attention, increasing their fame day by day, until the point of becoming actual online celebrities.

The figure of KOL in China is not something peripheral, but it is fundamental within brands' marketing strategies, that want to break into the market, raise products' awareness and increase sales, even more if it is brand's first entrance in Chinese market.

Successful KOLs are people who managed to establish a powerful community, based on reciprocal trust. KOL's trustworthiness has to be the base of his/her job, and, in fact, he/she should deal partnerships only with brands that share his/her same values and promote products that he/she would buy firsthand.

Chinese most glaring KOLs' figures in fashion field, as described in the last paragraphs of chapter 3, are, for example: Becky Li, Gogoboi, Mr. Bags. They are famous for their highly active and responsive community and their fame became international, thanks to some unbelievable episodes. For instance, Becky Li, during a partnership with the car brand MINI, launched through her WeChat channel, sell all the pieces available out within 5 minutes.

Mr. Bags is Chinese most famous luxury bags' advisor, he reached incredible success on his WeChat e-commerce, launching exclusive limited-editions bags, in partnership with renowned brands, such as Givenchy, Tod's, Longchamp.

KOLs' area of expertise can be multiple, that's why, in the last paragraph I dwelled on some specific areas, like: beauty, wine art and country life.

Peculiar figure in the field of beauty is Li Jiaqi, a young guy, who became famous for his live streams, in which he tests and promotes lipsticks, he reached huge followings in less than a year. During a funny challenge with the founder of Alibaba Group, Jack Ma, in which they were challenging each other for managing to sell the major number of lipsticks, Jack Ma failed by selling only 10 lipsticks, while Li Jiaqi managed to sell thousands of them.

Lady Penguin is leader in wine area of expertise, because its usage is still new to Chinese dining tables, her work is fundamental for teaching techniques and correct combinations of wine with food different categories'. She acts as a link for wine companies that want to export their products to China.

Li Ziqi is an antithetical figure, compared to all the above, she is a blogger that conquered her fans' attention for her videos set in Sichuan's remote country, during which she works in the fields and shows all ancient techniques of planting, harvesting, making noodles etc. Her videos provide soft background music and she never speaks during them, they show an actual throwback to origins and to ancient Chinese traditions. Her videos have such a broad audience because they generate a state of relaxation on who's watching, letting the viewer take a break from the frenetic pace of busy city life. Her fame reached Western world as well, in fact, her YouTube channel counts 8 million subscribers.

Li Ziqi also owns an e-commerce, in which she sells her vintage style T-shirts, that she wears during videos and some tools she uses to work in the fields.

This thesis takes into consideration all the factors and characteristics connected to the usage of social media in China in contemporary society.

My research was conducted with the support of academic online resources, provided by Jstore website and other online resources such as JingDaily, China Daily, South China Morning Post, NY Times, Il sole 24 Ore, The Guardian, Business Insider. The book,

titled “Digital China: working with bloggers, influencers and KOLs” written by Lauren Hallanan and Ashley Galina Dudarenok, two young Chinese market experts was very supportive as well.

Chapter 1.

Definition of Social Media

Social media are nowadays part of daily life.

There are a lot of definitions of social media, but one the most accredited is:

“Social media is a group of Internet- based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content”¹.

As Mayfeld indicates in his ebook, “*What is social media?*”², social media is a group of new kind of online contents which share some characteristics like: participation because everyone is free to express his opinion through it; openness: everyone can comment, share information, there are no barriers; conversation because social media are seen as a two-way conversation; community because social media increase the creation of communities in which people share mutual interests and ideas. Connectedness because of the use of links to other resources and sites. He also indicates that there are six categories of social media: social networks, sites in which people are able to communicate, connect with friends and share contents; blogs - websites, with the form of online journals, but written in a friendly style; wikis, informational websites in which users can add their knowledge or edit the contents in them; podcasts, recorded digital audio which can be downloaded on personal devices; forums, online spaces in which netizens share their opinions about specific subjects; content communities, online platforms of multimedia content. One of the most popular is YouTube in which users share videos. The sixth one is microblog, which is a type of social network (blog) about the posting of very small digital contents (which, actually, is the main difference from a common blog).

Then, Kietzmann in “*Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building block of social media*”³ illustrates the seven “*functional blocks*” of social media, which are: *identity*, because people in social media insert their own identities by declaring personal information such as name, age, city in which they live, profile

¹ Andreas M. Kaplan; Michael Haenlein “*Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media*”. *Business horizons*, v.53, n. 1, 2010, pp. 59-68. ESCP Europe, 79 Avenue de la République, F-75011 Paris, France

² Antony Mayfeld, “*What is social media?*” iCrossing, 2008

³ Jan Kietzmann; Kristoffer Hermkens; P. Ian McCarthy; Bruno S. Silvestre, “*Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media*”. *Business horizons*, v.54, n.3, pp. 241-251 Segal Graduate School of Business, Simon Fraser University, 500 Granville Street, Vancouver, BC V6C 1W6, Canada

picture; *conversations* is the second functional block and it refers to the feature of social media in which users communicate and talk to each other exchanging point of views about any field of interest and sometimes they also convey through social media important socio-political messages and conduct their battles on them. *Sharing* refers to the aspect of exchanges, which is a central point on social media: pictures, posts, links, the principal scope is the distribution and reception of contents. *Presence* is the mutual possibility among users to know if they are reachable in both virtual and real world. In virtual world this is possible through the status (available, online) or by checking the last time in which users were connected. The presence in real world is sharable with the localization of the geographical position. *Relationship* refers to the possibility of the users to be connected by exchanging some information or just for being friends in virtual or real world. *Reputation* allows users within social media context to recognize their own status or others. Reputation is not only a matter related to people, but also to their contents, in fact in some social media this feature is represented through likeability expressed by the others. The last functional block Kietzmann points out, is the concept of *groups*, which is one of the main aspect of social media because its basic principle is the creation of communities.

1.1 Social media around the world

1.1.1 Facebook

Facebook has been one of the first social media, and the first that actually took root in people's life. It was created in 2004 in Cambridge, Massachusetts by Mark Zuckerberg, along with others students and roommates and it is considered one of the Big Four technology companies, along with Amazon, Apple and Google.⁴ At the beginning, Facebook was only available for Harvard students and then for other famous universities students. Starting from 2006, it was, then, opened to anyone who wanted to create a personal account. Users share photos, text, information, links with the other users who are called "friends", that have to accept in advance the request of "friendship".

⁴Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. October 19th 2019. <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook>

1.1.2 Twitter

Twitter is a social network and microblogging system which is based on posting “tweets”⁵, public short messages that “followers” can repost and share (“retweet”). These tweets can’t exceed 280 characters of length for all languages, except Chinese, Japanese and Korean. This social network was created in 2006 by Noah Glass, Biz Stone and Evan Williams. Then engineer Jack Dorsey affiliated with them and the complete version of Twitter was launched in 2007 at the South by Southwest music conference, in Austin, Texas. It rapidly gained a huge popularity, in 2016 during US presidential election Twitter was the biggest resource of daily breaking news and in 2018 it reached more than 321⁶ million monthly active users.

1.1.3 WhatsApp

WhatsApp is a public-domain software, freely online distributed, multi-platform messaging and voice over IP service. It’s one of the most popular instant messaging app and it was firstly designed by Brian Acton and Jon Koum in 2009. In 2014⁷ WhatsApp was acquired by Facebook for US\$19⁸ billion, the largest acquisition at that time. WhatsApp has 1.5 billion users from 180 countries⁹ and this makes it the most used and famous instant messaging app all over the world with one billion active users per day. Since January 2018 it was launched WhatsApp Business, a feature created for business activities of small and medium entity to facilitate communication with clients. This launch had a great success and gave to the app even wider range of use

1.1.4 Instagram

The word “Instagram” comes from the combination of other two words: instant camera and telegram. The main purpose of this social, since its beginning, was to post pictures and share them with other pictures lovers and sometimes to convey a message, that’s why hashtags¹⁰ were also created. Instagram was launched in 2010 by its founders Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, while they were working on something different, on a check-in app written in HTML5, but

⁵ Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. October 19th 2019. <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter>

⁶ Ibidem

⁷ Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. October 19th 2019. <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/WhatsApp>

⁸ Annelise Schoups. “Why is WhatsApp called WhatsApp?”. Rewind&Capture. July 28th 2015.

<https://www.rewindandcapture.com/why-is-whatsapp-called-whatsapp/>

⁹ <https://www.digitalinformationworld.com/2019/02/whatsapp-facts-stats.html>

¹⁰ *Hashtag* is the reference that can be posted together with a picture to explain it better and to categorize it.

then they decided to focus only on the feature of sharing photos¹¹. The app had a great success at once, after only two months it already had one million of users. Since its launch, there have been a lot of changes, as the possibility to post short videos and the introduction of the “stories”, videos or photos that only last 24 hours on the user profile, unless he/she decides to save them permanently. In 2012 it was purchased for \$1 billion¹² dollars by Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook.

1.2 Social media in mainland China

The above mentioned social media platforms are very popular and famous in the occidental regions and in many Asian countries, but all of them in mainland China are actually blocked and censored by the government which control them through the use of the “Great Firewall”, the virtual barrier that separates Chinese internet from internet of the rest of the world. Facebook, Google, Instagram, Twitter, Whatsapp, Youtube mostly don’t exist for average Chinese citizens, but this is not perceived as a big absence by them because Chinese internet has its own parallel system and its own networks and social media. Indeed, China can boast the most active habitat for social media in the entire world and the numbers speak for themselves. 91%¹³ of Chinese online population, in fact, has a social media account, compared to “only” 67% of people in the US.

So, Chinese social media deserve to be presented separately.

1.2.1 QQ

QQ is an instant messaging software service that was launched in China in February 1999 by Tencent Holdings Limited, a company that was born in 1998, founded by a Chinese entrepreneur, Ma Huateng. Its first name was OICQ, which stands for “*Oh, I seek you*”, it was then modified because it sounded similar to another instant messaging service name, “ICQ”, that could have sued Tencent Holdings Limited for plagiarism. In April 1999, few months after its launch, the app already counted 200 millions of users and it took over the other very popular social media in China, Qzone.

¹¹Eudaimonia. “How Instagram started?” January 26th 2017.

<https://medium.com/@obtaineudaimonia/how-instagram-started-8b907b98a767>

¹²Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. October 19th 2019. <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Instagram>

¹³Xinyuan Wang. “*Social media in Industrial China*”. cap 2 “*The social media landscape in China*” pp.25-56, UCL Press. (2016) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1g69xtj.7>

QQ can be considered the biggest Chinese social media platform in terms of number of users. It must be said that, contrary to popular belief, QQ is not a Chinese version of Facebook for many reasons, first of all because it was launched five years before. QQ is unique and different from other social media platforms in several respects. Five aspects can be pointed out as the main features of QQ: 1) anonymousness; 2) high media confluence; 3) high individualization; 4) visual richness; 5) hierarchic structure. Speaking of point one, anonymousness, real names are hardly ever used for QQ names, a QQ account user name is often a nickname that users choose (QQ *ming*) after the system automatically generates the “QQ number” (QQ *hao*). QQ number is always used for exchanging QQ information with people because it remains the same, while the QQ name is often changed by users according to a specific period or situation, since the QQ contact name can be also a short sentence. Young people are the category of users that changes QQ name most frequently. The principal characteristic of the QQ avatar window is the list of all contacts, with other add-on features. Unlike Facebook, which does not pay attention on distinction of contacts, QQ let users split their contacts into categories, like: “Friends”, “Family” “Classmate”, “Work colleague”, “Strangers” and “Black list”, giving the possibility to rename them.

Regarding point two, the high media confluence, QQ provides multiple digital services on its avatar window: group chat (QQ group), video call, social media (Qzone), microblog (Tencent Weibo), email, online games, online music and online shopping (QQ shop). Because of this large provision of digital services, for most of Chinese people, QQ represents their first move into digital life: the first email is QQ email, first social media network used is Qzone, QQ music the first online music program and QQ games first online games.

Point three refers to the high personalization and customization of QQ profile with background music, pictures and ornamental elements from Qzone, like online clothes and accessories to dress virtual avatars as users prefer. So, each QQ profile tends to be unique and different to all other. This characteristic of customization of digital spaces is very common all over the Asia-Pacific region and this gives a much higher sense of humanized relationship between users and their online profiles. Another difference between QQ and Facebook lies on this regard. For example, the check-in feature on QQ (*qian diao*) alludes to checking

into the online space of QQ, in contrast to Facebook check-in which refers to the check-in in actual, real places users are at that certain moment and they want to share with virtual friends.

High customization and visual richness are strongly connected. Chinese online designs are much more colorful and sophisticated, than Western ones that are characterized by simplicity. Chinese way of thinking is “more is better”, abundance is a lucky sign of prosperity and this reflects also on digital contents that have to be a “feast for the eye”.

Last QQ characteristic is its hierarchical structure, which is related to the feature launched by the app in 2004, the QQ level system built on users’ active presence on the social: the longer the user is logged in, the higher level can obtain. So, the higher the level is, the more privileges user has on the platform, such as the possibility to create a QQ group and the access to more digital ornamental material.

1.2.2 Sina Weibo 新浪微薄

Sina Weibo is one of the main Chinese social media. Its name derives from 新浪微薄 *Xinlang Weibo*¹⁴, which means Chinese microblogging website. It shouldn’t be mistaken with the other Weibo platforms, such as Tencent Weibo or Sohu Weibo, commonly when someone says “Weibo”, in the majority of cases, is referring to Sina Weibo¹⁵. It was officially launched in August 14th 2009¹⁶ by Sina corporation and its features can be considered as a mixture of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, since it provides written contents, photos, videos and short video contents, all together. It must be said that, some multimedia content on Weibo, were already available to Chinese users more than 18 months¹⁷ before Twitter in the US and that Sina Weibo provides much more features than Twitter, for example “Weibo Wallet”function, through which

¹⁴ Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. November 1st 2019. https://it.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sina_Weibo

¹⁵ Xinyuan Wang. “*Social media in Industrial China*”. cap 2 “*The social media landscape in China*” pp.25-56, UCL Press. (2016) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1g69xtj.7>

¹⁶ Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. November 1st 2019. https://it.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sina_Weibo

¹⁷ Xinyuan Wang. “*Social media in Industrial China*”. cap 2 “*The social media landscape in China*” pp.25-56, UCL Press. (2016) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1g69xtj.7>

users can make online payments directly through the app. It is also a great resource in business and for marketers that want to boost sales through social media marketing strategy, since Weibo provides promotional campaigns. For all these reasons it cannot be compared to Twitter.

Sina Weibo profile shows user's name (in most cases nickname), a brief description of the user and number of followers and followees he/she has ¹⁸. There are three different category of user accounts in Sina Weibo: common user accounts, verified user accounts that are given an orange "V" badge for celebrities and a blue "V" badge for organizations and companies, which is useful to distinguish them from ordinary users and, it will also help to gain trust and reputation among followers. Last category entails the expert star user accounts, which is a paid VIP membership, launched in 2012 ¹⁹, that allows users to enlarge their functionalities on the platform. Vip membership has 7 steps, from VIP 1 to VIP 7: in order to upgrade their level, they have to gain "growth value".

Beside the use of social media in which to share entertaining contents, Sina Weibo, also became one of the main sources of information for Chinese young people, as many newspapers and journalists set their official accounts releasing latest news and current affairs.

Its main features²⁰ are: uploading text or multimedia content to share with other users, users can hold live streaming sessions or upload "Weibo stories", daily life frames (pictures, videos or texts) of 15 seconds each that disappear within 24 hours after sharing, similar "Instagram stories" feature. Users can post comments, likes, repost, share and chat and if they are particularly interested in a user's account, they can click the button that keep them updated of any Weibo activity of that user or they can join group chats to discuss about topics they are interested in. Users can interact using fun emojis, stickers, GIFs, that enhance user's experience and commitment. Another interesting feature is the one called

¹⁸ Asur, Sitaram, Huberman B.A and Louis Lei Yu. "Dynamics of Trends and Attention in Chinese Social Media". SSRN Electronic Journal. December 2013 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259105833>

¹⁹ Vanessa Wan. The ultimate guide to Sina Weibo: the largest Micro-Blogging platform in China. Dragon Social. April 2019. <https://www.dragonsocial.net/blog/chinese-social-media-weibo-and-twitter-comparison/>

²⁰ Ibidem

“hot topic”, it is very much used among celebrities to generate reactions from their followers and engage them in discussions about any kind of topic. Unlike a hashtag, “Super Topic” has its own page with moderators and can provide more reliable information. Super topic feature entails other features, such as “essential content” and “hall of fame”, these are selected by moderators, in order to show comments in order of relevance. There is a Weibo section, named “Hot”, in which the customized algorithm shows users contents in order of their preferences, according to the most searched issues by them. Beside “Hot”, we can find “Nearby”, “Ranking List” and “Food”. The “Discover” function is a search engine in which users can insert key words to find the content they are looking for and usually it is split into “Entertainment”, “News” and “Sports” section. From trending research and hot topics, Weibo draws a list of 50 trending topics most discussed by users, so that people can always be updated on the latest news about the issues they care most.

One the most iconic feature, that differentiate Weibo from Western social media, is the game center Game.Weibo.com, that provides online games for users. This attracts people to remain logged in the app for hours. Another basic feature is Weibo Fit, which records health and sports data.

Thanks to all these features, Weibo have built a lively social community that engages 431(by 2018)²¹ million monthly active users only and 93%²² of them access it via mobile devices, while Twitter “only” has reached 270 million monthly active users worldwide by January 2019²³. Other interesting data about Weibo are: more than 80% of monthly active users are below the age of 30²⁴, 56.3% of users are male, while 43.7% are female.

Under the commercial aspect, Weibo can be very well exploited by brands and companies, due to many features available on the platform. Thanks to the figure of key opinion leaders (KOLs) that is going to be deeply illustrated in chapter 3, better known in Western world as “influencers”, companies that want to

²¹ Ashley Galina Dudarenok, Lauren Hallanan “*Digital China: Working with Bloggers, Influencers and KOLs*” chapter 3, p. 39 Alarice International Limited, 3rd November 2018

²² Ibidem

²³ Vanessa Wan. The ultimate guide to Sina Weibo: the largest Micro-Blogging platform in China. Dragon Social. April 2019. <https://www.dragonsocial.net/blog/chinese-social-media-weibo-and-twitter-comparison/>

²⁴ Ashley Galina Dudarenok, Lauren Hallanan “*Digital China: Working with Bloggers, Influencers and KOLs*” chapter 3, p. 39 Alarice International Limited, 3rd November 2018

promote their products/services can make use of many formats. The support of a KOL is not an option, but it's a must for a successful promotion on Weibo. First tool, used by brands on Weibo, can be sponsored posts: they work as same as traditional media ads, with the difference that the content is handled by the KOL, that with his/her expertise will know how to build and create it. Product reviews are another strategy for promoting sales on Weibo and works perfectly if the KOL is specialized in the field of the brand. Campaign launches are usually under the format of giveaway campaigns: brands, through KOLs' Weibo profile, set up contest involving users to follow the account, forward a designated post and/or tag friends in order to have a chance to win the gifts offered in the giveaway. In this way the brand can enlarge his audience and reputation. Social selling is another strategy that is getting popular on Weibo: KOLs provide their followers a link trough which buy products and they get paid on the basis of how many clicks the link have generated. Live streaming is one of the newest feature for brands promoting on Weibo and it's already getting a huge success. It entails KOLs' live streaming, during which they release links for viewers to purchase items or get a discount.

When speaking about ads and KOL promotion on Weibo, the four major options²⁵ are: display ads, Weibo search engine promotion, fan headlines and fan tunnel. Display ads are random ads that appear in users' search engines or on the side of users' news feeds. These are usually used for promoting events, sales or campaigns.

Weibo search promotion puts brands or companies pages', that want to promote their business, at the top of the list for specific keywords. This is a great way to enhance visibility and attract followers.

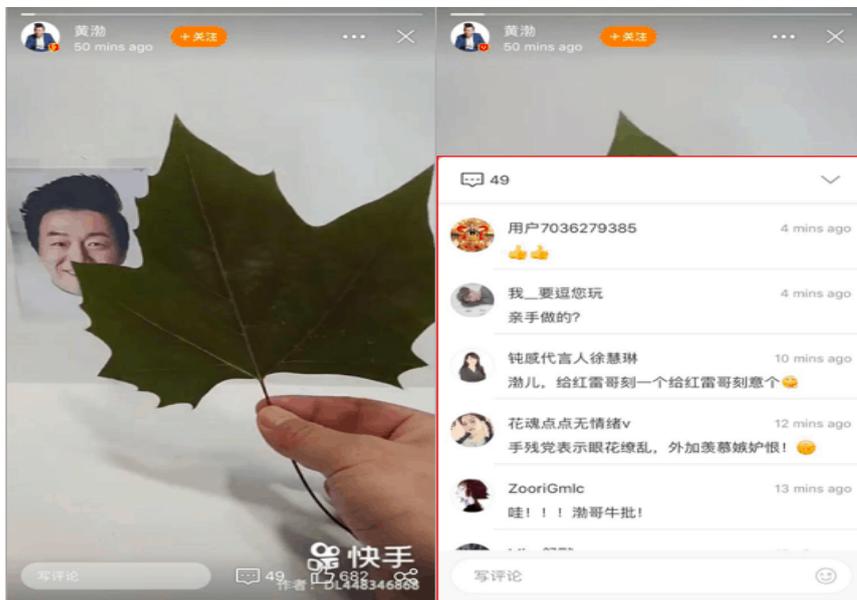
Fan headlines or fanstop is used on Weibo to enhance engagement with followers that are following brands' accounts. A promotional post, which looks the same as others, with the only difference that contains a sponsored tag, stays on top of users' news feed.

Fan tunnel are useful to target audience and to increase followers. The audience can be targeted by: age, gender, region, interests and device types.

²⁵ Ibidem



Coca Cola page on Weibo. Source: Dragon Social



Weibo stories and comments. Source: Dragon Social

1.2.3 WeChat 微信

WeChat, better known in China as *weixin* 微信, is a platform launched in 2011 by Tencent. WeChat is much more than just a social media, because it incorporates many services and functions, that normally in Western world are provided by many apps. At the moment something similar, in Western world, hasn't been created yet. Let's see further in details its multiple functions. At first sight, it could seem an instant chat app, also because its literal meaning is "micro messages", and actually this is one of its main functions. Similar to WhatsApp, users can exchange instant messages, audio records, photos, videos and create groups of people that can interact. Beside this function, WeChat has

multiple daily uses. It provides a digital payment function²⁶ connected to users' private bank account, that let them pay everywhere and in every moment, just with a touch of their finger. From grocery shopping in street markets, to public transport, from hospitals to public toilets, WeChat Pay is a daily fare for Chinese people.

WeChat accounts can be personal or official. Official ones require a longer registration, step by step, and usually are created by KOLs or companies that work with their profile.

Its main functions are: chat, moments, search, shake, people nearby and mini programs. Moments are all the posts (that can be videos, photos, links) shared by users, mainly like a Facebook homepage. "Search" is like an internet search engine in which any kind of information can be searched. "Shake" and "people nearby" functions allow to socialize by the possibility of identifying people geographically located close to us.

From Mini programs function there is a direct link to all other services' apps: train tickets, taxi, food delivery, all connected together from one main app: WeChat. In this way, it is not necessary to register and download each app separately, but it is just needed to have one, to do, basically, everything.

Thanks to the payment tool and Mini programs feature, WeChat can be well exploited by brands and KOLs that want to increase their turnover. Just like Weibo, also WeChat involves many promotional formats for brands in partnership with KOLs. For example, brands can hire KOLs in product placement activities, namely, KOLs can insert in their regular articles direct sales link to brands' product.

Product reviews and sponsored campaigns can also be greatly exploited on WeChat, by brands, engaging KOLs.

Co-branding can also be a successful strategy employed on WeChat: brands can co-create products with KOLs according to the needs of their target audience and sell them through KOLs' WeChat channels as limited editions.

Since many KOLs have their own e-commerce through WeChat Mini Programs, brands can offer special edition of their products through KOL's stores.

²⁶ Ji Xiaojing. *Red Packets in the Real and Virtual Worlds How Multi-Function WeChat Influences*

Chinese Virtual Relationships. p. 68. Transcript Verlag. 2017. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1xxrxw.8>

WeChat ads are one of the most important tools for brands and KOLs, making brands' products or KOLs articles more visible to users. Ads can be released through: moments ads, account ads or mini program ads. Moments ads appear like normal moments, but their presence is made clear by the "sponsored" claim in the upper right corner²⁷. They can be used to boost an account or a campaign, invite users to download an app, provide discounts or coupons.

Account ads work in the same way as moments ads and have the same aim of promoting accounts or campaigns.

Mini program ads are shown on Mini Programs interfaces as banners.



WeChat chat and sticker shop. Source: appcakefans.com

²⁷ Ashley Galina Dudarenok, Lauren Hallanan "Digital China: Working with Bloggers, Influencers and KOLs" chapter 3, p.34-38 Alarice International Limited, 3rd November 2018



Daily use of WeChat in a farmer's market. Source: Business Insider Italia

1.2.4 Douyin 抖音

Douyin 抖音 , better known worldwide as TikTok, is a Chinese social media that was launched in September 2016, previously named “Musical.ly”.²⁸ It's a short-form mobile video²⁹ based app, in which users can share 15 seconds' videos using filters or recorded audios. It's an entertaining app and all contents are shown to users according to their interests, hobbies, age and viewing history³⁰ . Douyin is now ranked among the most downloaded app ever, with more than 500 million³¹ users active monthly. 75%³² of Douyin users are aged from 15 to 36 and come from first and second tier cities, these are important data if we consider this category as the spending force of China and so they represent the best category to be attracted by social media advertising.

²⁸ Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. October 19th 2019. <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/TikTok>

²⁹ Tik tok. October 2019. <https://www.tiktok.com/it/>

³⁰ Ashley Galina Dudarenok, Lauren Hallanan “*Digital China: Working with Bloggers, Influencers and KOLs*” chapter 3, p.46-49 Alarice International Limited, 3rd November 2018

³¹“Douyin, la nuova app per raggiungere i millennial cinesi?”. East Media. January 31st. <http://www.east-media.net/douyin-social-network-cina-digital/>

³² Ibidem

They have specific preferences, often based on Western trends, the perfect audience for brands that want to promote themselves on social media. The most popular type of contents that can be used by brands in collaboration with KOLs are five³³: challenges, stickers, live streaming, novel skills and techniques, music and dancing.

Brands cooperating with KOLs can launch challenges to invite followers to take part in the campaign.

Brands can make logos, called stickers, that KOLs can insert in their videos in order to draw fans' attention.

Live streaming is one of the best techniques for boosting sales, KOLs during these show and review products, sharing the direct link for purchasing in one click.

Novel skills and techniques are usually managed by a category of KOLs, called *jishu liu* 技术流, these skills are more often used for car brands or electronics, online games and new tech products.

Music and dancing formats can be of three types: first one is related to those KOLs that are specialized in their own original music. Brands can deal partnership with them, asking for a customized song for a product. Second type entails choreographers, this can be a good strategy for engaging followers.

Third type on Douyin, involves KOLs that are famous for being good at lip-syncing existing songs.

All the above strategies can work well for car brands, electronic, fast fashion and games.

³³ Ashley Galina Dudarenok, Lauren Hallanan “*Digital China: Working with Bloggers, Influencers and KOLs*” chapter 3, p. 48-49 Alarice International Limited, 3rd November 2018



Douyin/TikTok logo. Source: Katherine Wu

1.3 Chinese e-commerce platforms

Chinese e-commerce is unique in the world, because it combines selling and social media platforms. Chinese online consumers are a huge number. E-commerce's giant in China, and also worldwide, is Alibaba Group, a Chinese corporate company, which owns many platforms, one of the most famous is Taobao 淘宝. Taobao is ranked among the 20 most visited websites worldwide³⁴ and it is an online shopping platform. The peculiarity of Chinese e-commerce is that consumers buy online, mostly, through their smartphones and that's why the phenomenon has been called m-commerce (mobile commerce) and this is much more expanded in China and in Asian countries in general, rather than in Western ones. M-commerce features are: young generation consumers, comfort and easiness of use, big potentiality for business, but at the same time companies need to invest to deal with competitiveness. The four main points to be successful in Chinese e-commerce are: invest in mobile commerce and media, use of social network for business promotion and make services digital, for example releasing QR codes to provide discounts and coupons to build customer loyalty.

³⁴ Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. December 1st 2019. https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alibaba_Group

1.3.1 Taobao Live 淘宝直播

In March 2016³⁵ Taobao Live 淘宝直播 was launched by Taobao. Taobao Live is a live streaming platform, which combines entertainment and e-commerce. It works well for online marketers that want to engage potential consumers and boost sales. Only Taobao store with one diamond reputation and more than 10,000 followers can join Taobao Live and hold a live streaming.

Taobao Live is not an app itself, but it is a window on Taobao main interface and the reason why it works so well is the coexistence of celebrities or KOLs personalities, live streaming entertainment and e-commerce function. Taobao Live aims at instantaneous shopping. During Live streams selling links are released and consumers can buy without even leaving the platform, just by clicking the link, it follows the “See now, buy now”³⁶ motto. The advantage of Taobao Live is to have Taobao’s consumers base that is already a huge number. Research analysis, in fact, shows that by January 2018³⁷, there were 425 million active users on Taobao, with more than 142 million daily active users. Data shows that 70.9% of Taobao users are women, while 29.1% are men. Young adults are the majority, the ones aged from 24 to 30 years old are 43.8% of all users. 80% of Taobao Live’s audience is made by women and the best time to go live is between 8 and 10 pm.

Taobao Live features work very well with KOLs and brands that want to expand their sales. In this online platform there are specific formats that can help reaching such aim: product showcasing, lectures and Q&A, scenario-based product promotion and product origins showcases.

Product showcasing is the most common to promote products: KOLs frame the product and explain its details and reasons why it should be purchased.

Lectures and Q&A formats are released by expert KOLs in the precise field of the product. During the live stream, they answer to all the questions users ask and give detailed information on how the product works and how it should be used at its best.

Scenario-based product promotion characteristic is that the product is not purely described, but it’s shown during its use. For example, a make-up

³⁵ Ashley Galina Dudarenok, Lauren Hallanan “*Digital China: Working with Bloggers, Influencers and KOLs*” chapter 3, p.55-57. Alarice International Limited, 3rd November 2018

³⁶ Ibidem

³⁷ Ibidem

blogger can launch a live stream for a daily make-up tutorial, using the foundation she has to sponsor.

Product origin showcases are very interesting and represent a good choice for conquering followers' attention and trust. Brands can invite KOLs to visit their factories, in order to show their followers the manufacturing process of the products through live streams. In this way consumers feel involved in the whole process, from raw material selection to final product and this enhances their loyalty level.



Taobao Livestreaming Platform. Source: Agency China

1.3.2 Xiaohongshu 小红书

Even though Alibaba giant is leading the way, the product recommendation and review community xiaohongshu 小红书, is getting bigger and bigger.

Xiaohongshu (in English little red book) was founded in 2013 by Miranda Qu and Charlwin Mao³⁸ and started as an online tour guide for Chinese shoppers, so their first aim was to create a platform, in which users could exchange their opinion and reviews about products. In October 2014 Xiaohongshu turned into a real cross-border e-commerce, in which consumers still can exchange opinion and reviews, but also purchase from overseas brands directly.

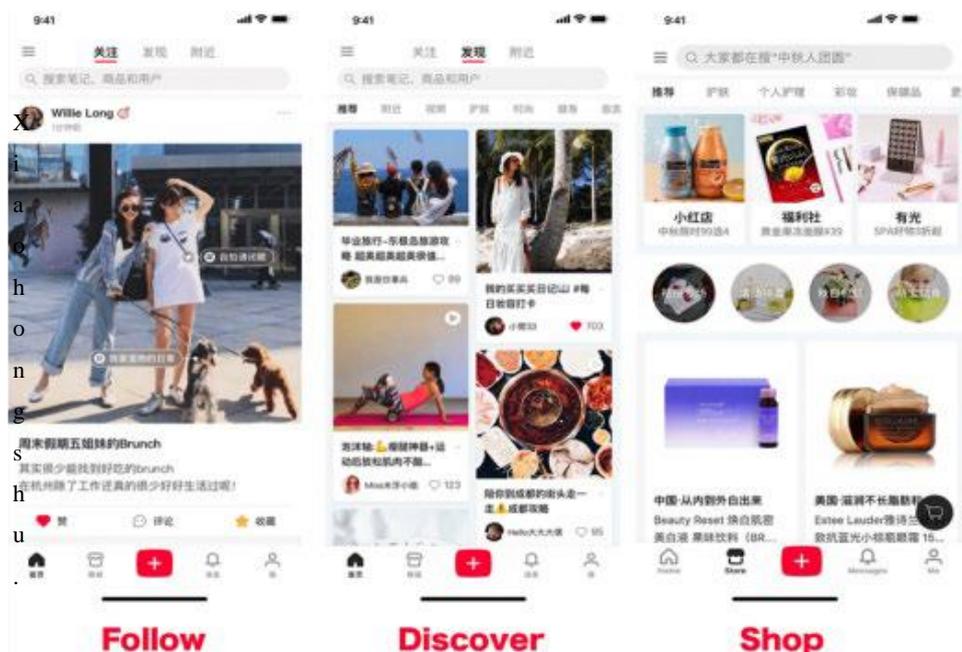
It is mainly focused on cosmetics, fashion and lifestyle products and has an audience made by young, middle-class, contemporary users. The app's homepage algorithm provide customized contents, based on the past researches.

³⁸ Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. December 2nd 2019. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xiaohongshu>

By 2018³⁹ it had around 100 million registered users and 30 million monthly active users sharing reviews and advices from all over the world. It has become one the most reliable sites where people seek for information and heavily rely on word of mouth recommendations, this represents a breeding ground for brands and influencers.

70% of users are women between 18 and 35 years old, that want to purchase unique products in a loyal context, in which they feel confident. Usually Xiaohongshu users come from Douyin. This happens because Douyin videos only last from 15 to 60 seconds, so, when users see a product they like on Douyin, they are likely to search for it on Xiaohongshu to acquire more knowledge about it and read reviews from other consumers.

Xiaohongshu community is very broad and there is disparity between common users and expert KOLs and celebrities. Brands can engage KOLs for sales promotions by sending them their products and asking them to review those on Xiaohongshu. The choice of which KOL to hire doesn't have to be random, it has to reflect brand's image and he/she has to have a strong and defined personality. KOLs and common users share their reviews through "notes", Xiaohongshu's posts, which include text, photos and in some cases also direct sales link.



³⁹ Ashley Galina Dudarenok, Lauren Hallanan "Digital China: Working with Bloggers, Influencers and KOLs" chapter 3, p.44-46. Alarice International Limited, 3rd November 2018

Chapter 2.

Social media impact on Chinese society

2.1 “Sociality” on social media

Chinese social media are impressive under many aspects, they are nowadays, part of everyone’s daily life and they are used in each kind of relationship: family, friends, romantic love and even with strangers. In this paragraph I want to describe in details their usage within the anthropologic field and see how they changed and evolved social relationships. There are specific rules about their use, which people take for granted and even the smallest mistake in observing these unwritten norms could lead to misunderstandings.

Besides, people lead a parallel life on online world in which sometimes they experience relationships, that actually don’t take place in real life.

Speaking about “sociality” on social media, the presence in online social media is fundamental even if presence in offline daily life occur regularly. For example, if two girls are work colleagues and basically see each other on a daily basis during business hours, they will still comment on each other’s Qzone personal account. Leaving comments on each other’s Qzone profiles is called “to leave footprints”. “Footprints” usually are funny jokes between friends. In users’ opinion, leaving footprints is not a way to keep in touch with the other person, but actually, a way to make their profiles appear more 热闹 *renao*⁴⁰, this Chinese word is composed, in turn, by two other words 热 *re* that means hot and 闹 *nao* means noisy. *Renao* it was a highly coveted traditional Chinese value related to a busy and colorful status of social life. Commonly, in China, during the celebration of Chinese New Year the concept of “hot” and “noisy” embodies the spirit of this festivity. For example, the expression “join the hot and noisy” 凑热闹 *cou renao* means to join the fun in any kind of social interaction. In social media context this principle refers to a vibrant and lively social connection and it can be related to an inspiring, full of contents social profile. We can say that, nowadays “hot and noise” atmosphere is sought after, both in

⁴⁰Xinyuan Wang “*Social media in Industrial China*” cap. 4 “*Social media and social relationships*”, p.101, UCL press. (2016) [https:// www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1g69xtj.9](https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1g69xtj.9)

online and offline word and sometimes it is even more desired on social media, than in real life. For instance, there's no difference anymore from leaving footprints on Qzones than playing online games in an internet café, since the hot and noisy principle is exploited in both cases, it can be said that the borderline between online and offline is very fleeting.

2.2 Social media in human relationships

2.2.1 Family on social media:

For a deep understanding of human relationships on social media it is necessary to mention some examples. Speaking about family and husband-wife relationships on social media I shall refer to Lan⁴¹, a 24 year- old rural girl whose husband had to take a job in Shanghai to ensure a better life to his children. Life would have been too expensive in the city for the whole family to live in, so Lan and their children decided to stay in their hometown, while her husband went to work in Shanghai staying in a collective dormitory and she had to remain to take care of their children. Lan embodies the traditional Chinese women with strong sense of devotion to her family, this is reflected somewhat in her Qzone profile too, in which she has a few locked albums, of which only she and her husband possess the password to look at them and in which she posts photos of their children in order to make them available for her husband anytime he wants to check these. He states, in fact, that he is too busy during daily hours to look at the pictures of his children, but at night, when he can't fall asleep because of too many worries in his mind, he gets comfort from browsing his sons pictures.

In this relationship social media invest a key role in the dynamic of the couple, this QQ album keeps husband and wife connected even though both of them are busy during the day and live far from each other.

Living far from each other not always can be perceived as a negative thing. In the case of Yan Hong⁴², a 37 year-old woman, owner of a nail salon in a small village, she got benefits from the fact that her husband had to move to work in a city in the north of China. Yan Hong's husband is a really lazy man, who didn't use to collaborate at all in the household, nor to care about his daughters. But, due to his absence, she finds the relationships more bearable, especially thanks

⁴¹Xinyuan Wang op., cit., pp. 103-104

⁴²Xinyuan Wang op., cit., pp.105-106

to the use of social media, because she feels that he shows more care for them on Wechat and QQ, he even asks about their daughters performance at school. A frequent tool used by the couple is WeChat voice messages, Yan Hong and her husband state that voice messages are better than phone calls because they can be sent and listened whenever one is not busy and so more relaxed and inclined to care about what the other is saying and communicating.

Speaking about audio messages, it has to be said that there are several differences in their use and in their purpose, based on different generations and ages of their users. For young people voice messaging is seen as a way of synchronous communication, because of its rapidity. While, for older generations, it's the exact opposite, because they see it as a way of "delaying" the answer in order to think twice on what they want to reply and to avoid hasty reactions that could occur, on the contrary, during a phone call for any reason. Another feature of voice messaging is that all the conversations, and specifically each word, one says in the audio, gets stored in smartphones. Even if, also phone calls are actually recordable, no one does it because it's not so handy and also because a person should start the telephone call already with the intent of recording. Since recorded messaging are storable data, they can be brought up whenever it's necessary (for instance, in case of having arguments with that person). In Yan Hong's case, all the more reason, the fact that audio recording are playable anytime helped her in solving a nasty situation. Yan Hong had some problems with her mother- in law about the education of her daughters and she didn't know how to tell her not to pamper her granddaughter. After the umpteenth rebuke from her mother-in law for having lectured her daughter of not having finished her homework, Yan Hong complained to her husband, who replied with a Wechat audio message in which he told her to act as she preferred and not to let his mother get involved too much. The following day Yan Hong decided to play the audio in front of her mother-in law and she was shocked because her son never went against his mother in the face before. This is to say that social media are for all intents part of everyone's daily life and do play an effective role in social relationships.

Because of the widespread diffusion of social media also among older people in urban China, young people started to suffer from the control of their parents and relatives also on online platforms. For example, if a 18 year- old Chinese girl

and her mum are friends on Wechat, she will be able to see what her daughter posts about her Friday night out and to know what she is doing after midnight, with the result that a 100% she will get angry and tell her to go back home to sleep. So, the main point is that with the diffusion of smartphones and the use of social media, parents have new tools for controlling kids and the only way, for Chinese young people, to avoid this control on them, is to block their parents on social platforms, which means they won't be able to see their contents and postings anymore. On the other hand, there is another group of people, who actually, think that their relationship with relatives improved thanks to social networks. This is the case, for example, of Jinq Yu Qi⁴³, a 32- year old tourist guide. For her, is like a protective shield, a sort of barrier in the relationships with her older family members because, as she says, ⁴⁴ in talking with them on social media, she doesn't have to reply immediately and so she can takes her time to respond whatever she is in a nice mood.

We witness at an actual rediscovery of parental relationships through the usage of social media, and specifically of WeChat, in this case. Through the creation of WeChat family groups, we see that also families that live apart from each other can keep in touch on a daily basis and do things that could be impossible otherwise, for example having lunch or dinner “together” sharing live pictures or videos. Besides, there's a radical transformation of the type of relationships, in some cases. Ding Yi Han⁴⁵, a young freelance artist living in Shanghai, explains that her relationships with her father and grandfather, both had an actual improvement due to the use of Wechat stickers, in particular. At first glance it could seem a silly claim, but taking a deep look, it's not silly at all. In Chinese traditional society “pater familias”, the eldest male family members, had to have a strict and unflappable attitude, which meant no smiles or expressions of love to their children. WeChat, in a certain way, changed this attitude making senior family members appear more “human”. Ding Yi Han says about her father and grandfather: “He has become so funny and even childish. It's not only my father; my grandfather was also taught to use WeChat this year. He too has become a lovely person, I mean before he was just the “grandfather”, you know

⁴³ Xinyuan Wang op., cit., p.107

⁴⁴ Xinyuan Wang Ibidem

⁴⁵ Xinyuan Wang op., cit., pp.107-109

what I mean?...”⁴⁶. This is a great achievement within a society: the redefinition of parental relationships. Just because of the use of cute features on online social media, as Wechat, Ding Yi Han, and so many other Chinese young people, had the chance to make deeper and more real connections with their relatives.

After analyzing all the different cases above, it is possible to state that social media, in most of them, had a positive impact. For example, in Lan’s case it helped to keep the family together through the option of sharing children pictures in a private album, among just the two of them. In Yan Hong’s case too, we see a silver lining: the rebuild of a husband-wife relationship and especially the stance against her mother-in law thanks to the voice messaging feature that helped her to break the existing pecking order.

Social media are reshaping family relationships by offering offer many new solutions and chances for communication: photos album, audio recordings, stickers, emoji.

2.2.2

Romantic Love on social media

Social media, nowadays have a key role also in romantic relationships. There is a constant presence of social media in all aspects of life, even within conversations in real life. Here’s an example: a group of girlfriends after a day of works are chatting and gossiping about boys⁴⁷. One tells to another that a guy asked for “her QQ number” and while saying this, she takes her smartphone out in order to show her friend what she noticed on QQ. That’s a proof of the importance of QQ, and social media in general, for Chinese people. Adding someone on QQ basically means that he or she has an interest on that person in terms of romance, so one of the main features of social media is to begin and manage a romantic relationship. In some cases the use of QQ even helped the relationship to improve itself. For instance, Xiao Lin⁴⁸, a 20-year old Chinese boy, says that using QQ he can be more romantic, than he actually is in real life, by the use of lovely stickers while chatting. This opinion is shared by many other Chinese young guys, who think they can be more romantic lover on social media because they are too shy in person. That’s because they are behind the

⁴⁶ Xinyuan Wang op., cit., p. 108

⁴⁷ Xinyuan Wang op., cit., p. 109

⁴⁸ Xinyuan Wang op., cit., p.110

display of their mobile phones and through the use of stickers and smiles they feel comfortable to express their feelings.

Another point related to romantic love on social media is that usually in Chinese rural contexts people cannot show too much intimacy in public, for example, walking hand in hand can be considered the highest form of physical contact allowed. While on QQ and other social media, people can freely post pictures in which they kiss their partners shameless. Xiao Yu⁴⁹, a 21-year old Chinese rural girl, reveals that she felt a sense of release and freedom posting the photo of she and her boyfriend kissing online on QQ, because in her small village it could be seen as a shameful thing. She says that, in big cities kissing in public would be seen as absolutely normal in big cities, but in her place it is not. Her picture on QQ obtained a lot of comments and appreciations, but this didn't make her feel embarrassed at all, on the contrary that's just what she wanted to get: approval from people. This tells us that, on social media context when posting something, it is already known the kind of reaction the post will generate and in some cases, in most of them, the ratings and the attention from the audience generated is the main purpose of the posting because people want to get endorsement and acceptance from others. Behind the publication of a picture, pretty much always, there's a specific scope. In the case of Xiao Yu, she wanted to alert and intimidate a girl to stay away from her boyfriend, because she thought this girl was flirting with him and so, through posting the news on QQ, Xiao Yu is sure she will have no more doubt that he is not single.

A negative aspect of romantic love is that too much control can lead to bad feelings, such as jealousy. The constant presence on social media can spoil the couple and their relationship leading to fights caused by jealousy. As we can notice in Cai⁵⁰'s example, a 22-year old waitress in a restaurant, the non-immediate reply to a WeChat message by the partner, can make the other partner feel unconfident and neglected. Cai is always present on online social media and that's why she immediately noticed that, even though her boyfriend wasn't replying to her message of half a hour before, he updated his status on QQ ten minutes earlier, so he was clearly using his phone, but not answering to her. This flows a lot of bad feelings on her, like to be unwanted and ignored by him.

⁴⁹ Xinyuan Wang Ibidem

⁵⁰ Xinyuan Wang op., cit., p. 111

Being constantly active on social media implies two different aspects that are two sides of the same coin. The positive aspect is that social media allow to keep in touch with the partner, even during working hours or whenever the two are apart from each other, but at the same time this can be a negative thing because, in this way, with the constant updates visible on social media, there's no more privacy between the partners and every action needs to be justified and explained to the other.

Nowadays, the level of importance attributed to social media is very high, since they are officially part of daily lives, so the non-mention of a romantic relationship on them can be perceived as the relationship itself it is of no importance. Zhu⁵¹ is a 20 year old factory worker who is worried because his girlfriends never mentioned their relationship on QQ, his concern is that she could be unfaithful or that she could hide something from him. The officialdom of a relationship comes from its announcement on social media because they can reach much more people, than situations in real life. The audience of a post can be huge, while showing the relationship in real life has limited visibility.

The choice of the way of communicating the relationship on social media has a crucial role because it can lead to success or failure. Lujia⁵² is a factory worker who decided to make the public announcement of his relationship with his girlfriend through the creation of a QQ group with 78 people, as a demonstration of love in public to her, because she told him she wasn't sure about his love, unless he didn't make something to show her publicly. But something went wrong, because setting up this group didn't have the attended success. Lujia wrote romantic sentences addressed to his girlfriend on this group, but the 78 contacts, present on it, felt very annoyed by these bounce messages that didn't have anything to with them and suddenly quit the group, which is a possible feature of social media. So, Lujia's mistake was clearly the wrong choice in the channel of communication through which declare his love to his girlfriend. Definitely a public post on Lujia's personal QQ profile, about the announcement, would have been more appropriate, rather than a group in which people were obliged to read romantic phrases- considered sappy and cloying by them, who are not personally involved in the relationship and, of course, felt

⁵¹ Xinyuan Wang Ibidem

⁵² Xinyuan Wang Ibidem

disturbed. Social media success requires strategy. Another example of successful announcement of relationship on social media could have been a public conversation of the two partners showing each love with romantic and sweet phrases: in this case no one would have been personally bothered by them, because spectators would have been free whatever to read or just to skip and scroll down.

The usage of social media within a relationship and their involvement in it isn't always a good thing. Fighting on social media has a bad influence on the couple. Huang Ling⁵³, a worker in a factory aged 19, says that each time her boyfriend and she had any kind of fight, he immediately used to update his QQ status with provocative phrases, such as “please, introduce girls to me, I need a girlfriend...”⁵⁴ with the intent to make her lose face. After their break up, Huang Ling decided to close the access to her Qzone to public, so she was the only one who could view it. She is forced to lock it because all her friends and relatives could see it and would get worried for the break up and always asking her for news. So, by locking it, she stopped the pressure they were doing on her, but she chose to use another channel of communication: WeChat. On WeChat she had no relatives and no close friends, but a smaller audience and, most importantly her ex boyfriend, so she could post there tragic phrases and even pictures depicting her carving herself with the purpose of making her ex boyfriend feeling guilty and at the same time not making anyone, like family or close friends, worried about her. So, we can see the differentiation of audience according to the social media used in each case: relatives and close friends are on Qzone, while colleagues and acquaintances on WeChat. The choice of which social to use it's not random at all, but behind the decision of which one to use and that to communicate and post on WeChat, rather than on QQ, there's a specific reasoning related to the audience we want to communicate something. For example, in Lujia's case the wrong decision on which feature to use for showing love to his girlfriend lead him to failure because the QQ group was totally inappropriate in this case.

New social norms have been established with the presence of social media in everyone's life. Social media offer people many ways to live their human

⁵³ Xinyuan Wang op., cit., p. 112

⁵⁴ Xinyuan Wang Ibidem

relationships: they let them live even more freely, like in the case in which kissing is not allowed in the streets, due to social norms, on the contrary it is totally allowed in online context. This freedom doesn't mean absence of rules, there are new ones to be followed, instead. For example, public discussion about arguments between the partners of the couple is perceived as weird on social media leading even more unwelcome results. The sociologist Erving Goffman theorizes the word "frame", referring to all the components of people's attitude in the context of action. In social media frame people take advantage of the private/public essence of social media to reveal, on purpose, the officialdom of a relationship, like in the case of Lujia, even if in his case he chose the wrong channel through which make its announcement.

On online context the fear of what other may think about us is the same than in offline world: the reactions that may arouse a post on online social media generate anxiety, because the risk of looking foolish is exactly the same as the one in real life, even worse, because the number of people "staring" at us is much bigger online.

2.2.3 Privacy on Chinese social media

The concept of privacy is very difficult for Chinese society, in fact, it is a collective society with its own paradigm and, actually, there isn't a Chinese word for "privacy". The only word which is close to it has an illegal connotation: *yinsi* 隐私 . This word is formed by two words: *yin* which means to hide and *si* that stays for "secret", so basically, privacy for Chinese society is something wrong and implies that there's something that needs to be hidden. Having private space or belongings was condemned within Chinese society and so, opposite to Western society situation, social media in China brought with them the new concept of privacy which before didn't exist. From the examples we saw above, the feature of privacy on social network was used in many cases as a positive thing: in Lan's case, her husband was far away from home for work and didn't have time during the day, the locked album, to which just the two partners could have access was a relief for him.

In Huang Ling's case privacy on social media let her stop her relatives from asking about the break-up with her boyfriend.

Another example of more privacy on social media, than in real life is the case of CiCi. She lives a collective dormitory in a room with three other girls, so she doesn't have any privacy at all. She found her private space on QQ, where she can be "totally free", as herself says ⁵⁵. Even to have more privacy with her boyfriend she prefers to text to him on QQ, rather than speaking on phone calls. The nature of privacy is not to keep everything secret and confidential, but is having the right to decide with whom to share personal things and be comfortable with this choice. So, when posting on online social media, people are aware that they are sharing contents with other people, but this online audience is different, than offline public. People choose online "followers"/"friends" and they are on the same wavelength with them, so they can express themselves without the fear of being judged or misunderstood. All the cases shown here demonstrate how social media let people to have more control on their social life: they can divide people in categories in different contact lists, they can allow or not others to see their contents by the feature of privacy, they can make public announcement to show love to the beloved one.

2.3 The reshape of Chinese moral values

The use of social media has changed the whole Chinese society in different aspects.

In the globalization era Chinese traditional values from Confucian times have dramatically changed and they have been totally reshaped. Confucian values entail being stable on the same status quo and not climbing the ladder in order to respect the social hierarchies, that implied a huge disparity between aristocracy and the masses. Parsimony, suppression of desire and postpone gratification from consumption were the cornerstones of Confucianism. After the fast economic, social and technological change, including the rise of social media, all these values have been suddenly adjusted to the new needs, especially for young generations. Parsimony has been substituted with massive consumption, fostered by the spread of hedonistic values, conveyed by all medias through advertisements. While functional needs decreased, there's an increase in consumerism due to the rise of hedonic needs, coming from Chinese quick development and its new condition of world economic power and also from the

⁵⁵Xinyuan Wang op., cit., p. 122

acquisition of Western values. Globalization promotes universal growth of the desire of materialistic goods, increasing the extent of individualism, which is a new concept for Chinese society, formerly based on collectivity and cooperation, key concepts of the Communist government. Materialism and hedonism among young people are also the result of globalized generation. The old values of frugality and thriftiness, in view of saving money for looking after family senior members, are now replaced by hedonistic values that pursue materialistic needs fueling the desire of saving money for spending it in purchasing unnecessary goods. In this concept things go round and round, since Chinese people developed this attitude based on saving in order to spend on consumerist goods. These material needs among Chinese people are a result of globalization, which increases the pursuit of instantaneous pleasure, in contrast to the Confucian principle of delaying personal gratification. Materialism also manifests itself in the form of envy for other's possessions and material goods⁵⁶. In contrast to the Confucian principle of suppressing desire, Chinese society is constantly experiencing strong desire toward superfluous stuff and Chinese people are becoming more and more oriented towards individualism and personal liberty. As a result of these changes and reshaping of Chinese values, the feeling of desire is no longer considered a taboo in China. Nowadays Chinese people freely show their desires, instead of suppressing them. In this context social media have a key role in determining such changes of values, with a special mention to Weibo. Facilitating the merge of social upper classes and common people is one of the great merit of Weibo. Weibo gives a glimpse of freedom of expression in the difficult context of Chinese society in which there are still strict rules on what is allowed to talk about and what is censored, that's also one of the reasons why it has an important impact on Chinese community. Even if government censored many contents and social media are not yet free as Western ones, on Weibo, people started to share their opinions. Weibo is not "just" a social media, but it has become one of the main means of information for Chinese young people. From the analysis and the interpretation of Weibo messages, it is possible to have a more detailed perspective on consumers' values in the social media era. On Sina Weibo there are much more retweeted

⁵⁶ Jingyi Duan and Nikhilesh Dholakia "The reshaping of Chinese consumer values in the social media era. Exploring the impact of Weibo", p.411, College of Business Administration, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, Rhode Island, USA www.emeraldinsight.com/1352-2752.htm

messages, than on Twitter: 65% of posts are retweets⁵⁷, they have a didactic function since Weibo users are encouraged to learn about any topic, in general just through these retweets. In Weibo context verified users tend to attract more followers and to produce more interactions, than common users. So verified users tend to open a debate on a certain topic and common users that comment have the chance to become popular as well, getting into the top list and by the retweet of their messages.

In traditional Chinese society, *guanxi* 关系 refers to social relationships and specifically to a network of very deep, both civil and economic relationships. This concept has its roots in Confucian doctrine, that sees the individual as part of a community. In this paradigm, *guanxi* was a group of contacts of people to which individuals could ask for help in case of necessity. This network of interpersonal relationships was established since school, when parents chose a scholar environment for their children, in which they could build their group of social contacts to be brought throughout entire life. *Guanxi* shows itself in social media context as well. The way of establishing relationships in social media is different than the one in offline world within Chinese society. *Guanxi* on social media becomes *e-guanxi*. *E-guanxi* is the set of interpersonal relationships on social media and it is regulated by some factors: gender, whether a user is verified or not and geographic location. Weibo users tend more to establish *e-guanxi* with people at the same or higher social status and less with people on a lower social level, which is actually the same thing that happens in Chinese offline society. Weibo users tend to have follow relationships with other users attending, for example, the same school or living in the same city.

The difference between mass media and personal social media lies in the interactive nature of the second ones. Mass media are unilateral and have an informative function, while social media have a bilateral function, because they both have the purpose to inform, but with a more dynamic connotation, in which people can exchange opinion and open debate about those information. Mass media, in the past years, influenced changes within society like helping modernization, stimulating materialistic ethic, attaining unnecessary needs and generating desires.

⁵⁷ Jingyi Duan and Nikhilesh Dholakia op., cit., p.412

From a research, conducted by Jingyi Duan and Nikhilesh Dholakia from the College of Business Administration of the University of Rhode Island⁵⁸, based on 15 active Weibo users, randomly picked up and monitored for one month. They, then decided to keep just most active users among those 15 and the users involved in the research remained 8. Half of these 8 were verified users with the V icon, which is given by Weibo to users with a vip status. Usually those are users that work through Sina Weibo. V icon is conferred after a self request and after verifications by Sina Weibo staff. The other 4 participants in the research are non- verified common users. They all have different levels of educational background, aged around 28. After having analyzed all the forms of comments, retweets, posts four main arguments emerged: demonstration of desire, immediacy of hedonism, materialism and the merge of aristocracy and common people values.

First thing is the demonstration of desire that is fueled on social media. There's a spasmodic attraction towards consumerist goods. Users on Weibo, clearly show this desire for products they haven't got yet. This craving is generated by the obsession of nowadays society towards "good life", referring to luxury lifestyles, better if shown and exposed on social media. The action of reposting and retweeting others' messages on Weibo about desired products or lifestyles reveals the desire of users and they show it through this sharing of contents. Cravings toward material objects is not seen as a shame anymore, on the contrary, this feeling of yearning others' possessions or luxury things is exhibit fiercely. Social media become the perfect place in which to display belongings, travels, luxury experiences ostentatiously, with a hint of desire to generate envy in the other people watching. The condition of constantly wanting more is seen as a fascinating and captivating pursuit of an ideal style of life, full of superfluous things. This pursuit stands in stark contrast with the Confucian pillars that promote to live a life with a sense of humbleness and exercising frugality. As a result, social media lead to an overthrow of Chinese traditional main common values. This is mostly about Chinese young generations, who don't restrain their impulses at all, by showing earnestly their deepest dreams and cravings on social media, showing off all their opulence and wealth online. This phenomenon of parading each single thing on Weibo and other social

⁵⁸ Jingyi Duan and Nikhilesh Dholakia op., cit., p.412

media is much more present on Chinese social media, rather than in Western ones. All of this is reflected also while Chinese people travel to Western destinations, in which they, not only expect a normal good service, but they require a type of service that is specifically shaped on the necessities of Chinese guests and consumers, due to their cultural characteristics.

The second step on the overthrow of Chinese ancient values, in support of the approach towards Western values, that didn't exist in China, before modernization and globalization, is the immediacy of hedonism. The development of attitudes of the here and now, of "everything at once" has become a feature of Chinese young people and these attitudes at odds with Confucian moral values of delaying pleasure and self gratification. What is hedonism and what characterize an hedonic experience? Hedonism is, by definition "a purposeful pursuit of pleasure with rational actions" (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaghnessy, 2002) ⁵⁹. In Weibo context the "rational action" is not only the action itself, but the action itself is empowered by the sharing with other people and users. For example buying a luxury bag while drinking champagne offered by the luxury store in question is a rational action of hedonism, but by sharing this action on Weibo or on any other social media makes it even ten times more "hedonistic" because there is a much more huge audience that will see it. Hedonistic posts on Weibo are largely frequent because users really enjoy a lot posting this type of experiences, it is a way for them for feeding their ego. Sharing on Weibo makes each act of consumption an experience of hedonism.

Another predominant feature, within social media context is materialism. "Materialism is defined as the importance a consumer attaches to material goods and possessions" (Belk, 1985)⁶⁰. Explicit materialism is obviously in contrast with the Confucian ancient values of parsimony and thriftiness, hence we can state that Chinese traditional values are almost absent in the Chinese social media frame. Besides the value of thriftiness, materialism goes also against communist principles of community, like family and religious values⁶¹. Through social media features of liking each other contents, comments and reactions, a

⁵⁹ Jingyi Duan and Nikhilesh Dholakia op., cit., p. 416

⁶⁰ Jingyi Duan and Nikhilesh Dholakia Ibidem

⁶¹ Jingyi Duan and Nikhilesh Dholakia Ibidem

sort of competition is generated among users and this also fuels the compulsive consumption and the subsequent show off of the act of consumption in question. The more a user show off his richness, high quality lifestyle, travels in idyllic destinations, the more he gets self gratification from others reactions and so, users enter into competition with each other about who gets more social interactions on his posts and about who has the most desirable life. Of course, life shown online doesn't always match with reality, because the trend on social media is always to post the best one has or does, negative aspects of life are avoided and this can lead to frustrating feelings to some people because they take for granted that what they see on social media reflects offline life and that truly those people don't have any troubles or difficulties in their lives, but of course it's not like this. So social media, can also bring people to experience a detachment from reality.

Another finding from the research is the merge of upper social classes and lower social classes values on social media. Since Weibo is wildly used by celebrities and "important" people to communicate and convey messages, it helps in this merge because the discussions started by verified users (users with a vip status on the social, due to their number of followers and interactions with others) are then carried on by non- verified users (which represent the lower social classes). Fans, not only comment and repost vip posts, but vip as well comment on common people and fan posts. Upper and lower classes are not so distant anymore. On social media, in fact, there is not an unilateral communication, but there is always bilateral one and this is reflected on the fusion and equalization of all different levels of society. Verified users share and make public and visible "normal" people, non verified users contents. Furthermore, it is observed that the three most popular posting on Weibo are created by common users, non vip ones, and a lot of comments and reactions on these posts come right from elite groups of users. The retweet feature is very relevant in the social media arena because it allows the spread of the message, that can reach many more people and involve more users in the conversation, producing a more variegated discussion, full of different point of views and opinions. As a result, two historically separated social classes, nowadays not only are in contact with each other, but even influence each other attitude.

To sum up what stated above, we can say that, for sure there are either positive and negative aspects in the social media frame.

Chinese consumers' have changed due to modernization, globalization and the widespread of social media usage. Weibo, in this case, have totally reshaped Chinese consumers behavior. As above mentioned, demonstration of desire, immediacy of hedonism and materialism are all new feature in Chinese society framework. They took the place of ancient values, such as delaying gratification. For example, being always connected and the easiness of sharing contents on social media satisfy consumers' hunger of flaunting, because they can switch from a personal and individual sphere to a public audience with just one click, posting consumption experiences. So, gratification is not anymore delayed, but there's an immediate and instant personal fulfillment, which is just what Chinese people are looking for, nowadays, after years and years of self restriction imposed by Confucianism first and Communist government after. The "enjoy now" mood is the new motto for Chinese young people, they crave luxury possessions, luxury experiences, objects that have a social role. By saying that, I want to assess that, these material goods, that they ardently desire, actually, mirror their desire of being on a high social rankig, that can make them being admired and influence other people. We can just note that other ancient values, as well, such as frugality and suppression of desire have already disappeared in the cause of materialistic and Westernized values. By the way, Chinese social media appear to be much more oriented towards consumerist hedonism, than Western ones. This orientation towards consumption and towards displaying publicly acts of consumption helps firms to gain customers. By saying this is implicit how Weibo and all the other social media have key role in business. Let's set an example for deeper understanding of this concept, Chinese travelers do have an effect on regions outside China. Chinese people were the biggest number of consumers in tourism by 2014 and as claimed by Accor Hotel group's report⁶², 91% of Chinese tourists were really active on social media during trips, through uploading contents, sharing etc. Weibo users, in fact, are very inclined to post on social media during travels and trips and this also is connected to the fact of showing off and to realize acts of hedonism. People who have the possibility to travel, in far away from home locations and to stay in five star

⁶² Jingyi Duan and Nikhilesh Dholakia op., cit., p. 418

hotels, eat in gourmet restaurants reveal (or at least apparently) a really high status quo and that's right what Chinese people want to boast of. Data shown on social media from Chinese users who post and review places in which they go, is a precious thing for businessman because they can collect information on consumers and on the market and adapt the offer to consumer needs. In this field, usage of social media is fundamental, brands and merchants can get to know: gender, age, number of followers, geographic area and type of user (verified account user or not) from analyzing Weibo information.

The other positive effect of social media found is the equalization of social strata because on Weibo everyone has a voice, independently whether he or she has a verified account or not, and the huge gap among the classes has been bridged thanks to it.

2.4 Can social media generate philanthropy?

Another phenomenon shown on social media is that the communication between celebrities, verified users and common people, who can be called “fans” or “followers”, generates philanthropy acts. At least apparently. The strong relationship that is established between celebrities on social media and their followers, as discussed above it is an equal and bilateral relationship, that can also lead to charity and benefic acts. In particular, we will focus on the philanthropic initiatives started from people who became famous through music TV-shows. This form of philanthropy has a specific name: *celanthropy*, which stands for “celebrity” and “philanthropy” and refers to acts of philanthropy promoted by celebrities. A research⁶³ was conducted on philanthropic initiatives that begun in 2005, generated online by four Chinese popstars. They are: two female singers Li Yuchun, Ji Minjia who come from a very famous talent tv show called “*Super girl*” (*chaoji nusheng 超级女生*)⁶⁴ on Hunan Satellite Television between 2004 and 2006. Male singers: Zhang Jie, who was the winner of another talent TV show, based in Shanghai, called “*My show*” (*woxingwoxiu 我型我秀*), but actually he became very popular when he won

⁶³ Elaine Jeffreys and Jian Xu (2017) “*Celebrity-inspired, Fan driven: Doing Philanthropy through Social Media in Mainland China*”, *Asian Studies Review*, 41:2, p. 244-262, DOI: 10.1080/10357823.2017.1294145
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2017.1294145>

⁶⁴ Elaine Jeffreys and Jian Xu (2017) op., cit. p. 245

fourth place in the male version of *Super Girl*, called “*Super Boy*” (*Kuaile Nansheng* 快乐男生), in 2007. Another male singer involved in philanthropic activities is Jing Boran, who became famous for winning the Shanghai Dragon Television contest in 2007, named as “*My Hero*” (*Jiayou! Hao nan'er* 加油! 好男儿).

Collecting information about the philanthropic initiatives conducted by them, whose popularity comes from interactive audience participation, resulted that they were not powered by celebrities’ personal social media profiles. This sponsorship takes place in government-affiliated philanthropic associations, that make known the involvement of these celebrities and their fandom with them. Differently from Western countries, in which forms of philanthropy are linked to not-for-profit organizations, in China this is strictly connected to government. There’s a logistic explanation to this: in mainland China, it’s illegal to raise public funds by charitable organizations that are not administrated directly by the government. So, celebrities’ fans are, basically, are involved in philanthropy initiatives wanted by the government and sponsored through celebrities.

Results of the research tells that about these initiatives there’s both a good side and a bad side. Criticism arose in the public opinion, but let’s explore this further. In these acts of philanthropy generated and promoted by celebrities, there’s a passive nature in who is involved in donating. That’s because, as stated by many people, fans were moved to donate, not for the charity cause itself, but just because it was something sponsored by certain celebrities, so to get in good with their favorite idols and to make benevolence acts towards them.

Anyway, as stated by many others, criticism doesn’t have a case because, regardless of the aim by which fans are moved for donating, younger generations are truly getting involved in charities after these were sponsored by their idols. So, by the promotion of philanthropy causes by celebrities, the main goal is achieved: Chinese young people, that usually only care about shallow issues, get attracted by significant topics and speak about them on social media, creating social networks that care about social issues.

2.5 Social media for China's workers

Social media reached Chinese rural workers as well and gave them a political voice, that didn't have before. The wide diffusion of technologies of the past decades and the affordability of mini digital devices for recording let Chinese rural workers report the hard work in the fields. Social media, like QQ or WeChat are a great media for employers because they can find on them any kind of material, such as blogs, photography, poems, films or any other visual art content about themselves or made by themselves. Social media has been a tool exploited by them for creating any sort of contents about their struggled and complicated condition and about social gaps of which they are still victims. Unfortunately this workers activism is frowned upon by the government because this gives too much right of speech to them and the self-empowerment and digital technologies led too much freedom. Censorship from the government and political forces even caused imprisonments in some cases, so, unluckily for rural migrants, differently from all other cases discussed above in which social media were very helpful and their usage had a constant and improving spread, in the case of migrant workers the use of social media struggling to obtain more rights and empowerment dramatically diminished because of censorship. So, while in all the other fields social media are growing every day faster, the complaint of labour activists was censored.

2.6 Social media and business

Weibo and Wechat are the two main social media, in China, involved in business activities. From the analysis⁶⁵ of social networks resources and data we will see, in this paragraph, the influences social media have on entrepreneurship and business creation from start-up companies.

Social media are, nowadays, one of the most important means of information and so reaching knowledge has become much easier for Chinese youngest generations, even if one of the biggest challenge for social media is to fight against the spread of fake news.

Social media deeply transformed the means from which to draw information and become the principal one: easiness, immediacy, anytime and anywhere are all characteristics of online media and that's why they mostly took the place of traditional

⁶⁵ Arun Sukumar, Zimu Xu and Guannan Chen, "*The influences of Social Media on Chinese Start-up Stage Entrepreneurship*"p. 1041-1048 Coventry University, UK 10.34190/ECIE.19.229

media. In recent years in China there's been an encouragement from Chinese government to improve entrepreneurial activities, with incentives regarding university learning on entrepreneurship, preferential tax policies on start up and small businesses (Cai, et al., 2014)⁶⁶. Since social media are a stage in which is very easy to find and share information, their use on firm level and business activities allow Chinese young entrepreneurs either to learn from others shared experience and, so, to improve their business, either to enlarge their social network of contacts. The advantages of social media, involved in business activities are plenty. Social media can be used whenever and whatever who wants, from everyone, so this goes beyond geographic boundaries that used to limit intercommunication and share of information before. This social media feature is very helpful in marketing strategies for business. For example, since online shopping took over, the information sharing among consumers became fundamental. In online shopping, there's not the visual component of making decision purchase in stores, so the opinions of people who already purchased a product is crucial for those who haven't decided yet whether to buy or not something. On social media there's a mutual share of information and experiences about products in the purchasing process and this is a great step for globalization and for entrepreneurial activities, because it has an effect both on national and international market, since online medias are accessible from anyone, anywhere. Plus the huge visibility firms can gain through social media for sales promotion have very restricted costs.

Companies, always more frequently, start to establish official brand accounts on social media in order to be noticeable and reachable from online platform users, that can become future clients. Firms official accounts post pictures, videos and any kind of social content providing information about their products and their usage, with the aim of arousing curiosity on future consumers and letting them know about any promotion, news and special events. All these social media activities have the purpose of increasing sales and, above all, to retain clients by making them feel as part of a community, almost like a family, to which they belong in purchasing products and being active through likes and comments on the brand social account. Besides brands official accounts, many times owner of business or top leaders of a brand set up personal profile accounts, with the aim of attracting hypothetical clients as well, by letting them get in their personal sphere and letting them acknowledged about the brand history, for

⁶⁶ Arun Sukumar, Zimu Xu and Guannan Chen op., cit., p.1041

example, or the great sacrifice and hard work there is behind a finished product (that otherwise customers wouldn't be able to know without the presence of social media and brand related accounts). Through businessman official personal accounts, followers can, also, feel inspired by the experience and success shared in building an entrepreneurial activity. Young people can be inspired by these successful stories in following their own dreams and playing out their projects. Another point in great favor of social media is that, the communication between company and its clients occur without any interference of third party, establishing a direct and honest communication that could have a good influence on young peoples' decisions and carriers to undertake.

In this idyllic landscape, social media also have to fight against monsters that spoil their positive role of conveying information, messages and exchanging ideas. Since there are not yet clear and transparent laws about social media usage, due to the fact that is a relatively newborn practice and government are still trying to figure out how to regulate certain wrong behaviors within social media context , one of the dangers is that fake news could freely circulate and people, who don't double check the information they find, could be misled. False information could negatively influence people and in the social media marketing context as well, consumers could be misled and manipulated by dishonest brand campaigns.

Youngest generations are the most susceptible part of users, due to their younger age could get through bad experience within social networks, for example the presence of the so called "haters", users who, mostly with fake profiles, post negative comments and insults, just with the aim of hurting others, hiding behind screens and false identities. That's why government need to establish precise regulations on these cases.

Another bad issue in the social media frame is the violation of copyrights and the challenge of protecting intellectual property. This is the downside of easiness and immediacy of information, that circulate freely online and, unluckily, someone could appropriate of them misrepresenting them and reposting these information without quoting the real author. So, this is a huge issue for personal accounts and either for business activities that work through the creation of contents on social media.

Of course, the great effect from the spread of information on social media, as Twitter, Facebook, Youtube in Western Countries and Sina Weibo and WeChat for China, represents a facilitation for the informative distribution process within networks. To go

further in details about social media and entrepreneurship, it is necessary to start right from the influence of social media on businessman, in the specific context of Chinese economy, that has its own paradigm and features. The influence of social platforms on Chinese start-up companies need to be investigated. Later on, the pursuit of the research ⁶⁷ focuses on how Chinese young people perceive entrepreneurship and how their opinion, on this, is influenced by social media networks.

To collect main data, the research in question ⁶⁸ makes use of interviews and questionnaires from a sample of present and past undergraduate students of a university based in Shanghai, whose age is between 20 and 30 years old. All the participants have to be interested in setting up a business or had already done so. 25 interviews took place and 100 responses were collected from the questionnaire. All the results were collected in an anonymous way in order not to violate privacy of participants. The questions were about the understanding of the connection between social network and participants entrepreneurial activity, specifically on aspects, such as frequency of daily use of social media and the importance of taking business decisions, based on the information collected from social media channels.

Participants were asked to respond about their: experiences on entrepreneurship, and about their profile attitudes on social media, like, ages, gender, organization of social activities whether, on a daily or weekly basis, and their opinions on the influences of social media on business and entrepreneurial activities. Participants were divided into four groups according to their age: first group composed by the 45 ones aged from 20 to 25, second group included 32 participants whose age was between 26 and 30, third group was made of 17 participants, aged between 31 and 35 and the last group included the last 6 participants, whose age was over 35. 47 participants were female and 53 males.

First result of the research is the differentiation in social media usage, due to a differences in the age. Participants between 20 and 25⁶⁹ year-old resulted more active on social media. 39 out of 45 participants in their group, access to social media at least once a day and 22 of them tell that log into social platforms more than 3 times in a day. Definitely, the most active group in the use of social media is the first one, with the youngest participants.

⁶⁷ Arun Sukumar, Zimu Xu and Guannan Chen op., cit., p. 1043

⁶⁸ Arun Sukumar, Zimu Xu and Guannan Chen Ibidem

Weibo, WeChat and Twitter and Facebook as well, despite censorship, resulted as the four main social media channels used by young Chinese people. Weibo and WeChat are leaders in this field, with 82% of participants active on both of them. The third group, whose participants are aged between 31 and 35, shows a subtle difference, with 11 participants who prefer Weibo and 15 prefer WeChat. Unlike the rest of the world, in this Chinese research, only 18 participants prefer Twitter and just 8, Facebook. But, younger Chinese people demonstrate to be active both, on Chinese and international social media. That's why, despite censure by Chinese government, Chinese young people are able to use tools to bypass the Chinese "Great firewall", which is the virtual wall built by Chinese government, for isolating, in a certain sense, Chinese people from the penetration of foreign news and online contents. Chinese young people use specific tools for going beyond this censorship and having access to international media and social media. This tools are called "VPN", virtual private networks, that allow users to make them appear to be located in different geographic countries, so they can have free access to all websites. These VPNs can be either free or paid by subscription. Without these tools, Chinese people couldn't be informed to the latest international news on marketing and technology. Participant 4⁷⁰ says that he benefits from the usage of Twitter, by the many innovative information present on the foreign social media and using them to improve his business in China.

An important data emerged from the questionnaire⁷¹, is the high influential feature of social media on entrepreneurship marketing. Data speak for themselves: 69 out of 100 participants say that they are occasionally influenced, 21 out of 100 admit that social media contents highly influence them and, only, 10 out of 100 participants affirm that are rarely influenced. As a result, we can state that 90 out of 100 participants declare the effective influence of social media in real life, especially, among young people. Another differentiation lies in gender: female are more disposed to acknowledge the influence of social media, than man. 34% of woman believes social media as extremely influential, and only 9.4% of men admit this. 44 woman and 46 men participants state that social media are influential at different extents.

⁷⁰ Arun Sukumar, Zimu Xu and Guannan Chen op., cit., p. 1045

⁷¹ Arun Sukumar, Zimu Xu and Guannan Chen op., cit., p. 1043

Questionnaire and interviews show⁷² reasons why to stay active on social media, as well. First of all, one of the main reasons emerged is to collect information and being informed. Even though Weibo and WeChat are both the most popular social media for searching information, Chinese people being interviewed said that they prefer Weibo, over all the others, because it provide more detailed and reliable information. From the interview of one participant clearly emerged this data: the importance of the presence of official accounts, and in this specific case, of newspaper editorial staff official accounts, because users can draw information on them. So, social media, is not only a merely a leisure activity, but it is an important source of information, spread through its channels. The danger of fake news is always present, but anyway, Weibo, can be considered the first place, for Chinese young people, where to seek for information.

It must be made a differentiation when choosing a social media channel for marketing purposes. Weibo and Wechat offer different functions and features in promoting commercial actions. As emerged from participant 7 interview⁷³, WeChat is considered the most useful tool for sales promotion because it allows a more “intimate” and close relationship with the audience, that is composed by potential buyers. Followers of business accounts on WeChat, seem to be more inclined in purchasing products because they feel more confident, due to the fact that WeChat is a more close platform, than, for example, Weibo. When potential clients choose to become followers of the official account, they are already very much interested in the offered products. For participant 7, the usage of WeChat has a key role in the success of his business. So, companies usually create official accounts on WeChat for sponsoring their products and let future consumers get to know information about those. Making sales through WeChat is easier, also because, there’s a direct communication between person who sales and person who buys, the buying process can be very quick and fast. While Weibo is more regarded to the release of information about the specific features and characteristic of the products, it’s a more informative tool. A consumer can easily find information of what he wants to purchase on Weibo, but then, it’s more difficult to have a private conversation, because of its open and public nature.

⁷² Arun Sukumar, Zimu Xu and Guannan Chen op., cit., p. 1045

⁷³ Arun Sukumar, Zimu Xu and Guannan Chen Ibidem

All the participants, involved in the research, concur in the distinction of functions relying between WeChat and Weibo, in marketing practices. Thus, it can be said that, the principal entrepreneurial functions of social media are: first of all, to collect data and information and immediately after to analyze them in order to develop managerial strategies and decisions that are appropriate and aimed at obtaining an improvement on the business. Secondly, it is necessary to promote customized marketing activities and communication, directly with customers and providing them customized services to seal the deal.

Influences of social media on entrepreneurship are largely recognized by all interviewed participants, who declare, that they all read information about government entrepreneurial policies. 91 out of 100 participants think that information coming from social media are more reliable than the ones coming from other sources. Plus, all of them consider that social media play a key role in entrepreneurial activities, useful in business promotion.

Since, social media are regarded as a means for sharing and drawing information, politics have a role on them too, authorities make use of social media to launch government policies and for explaining them in details. Participant 11⁷⁴ says, on this issue, that it is important to have more than just one point of view about government policies, so social media feature of sharing opinions is determinant in this. Entrepreneurs can either get information from authorities official accounts with detailed explanation of the policies, but they can also have access to different interpretations of them. In entrepreneurs' hard process of taking decisions about their business activity, reading the interpretation from specialists and their expertise can be a great help. Anyway, to make the right decision, it's fundamental that they have their own idea and competences on a certain issue.

Participant 18⁷⁵ underlines that the most critical side of social media is analyzing the information, in order to understand whether they are fake news or not. Given that, the ability of recognizing false and true information should be taken for granted in entrepreneurs' case, but actually, in the social media frame, it can be harder, because the amount of circulating information is very high, and so, to research the truthfulness of an information is requested a strong effort of energy and time. As reported by participant

⁷⁴Arun Sukumar, Zimu Xu and Guannan Chen op., cit., p. 1046

⁷⁵Arun Sukumar, Zimu Xu and Guannan Chen Ibidem

18, as well, his business was spoiled by a false information for a period and this taught him that social media is a wonderful media, but it has to be handled with care, because it can also lead to very serious consequences.

Participant 21⁷⁶ even says that he couldn't become an entrepreneur without social media. He created his own business by setting up a personal account on social media, putting together a group of people that followed him. But, he says also, that by now it has become difficult creating business gathering people, because there are too many accounts and they are all the same, so people are not anymore so likely to follow new accounts. In his opinion, the negative side of social media relies, just in the absence of intellectual property rights. There is no solution about this issue, but even though the presence of such issues, the fundamental role of social media within entrepreneurship world is undeniable. Information on social media greatly influence Chinese young people, because they are active online on a daily basis, even for many hours a day. So, their decision in purchasing products or in choosing services offered by entrepreneurs are greatly affected by their researches on social media.

To sum it is fundamental for entrepreneurs to be able to develop and carry on correct social media strategies, to improve their sales or business activities in general. Anyway, it must be said that this research could also have some flaws because it's only conducted on the basis of 100 responses, recorded for the questionnaire and 25 for interview. Plus, the questions in the questionnaire contain a limited amount of topics, and also the fact that all participants are from Shanghai University, make it not sufficient to establish a statistical analysis.

2.6. 1The importance of choosing the right marketing strategy

As outlined in the paragraph above, speaking of entrepreneurship promotion on social media with marketing and sales promotion intents, one of the most important things to take into consideration, is the development of the right marketing strategy, because this can lead to a triumphant success or to a tragic defeat.

Companies coming from all parts of the world make great use of social media for any intent: from promoting books, movies, all sort of social events, products etc... in doing so, there's the need of being careful whether not to hurt anyones' sensibility, because

⁷⁶ Arun Sukumar, Zimu Xu and Guannan Chen Ibidem

social media are a virtual place in which real people hardly forget others' mistake. Let's explain this concept better. For example⁷⁷, one American event organizer, which used Facebook to promote and assemble sponsors for the annual Turkey Trot (which is an American annual footrace, usually set on Thanksgiving Day), held for charity reasons.

The problem turned out when one of the organizers of the Turkish Trot thanked, as it should be, the Christian center sponsor. It was found out that this Christian center (unwittingly to organizers) hosted in the past a gay recovery initiative, and such a thing is very badly seen in the context of United States in which gay rights are very felt as a social issue. A fan posted an angry comment for the choice of this sponsor for this event and, even if it was immediately deleted, and others were blocked from the account, it was already too late to stop the controversy arose. All offenders, right after being banned from the official page of the event, created a Facebook group as a sign of protest, with the aim of boycotting the footrace event, for having chosen a sponsor that is against gay rights. All this is to say that, even the slightest oversight, on social media, can lead to very serious consequences and to huge mess. It's necessary to be extremely careful while posting on social media, especially when it is about official events and organizations (most of all for verified profiles and who work with them), in keeping consistency with own personal ideologies and continuity in messages that one wants to convey, because otherwise, in social media is easy to lead to misunderstandings and communicative disasters that hardly can be solved, then. On social media, in fact, the posting of any post that is not in line with the community is a big issue, because even if noticing immediately the mistake, that post would have already had big visibility and probably photographed and shared online by most active followers, that won't easily forget about the mistake, especially if it is something about sensitive themes.

Another issue about advertising through social media is that, often netizens express opinions based on untruthful and misleading news. For example, in 2011 a scandal⁷⁸ occurred on Sina Weibo regarding a Chinese luxury furniture retailer based in Singapore, named Da Vinci Invest PTE Ltd. Da Vinci was accused of selling into the Chinese market made in China products, selling them as luxury made in Italy items. Actually this presumed fraud scam damaged Da Vinci image and that's just the downside of social media. Companies reputation can be ruined within only one second,

⁷⁷ Jonathan Poston, "*The Unsocial Network*" on Beijing Review, January 9, 2012 NO. 2 January 12, 2012 www.bjreview.com.cn/life/txt/2012-01/09/content_419120.htm

⁷⁸ Jonathan Poston Ibidem

in social media context, and it doesn't matter if the bomb detonated from false or true information.

To summarize we can state that the risks of social media mostly are: it's easier for competitors to attack; since the presence of censorship in some countries, like China in this case, international companies could have troubles by promoting themselves on sites, that are actually blocked in that country; being present on social media increases the risk of being hacked either for companies and their clients; operations and performances on social media may not being steady from a year to another; there's no guarantee that sales will improve by using social media; it could seem "free" at the beginning, but social media hide certain costs, as personnel hours, potential lawsuits costs, custom loyalty development; sometimes it could play a distractive role for staff and clients, rather than having a marketing effort.

2.6.2 Social media and luxury brands

After the change and reshape of Chinese social values, as deeply discussed above, consequently to the fact that after 90's Chinese people become much wealthier, luxury western brands started to have a great success in the Chinese market. China, in fact, is nowadays the largest e-commerce market in the world and, Chinese luxury goods market, is one of the biggest as well.

One of the main hallmarks of Chinese luxury market is that 60%⁷⁹ of Chinese luxury consumers are under the age of 40, while in western market under 40 luxury brands customers are only 38%. Because of their young age, their presence is prominent in online context, especially on social media. Data show that around 70%⁸⁰ of Chinese consumers do online researches for luxury brands at least once a month and 40% want to buy from these brands online. 57% of the totality of Chinese purchasers follow brands on social media, while in the rest of the world this percentage is 38%. So, it is clear that, for all brands, having a social media account plays a key role in sales and profits. Usually brands pages provide information on their company, on their products and usually they have efficient social media employees that engage with potential

⁷⁹ Mark Ng "Social media and luxury fashion brands in China: the case of Coach", *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing*, 2014, 5:3, p. 252, DOI: 10.1080/20932685.2014.907607
<https://doi.org/10.1080/20932685.2014.907607>

⁸⁰ Mark Ng, *Ibidem*

clients one to one communication to answer to their doubts in the decision purchasing process.

Since luxury brands market is different than common brands market, it deserved to be discussed it in a special chapter. At the beginning, luxury social brands were not interested at all in investing on social media marketing strategy. That's because internet and social networks were seen as a mass medium tool, used for reaching people on a middle social class average, that wouldn't match with a luxury brand target market. If a product is accessible to anyone, then, it won't be a luxury product anymore and social networks were seen as mainly used for promoting brands through the launch of discounts or special offers online. Basically, the values of luxury brands seemed not to match internet characteristics for being too "popular" and accessible to anyone.

In recent years, there was a drastic change of course and luxury brands finally decided to approach to social media marketing, because they recognized their high profit value, by the abilities of increasing the reputation and the value of the brand. Social media enhance all the values a luxury brand has: financial, functional, individual, social, hedonic, symbolic and relational value. (inserire tabella di pag. 256) Financial values are enhanced on social media not only by exclusive online sales promotion, but also providing information on the product and emphasizing certain qualities, such as quality and service. Functional values is given by the diffusion through social media accounts of brand knowledge and information. Individual value, related to the hedonic act of buying a luxury product is obtained by the interaction with celebrities, model and any category of people with a high social status, direct involvement of customers in designing or matching products, unique buying experience and entertainment through the creation of contents. Symbolic value refers to product uniqueness and iconicity of a product that will never die. Relational value is related to the direct interaction with users on social media accounts that include: sharing information within community, interaction between community members, brand fests and events for community members.

2.6.3 A successful luxury brand social media marketing strategy: the case of Coach in China

Coach, Inc. is a luxury American leather goods company, worldwide famous for its handbags, suitcases, wallets etc... it started its operation of entering Chinese market in

the 90's by opening 24 stores in China and a huge one in Hong Kong and it is now one of the top five brands in China. Coach is a middle-class oriented brand, with a young target market, defining itself as an "accessible luxury brand". From 2009 the brand kept on enlarging its presence in China by opening many stores and also some in discount factory outlets. In 2011 Coach decided to invest in the e-commerce market by setting up its own online store, rather than leaning on multi-brands fashion e-commerce platforms. First Coach e-commerce was on Taobao in 2011, and then it officially opened its own e-commerce platform in China in 2012⁸¹. Its prices 50-70% lower than other luxury international brands permitted it to wildly enter in Chinese market, positioning itself in the third best-selling brand in China in 2012.

A research conducted on the brand in 2014 let us know deeper information about the development of Coach on Chinese social media and how it approached the new method of doing marketing and business successfully by using the right strategies. This study⁸² used Coach's posts on Weibo from the 19th of April 2011 to the 30th 2012 as samples. 1543 relevant posts were found and helped to understand the success of Coach's marketing strategy. Coach was the brand chosen for this research for three reasons: firstly for its effectiveness and success in Chinese market and its diffusion on Weibo. Secondly for its great effort on establishing its identity through personal e-commerce and social media. Third reason is its target market of young urban Chinese people that allows to understand how brands interact with young luxury buyers.

Coach opened its page on Weibo on the 13th of April 2011 and now is among the most active luxury brands on Weibo for number of fans and posts.

Weibo is the principal social media platform of Coach brand, but it also makes use of the cross-platform. This means that Coach established its online presence through different social media platforms in order to help the brand in enhancing the relationship between brand and its consumers.

Now, let's investigate which strategies Coach used for developing its brand value. Brand building is the first step in creating a social media marketing strategy. Coach decided to divide its posts in three major groups for building its brand: brand identity knowledge, advertisement interaction with customers and sales promotion. To build a

⁸¹ Mark Ng, op., cit., p. 258

⁸² Mark Ng, op., cit., p. 257

strong brand identity and to make customers aware of the history of the products and increase their knowledge about the brand Coach shares brand history, craftsmanship and design style. In doing this they conducted a very nice initiative, namely, they shared posts introducing Coach's management and designer teams in the United States and in China, in which professionals expressed their personal idea of style. This is a very smart initiative aimed at letting customers feel involved in brand dynamics, as a community. Another initiative was taken from the brand starting from January 2012, that was called "The New Yorker, in which through social media postings Coach conveyed New Yorkers point of view about fashion and lifestyles, as New Yorkers, of course.

Since young Chinese shoppers pay more attention to functional benefits of their purchases, rather than Western ones, Coach, sometimes, released interactive games to spread knowledge about the characteristics of its products. In December 2012, the brand shared posts illustrating its bags' leather name tag and asked followers to design their own proposals of name tags. This strategy had great success with 4000 Weibo users participating and actively sharing their own posts about the initiative on their accounts. Another point of the strategy consisted in involving persons, with a high-social status, personalities such as models or celebrities, with the intent of upgrading brand image. Such feature was developed by sharing, on social media, posts in which such celebrities were using Coach's products. It was seen that the best way to attract Chinese consumers through this method, was to use Chinese celebrities, rather than international ones. Promotion through bloggers encourages direct interaction through which consumers can, receiving customers feedback. Celebrities', and any people with a high level of influence, support is fundamental in luxury marketing. It improves brand's perception and its position, refresh brands that lost power and enhance brand's prestige. Celebrities have a halo of luxury lifestyle, precious, glamour, success and wealth achieved, so in buying the same product that a celebrity wears or use in his/her everyday life is like the celebrity and the consumer share the same status quo. In Chinese context the fact of using local celebrities has much more importance. Coach, in fact, employed the Chinese pop star Wang Leehom for representing its men's products. Fans can receive news about their paladin through WeChat, together with videos and update promotions about Coach. This interactivity strengthens both Coach's image as a brand and creates entertaining experience for customers.

In enhancing interaction with customers, with the aim of growing the number of followers, Coach launched many initiatives. One of these was the “Red Pocket” activity during Chinese lunar New Year, which is the most important festivity for Chinese people, during they use to be reunited with relatives and to have a big dinner all together, in which they exchange these red pockets, usually filled with money, to wish each other fortune, propitious things and good health. Coach exploited this tradition, letting users wrote blessings and sent them to their friends on Coach’s Weibo account. When friends received this virtual red pocket, they were directly redirected on Coach’s Weibo profile to open it. So, this helped Coach in spreading its acquaintance through Chinese social media.

Sales promotion has also an important role in online marketing strategies, but in the case of luxury brands too many promotions could be counter- productive because they could weaken the brand’s image. Coach exploited the feature of sales promotions offering special promotions online. One of these was “Surprise Friday”, in which fans were invited to vote for products through WeChat and then every Friday the most voted items were announced to be on sale through a post on Weibo account. The post was directly linked to the online shop, on which followers could shop immediately. The direct link between the Weibo page and the brand e-commerce one is very relevant, because it combines either providing information, either immediate access to the product described. This combination is fundamental for fighting against products counterfeiting because only official websites can ensure clients reliability and loyalty.

To sum up, we can say that nowadays brands presence on social media is fundamental, not only for providing discounts and promotions for common brands, but also in the case of luxury brands for conveying brand’s culture and knowledge. Of course, there’s the need to understand that choosing the correct strategy is fundamental in social media in order to prevent big failures and brand image damages, especially in the complicated Chinese social environment.

Coach is one of the brands that did its best in establishing its dominance in Chinese market, either by opening many stores, either by setting up Chinese social media accounts attracting young urban Chinese luxury consumers. The usage of different social media platforms was a plus point in developing the digital marketing strategy, because the different activities launched through the different social media platforms helped to solidify the ties with customers. Also building its own online shop was a

trump card, in making clients feel confident and secure in their purchasing process, and consequently, making them perceive Coach as a reliable and trustworthy brand. The brand and its value equity was also improved by celebrity endorsement and the creative ways of illustrating the style, the history and the craftsmanship of Coach.



Wang Leehom for Coach. Source: Luxury Inside

2.6.4 Social media strategy failure in China: the case of Dolce&Gabbana

In November 2018 Dolce & Gabbana⁸³, the famous Italian fashion luxury brand, owned by the two founders and designers Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana, launched a series of videos on its Weibo official account, on occasion of an important fashion show that should have been held in Shanghai few days later. These videos belong to a series of videos, named “Eating with chopsticks”, in which a Chinese girl awkwardly is trying to eat some Italian typical dishes, like pizza, spaghetti and a giant Sicilian cannoli using Chinese chopsticks, as the title explains itself, while, off the field, a male voice gives her advices on how she should eat these. These videos were immediately considered very offensive towards Chinese people because they show a very stereotyped image of China, with those musical tunes that remember cheap Chinese restaurants outside China. The protagonist of the video is depicted as the classic stereotyped flaky Asiatic girl laughing for no reasons and acting awkwardly. The cherry on top is the amount of sexist attitude within the video, since there’s a male voice saying “can you make it or is it too big for you?”, while the girl is trying to eat the Sicilian cannoli, with a vulgar double entendre behind. After the posting of these videos several controversies arose and then the videos were banned and cancelled from Weibo. Apparently, even if still a very nasty episode, the all situation would have been settled down within a few days, but the designer Stefano Gabbana, the cofounder of the Italian brand, issued publicly, through the Western social media Instagram, racist statements about Chinese people. A journalist asked the designer further explanations about the weird campaign released through the Chinese social media, Weibo, and he, instead of mediating and trying to solve the issue, added fuel to the fire, by saying that their intention wasn’t offensive, but a tribute to China and stated that his communication is good at nothing and shouldn’t have deleted the video because Chinese people are stupid, as China itself. He, then, deeply offended China with serious words, such as “China, shitty, ignorant, member of mafia, eating-dogs nation”, that of course and very sadly, went viral worldwide through all social media. All this lead to a huge mess and many influencers and celebrities started to boycott the brand and consequently the fashion show that should have been held in Shanghai was officially canceled by Chinese government. The only chance of

⁸³ Valentina Tanzillo, “*Dolce & Gabbana in Cina: analisi di un disastro social*” in Social media marketing- Studio Samo, 22 Novembre 2018
<https://www.studiosamo.it/social-media-marketing/dolce-gabbana-in-cina-analisi-di-un-disastro-social/>

the Maison was then to apologize and so, the two founders decided to say that Stefano Gabbana's account had been hacked and that it wasn't him saying those bad words to the journalist, actually a banal and unlikely excuse. Right after the scandal, series of videos started to circulate on the web, such as Chinese people throwing Dolce&Gabbana products in the toilet or others burning such products. Videos showed that D&G stores, in China, were completely empty and in some shopping centers D&G corners were removed.



Dolce & Gabbana fail campaign Source: Studio Samo

Now let's analyze in details which ones have been the main mistakes made by the Italian fashion house. First of all, when developing a marketing strategy, it is necessary to understand the target market we are addressing to. In this case, the biggest mistake, was that the target market didn't match those video contents. Such contents were not suitable for Chinese target market, because Chinese people are sensitive to certain themes and companies cannot treat their clients as fools. Even because we are talking about a high positioned brand that has to do with high ranking clients, that are likely to spend a lot of money in purchasing products that satisfy their desires of exclusivity and luxury, and for sure are very demanding clients that are not reflected in the images of the videos. Stereotypes are never something good, even worse if we are talking about a country that had an economic development at a crazy speed rate, and so it is very offensive to depict Chinese people as they were, maybe, 20 years before. For companies, getting out from these kinds of crisis and scandals, then, it's very difficult because, even

having a great worldwide reputation, is not enough in these cases. One of the mistakes of Stefano Gabbana was to offend the journalist telling her he wasn't scared by her. This is the first mistake: in social media era, everything someone says, stay forever. Recording and taking "screenshots" from conversations is very easy and so saying something and, then deleting it, it's not enough for preventing the online spread of it. Official accounts, and also personal accounts of companies leaders, have to pick each single word carefully, because their announcement can have drastic impacts on their businesses. So, even though D&G is considered as an institution in the field of fashion, the crisis generated by the words pronounced by one of its founders and designers, Stefano Gabbana had severe impacts on its activities in Chinese market.

The important message arising from this situation is that social communities don't easily forgive. Since in nowadays society, as Kotler states⁸⁴, doesn't belong anymore to single individuals, but to social groups, communities of users, clients and fans are becoming more and more powerful and, consequently, their satisfaction index is dominant. People are not afraid of expressing their opinion, even if they are about big companies and high positioned brands, they speak up and honestly say what they dislike, especially when the campaigns of such brands don't match with their moral values. It is crucial, for companies that want their businesses to be successful, to take into consideration feedbacks and reviews from their clients and use them to improve their strategies and fix their weak points. Online communities are a huge resource for brands, so making them fool is the biggest misstep. Besides the offensive videos posted on Weibo by D&G official account, the insults of Gabbana and the consequent excuse of saying that the account had been hacked is even worse. Netizens and users of social media are not stupid and they well know the tricks used on social media, so they clearly couldn't take that excuse as real, it's the most banal ever.

The lesson that should be learned from this bad situation is that the power of online social media should never be underestimated. Even if sometimes controversial on social media end as a flash in the pan, online crisis can lead to the worst consequences for a brand, they could spoil the business in a segment of the market. In the specific case of D&G, insults were too serious to go unnoticed, even because China is a nationalist country, with a strong sense of belonging and always very proud of their own people. The choice of a Chinese girl, eating foreign foods with chopsticks, just ridiculed a very

⁸⁴Valentina Tanzillo op., cit., p. 4

important tradition for Chinese people and for sure was not perceived as funny at all. A correct marketing strategy has to take into consideration many aspects, including the features and characteristics of the country which is addressed to. The allusion to sexual themes was another mistake in a country, that is very discreet about certain things, with a high sense of decency.

Besides the cancelation of the fashion show, the poor figure cut by D&G brought them to an economic and business failure, since their products suddenly disappeared from the main Chinese e-commerce platforms, such as Tmall, JD.com, Xiaohongshu, Secco etc) as South China Morning Post⁸⁵ wrote in the days following the disaster.

The two cases, referred to Coach and D&G brands, showed the importance of social media within marketing context, especially when speaking of Chinese market.

In the first case, Coach demonstrated that good and correct social media marketing strategy is crucial for the success of a company and that, the good name a brand builds on social media is a guarantee for clients and entice them in making purchases decisions. Good social media strategy can enhance all the values of a company: financial, functional, hedonic... and it helps in building brand identity and image, through the use of different means, as for example celebrities endorsement.

Unluckily for the Italian brand, D&G, it gives us a bad example of the use of social media within marketing strategy development context. They made plenty of mistakes, offending target market on three occasions: first time by publishing ridiculing videos full of stereotypes about Chinese people, depicting them as unable of eating Italian food, unable of using fork and knife and the sexist touch was the worst. Second time, when Stefano Gabbana was asked to explain better the aim of “Eating with chopsticks” campaign, he replied in hotly worded tones, showing himself not to be repentant at all, rather he even overstated the situation, by making public announcements, in which he states that Chinese people are stupid and misunderstood the humoristic sense of those videos. Very serious affirmations, especially talking about a country, in which the concept of “*face*”, in Chinese *mianzi* 面子, has very ancient roots. *Mianzi* literally means face, in Chinese, and it is referred to someone’s reputation and fame, having a good reputation and, overall, maintain an attitude that doesn’t let you *lose face*, *diu mianzi* 丢面子 has a huge importance. All these key concepts were probably unknown

⁸⁵Valentina Tanzillo Ibidem

to Stefano Gabbana and his social media manager, otherwise nobody would have done such basic mistakes, when dealing with Chinese people and Chinese values, that boast a millennial culture.

Then, trying to fix the situation, they even offended Chinese people for the third time making them fool, by saying in a livestream on D&G official Weibo account, that Stefano Gabbana's personal account had been hacked and that he never insulted Chinese people by the issues stated to the journalist, that simply asked him to explain better the aim of the videos shared on Weibo.

To sum up, in social media marketing context, it is necessary to have a great knowledge about the target market and its culture because things can easily misunderstood and take misleading controversies, due to the physiologic differences among countries. Italian humor can be misinterpreted, by other countries and there is the need to understand that each country has different cultures and its own habits and traditions, that cannot be neglected and undervalued to develop successful marketing strategies.

Chapter 3.

Who are influencers?

The figure of social media influencer could be described as: “A Social Media Influencer is a user on social media who has established credibility in a specific industry. A social media influencer has access to a large audience and can persuade others by virtue of their authenticity and reach.”⁸⁶ So, this figure operates within social media, and it represents an actual job. He/she gets paid by sponsoring and reviewing certain products, the bigger his/her audience is, and moreover the degree of influence he/she has over such audience, the more he/ can be remunerated. The word speaks itself: influencer, someone who “influences” someone else’s behaviors or attitudes in any field. In nowadays society, with the diffusion of social media and our habit to update them on a daily basis, it becomes easier to get influenced by someone else about any topic. That’s also because people are more likely to trust someone that they see more as a friend, rather than just an advertiser. This mechanism is due to the fact that influencers sponsor things in a casual, random way, so followers don’t perceive it as a quick advertising going through TV shows. It’s all based on the relationship influencers build with their followers and the fact that they let such followers enter in their actual lives, sharing with them most of what they do in a day, just like normal friends usually do. Communities of followers, as a consequence, are more likely to trust and buy what influencers endorse, rather than, mostly, unknown people they just see for ten seconds in a TV commercial. Consequently, if a user has a big audience of followers with whom share frames of daily life or communicate with them about certain issues and if such issues generate revenues, he or she becomes a professional social media influencer.

It is important to understand that the social media influencer, firstly, is someone who established a virtual, but very close relationship with his/her followers and this is the first reason why people are likely to accept his/her advices about any kind topic and in making purchasing process decisions. So, in light of this, it would wrong to consider the role of the influencer just as a pure marketing instrument.

⁸⁶ <https://pixlee.com/definitions/definition-social-media-influencer>

3.1 Influencers' history in Western World

The history of influencers dates back to the advent of World Wide Web in 1991⁸⁷, so to the origin of modern web itself. The spread of Web and its new technologies gave the possibility to build virtual relationships with people who never met in person before, even geographically very far away from each other. It also opened unlimited access to information and contents produced by non-traditional medias, but from common people. The prototype of influencers and their communities were forums, platforms usually built around specific topics, in which people were giving advices each other, actually influencing themselves. People who gained more fame and trustworthiness within the context of forums, those who were more active and gave more precise and correct advices on various topics, can be considered social media influencers ancestors'.

Since 1990's and early 2000's many forums and blog sites started arousing and people started to reply to each other with the feature of virtual online messages, it was something completely new because for the first time people who didn't know each other in person could talk and share opinions and advices about any topic, just trough a computer on an online website. These can be considered the pioneers of the digital influence, that today we already give for granted as a concept. Users of these forums, that were usually about particular and super specific issues, being daily active on them and releasing correct information, would garner a high reputation within the forums, becoming a qualified source of information.

Even those kind of people that none would have ever expected to become users of the World Wide Web, were, in the end captured by it. According to a 1999 *Wall Street Journal*⁸⁸ report, in fact, nature lovers, that firstly were highly skeptical about the use of the web, then became very used to it for searching information about travels, treks and equipment. It was found that hiking lovers in late 90's had being impressed by online forums, as *Backpacker* magazine and GORP.com, they were amazed by the amount of materials found on them and especially by the high expertise of the users that were posting advices about any topic, from gear to food to footpaths locations.

This teeming environment of new features, such as the origin and development of virtual communities, started to attract immediately brands and companies, that were

⁸⁷ Paris Martineau, "The WIRED Guide to Influencers", 12th June 2019
<https://www.wired.com/story/what-is-an-influencer/>

⁸⁸ Paris Martineau, Ibidem

already understanding the huge potential of these *social* channels as enhancing tools for their business activities. Companies started to find out that people that were searching the internet and reading someone else's opinions on forums, were potential clients, already intentioned towards the purchasing process of the product, and wanted to find other people's experiences that had purchased the same product or benefited of the same service they were searching. So, they started to realize that common advertising through traditional mass media channels, such as television and newspapers, didn't have the same impact on the purchasing process of consumers, also because ads pass randomly, while feedbacks on the internet by third parties were searched by netizens on purpose.

The influence exerted by most active users of forums on the others participants, started immediately to be exploited by companies and brands, that started approaching their first online "influencers", in order to ask them to promote their products within online spaces, in which they had great power. One of the first examples, in early 2000s, was the MindComet, a media company that sought for marketing influencers, in the shape of MySpace, the ancestor of Instagram, dominant users with a high degree of influence on others users' choices. MindComet hired MySpace super users to sponsor brands and products to their followers, paying them by gift cards or promo codes. Other very famous companies followed suit, for example Sony BMG recruited unpaid interns, with the duty to promote its artists in online communities in 2006.

More than a decade before the phenomenon of influencers was totally studied and understood, authors of blogs in the late 2000's already held a great power over consumers. The constant increase of the presence of personal blogs, that had an economic impact, led to the commercialization of bloggers and influencers.

Companies started to send their products for free to bloggers, in order to let them aware of the existing of their brand and giving them the chance to try their products in the hope that they would share those with their amount of followers on the blogs.

The founder of MindComet, Ted Murphy, in 2004 founded the first influencer marketing network, named "BlogStar Network. At the beginning it was a private email database of bloggers and influencers, that wanted to monetize from their online activities dealing a partnership with the firms that were part of the MindComet, like Red Lobster, Turner and Burger King. Murphy used to send all the job offers in the database,

and then examine the answers he received. By 2016 already a “couple thousand”⁸⁹ of bloggers joined the database, as Murphy himself revealed to *Businessweek*. During this interview to *Businessweek*, he was asked about the disclosure requirements policy and he answered, glossing the issue over, that it was a choice of the influencer whether to declare the presence of a sponsored post or not.

In June 2006 Murphy launched the first digital platform, actually, connecting advertisers and social media bloggers/influencers. This platform was called “PayPerPost”, in which brands could insert detailed listings, such as: type of influencer they were looking for, what kind of product they wanted to be sponsored and through which features. Of course, the more an influencer had a high number of followers, the more he/she could be expensive.

Internet users and followers didn’t take the creation of PayPerPost platform so easy, they reacted badly, because they perceived it as a loss of genuineness within the environment of social media, in which people freely were exchanging disinterested opinions. This led to a temporary collapse of influencers category. Big controversial arose within social media platform environment: journals published articles, such as Tech’s Crunch, for example, wrote “PayPerPost.com offers to sell your soul”, or *Businessweek*, with a strong vitriolic tone, wrote “Polluting the blogosphere”, referring to the company that hired influencers.

After the launch of PayPerPost platform, a lot of other companies were founded, with the same purpose, of looking for and hiring influencers. There was an actual boom of this business of influencers marketing, by the end of 2006. At the same time another controversy arose: it was found that Microsoft sent tech bloggers free Acers pc. Even though at that moment this was seen as a fraudulent act, both by the company who gifted products, and by the bloggers/influencers that endorsed such products after receiving them as gifts, influencer marketing kept growing at a massive speed over years. Some more examples of influencers marketing campaigns in those years can be: the English company, Hutchinson 3G UK Limited launched in 2007 launched a new device, called Skypephone and distributed it to bloggers, with high power of influence, for free, in order to have positive endorsement reviews back, with the aim of promoting sales. Another example comes from the same year, when Kmart supplied six influencers

⁸⁹ Ibidem

with \$500 gift cards, with the aim to make them review to their followers the shopping experience at the discount store. This campaign had a huge success, with 2.5 million people reached within one month, 800 blog posts and 3200 tweets, as Murphy revealed one year later to *The New York Times*⁹⁰. He also revealed, in that interview, that the field of moms blogging about mom lifestyles was one of the most popular and profitable within influencer marketing environment.

The biggest issue at that time was the disclosure practice, in other words the obligation or not to declare explicitly whether any social media content shows sponsored or gifted products/services, or not. It could happen that sometimes Federal Trade Commission caught some celebrities, that didn't indicate the presence of sponsored contents, but actually nothing concrete used to happen.

Because of the huge growth in this marketing area within the last five years, that made it become a multibillion-dollar industry, influencers fees and remunerations had grown out of all proportion. Each influencers' mention of products'/services' brands through post or any other social media feature is handsomely paid by companies. Their remuneration budgets even increased, since they started to hire agents and managers, drafting contracts for them. According to a survey into the influencer marketing industry, undertaken by Wired in 2018, a popular Youtuber revealed that, once, a brand offered him around \$20000, just to show their drink on his desk while filming a video. The starting cost of a single promotional post on Instagram, by influencers with around one million followers, is \$10 000. While, advertising through YouTube is even more expensive, for example a sponsored video from a Youtuber, with 3 million subscribers on his channel, will cost non-less than \$40000. Also, if companies want the influencer to make a bad review on competitors, they will have to pay around \$10000 to \$30000, in addition to the starting fee. These very high rates are justified due to the fact that the influencer is supposed to have an actual effect on his/her followers, and consequently a direct impact on a company's sales promotion. We are saying "supposed", because the engagement rate between influencers and their followers has to be verified, since many impostors are around and they fake their followers, by actually buying them. In this case, the first requirement, a good influencer should have, would be missing because if followers are being bought, the relationship between influencer and his/her followers would be totally void and this influencer wouldn't produce any benefit for companies.

⁹⁰ Ibidem

Fraudulence within influencer marketing is a serious issue, that was predicted to cost to brands \$1.3 billion, only in 2019. This phenomenon is, of course, due to the fact that influencers are very well paid, so now, everyone is trying to enter this market, even using illegal methods. There are several ways to trick companies, let's see which are the most popular.

Social media marketing panels: these illegal marketplace sell fake followers, number of views, likes (all the data that companies take into consideration when analyzing an influencers insights).

Power likes: it's a system that provide fake comments, likes and reactions from account with many followers, that are considered of certain importance. In this way, the algorithm is tricked into thinking their account is so influent to the extent of appearing in other users' Explore page.

Engagement groups: share a post in a private group asking other members for likes and comments, to fake a high reactivity from followers.

The Account Switcheroo: these are accounts that accumulate followers in the shortest time possible, usually with tricks, such as Follow-For Follow methodology, in which the account start to follow tones of people in the hope that they will follow him/her back, and when they reach a solid number of followers, they sell the account to the good bidder.

This is to say that, in influencer marketing context, frauds are constantly lying in wait, so companies have to be really careful when choosing their selected influencers. Some companies choose human supports to avoid frauds, others relies on apposite programs that should spot any sign of fraudulence. One of the simplest thing , in order to verify influencer's real power of influence among followers, is to ask him/her to show the amount of likes per post, that has to correspond with the amount of followers to declare his/her honesty.

Sponsored contents are everywhere, today, and so many platforms decided to encourage influencers' disclosure, by setting up new features that make, the presence of sponsored contents, clear for everyone. Even though the presence of such tools, it was seen that tacit ads, in which influencers didn't officially declare the sponsored content, but just

showed the products/service it while using/benefiting, making covert endorsement, had a more influential power over followers.

After the pioneer, PayPerPost, many akin companies were born and challenge themselves, playing matches about who will give birth to the best advertising content for brands.

3.1.2 The role of social media Influencer

People are getting everyday more active on social media and that's a thing. Data speak themselves, the 45% of the population is actively present on social media: according to the January 2019 We Are Social report⁹¹, precisely 3484 billion people have at least one active social media account. Because of this constant online presence, it would be very unlikely not to be influenced, even on a minimal side, by other people attitudes, and, why not, by influencers. Influencers are people that established a well formed network of people, that actively participate in their lives daily, through social media. In many cases, they are known for being experts on a certain topic and they specialized on that topic on social media, by regularly posting pictures, videos and any sort of contents about that. People who share the same passion about the argument become followers of that person and a real bilateral relationship is established.

Brands and companies are really interested in influencers and their special relationship with followers, because they know they can enhance their businesses activities through them, since influencers have the power to push the purchasing decision process of the people who follow them.

Influencers can be divided and grouped in different ways and by many methodologies. For example, some are divided into categories according to their number of followers, types of content and level of influence. Another method is to divide them by the niche in which they operate, so not always the number of followers is the most important data, in order to understand the "power of influence" of a social media influencer.

Let's analyze all the different categorization.

⁹¹ What is an influencer? –Social media influencers defined (Updated 2020), Influencer Marketing Hub <https://influencermarketinghub.com/what-is-an-influencer/>

In the category in which influencers are grouped by their number of followers on social networks, we find: mega- influencers, macro-influencers, micro- influencers and nano-influencers.

Mega- influencers are people with a huge number of followers on social media and even if there are no fixed rules, normally they have more than one million followers, at least on one social media platform. Many of them are celebrities, so people that already had great fame before the existence of social media, such as cinema stars, singers, TV-shows presenters, sportspeople, musicians and so on. Only considerable brands should resort to these mega influencers for many reasons. First of all, they are very expensive, at least \$1 million for one single post and they can be very hard to handle, as working partners, even if in the majority of cases, let's say all of them, they have social media managers and agents, that act as intermediaries in their place and deal all the contracts for them.

Macro influencers are those with a range of followers between 40 000 and 1 million on a social media network. They are much more accessible, than mega influencers, for brands and their influencers recruiters. Two kind of people belong to this group: second-class celebrities, that didn't reach very high levels of fame through their job outside social media. Or people that "were born" online and built their fame and spread their popularity through their activism on social media. Usually this group of people started to be followed online due to their expertise on a specific topic or in any specific field, but unlikely micro influencers, reached a much bigger audience.

They can boast a high power of influence among their followers and it's also easier for brands to get in contact with them, firstly because they are numerically more than mega influencers and they are also more open to communication than micro influencers.

The risk not to be underestimated with this category of influencers is to avoid influencer fraud, which is the fraud of influencers that are, actually, fake ones, because they bought themselves followers, so they don't have a real engagement rate with their followers.

Micro influencers are ordinary people that have reached a certain number of followers, for their expertise in a specific niche of knowledge. The number of their followers can vary among 1000 and 40 0000. They have a genuine relationship with their followers, based on the loyalty that characterize themselves. This type of influencer promote something just because he or she really like that product, and not behind any sort of

retribution. That's the reason why companies that want to approach this group of influencers face some difficulties, because they are against any paid partnership with brands, since this could affect the genuine relationship they have established with their followers and could lose the credibility they built with efforts. In many cases when a company approaches a micro influencer, he or she didn't even know that company brand and so, the latter will have to do its best to convince the micro influencer in stipulating the partnership. Micro influencers would even be more likely to promote something for free, but for sure they will not sponsor anything that is too distant from their field of expertise.

Micro influencers are becoming more and more relevant in social media and they are getting more fame on them. They are perceived to be the influencers of the future because the internet has led to the fragmentation of media in many small segments of topics, and so even if you do something unknown to most, you will find your small niche of followers that share your same interest, on a social media platform. That's also because, in the so called "Generation Z"⁹² young people prefer to spend more time searching the internet, rather than doing other activities, such as going out with friends, doing sports or even watching movies. Micro celebrities, that in most of the cases have been born out of nothing and have built their fame for concentrating on a specific niche, find their perfect place in the context of Generation Z.

Nano influencers are those with even less than 1000 followers and they are usually specialized in a very small niche of knowledge. They attract people that are interested in that specific field that the influencer talks about. Some companies consider them insignificant, but they could be extremely helpful for firms that work in small niches. The problem lies in the fact that they can reach a small amount of people, because of their limited amount of followers. So, most of the firms don't take them into consideration because they would engage hundreds of nano influencers in order to reach an effective amount of people and, consequently, to enhance sales through nano influencers.

The other way to categorize influencers is to divide them by the type of content they share. Bloggers and influencers in social media (mostly micro bloggers) are the one who have the best relationship with their followers, they interact with each other, even

⁹² Ibidem

establishing a real one to one communication. Blogs are very effective for the products they sponsor: brands, in fact, are encouraging this marketing strategy. If a very popular blogger on the web, shows a new product she is using/ wearing, followers will immediately react wanting to purchase the same product. That's the exact effect hoped by the companies who engaged the influencer.

Bloggers are specialized in many different fields: everyday lifestyle, finance, economy, music, fitness, healthy food, beauty, make-up and many others. Most important feature of a successful blogger is to be loyal towards the readers and to give reliable and real opinions, that are not faked just to grab the money from the company. Explicit sponsored posts and tags on the blog don't affect the relationship between blogger and his/her followers, as long as these are consistent with the "philosophy" and with the topics the influencer usually talks about. Especially when talking about Generation Z, sponsored contents are not a problem at all, if they match both influencers' and followers' values.

Western influencers also have their spot on YouTube. Videos are also a popular type of content and the so called *Youtubers* decided to share them through this social media channel, instead of creating their own video website. Brands are interested in this type of content creator because they usually talk about the product they use, and so they can have a very high level of power of influencing fans in purchasing decisions.

Podcasters are another type of influencer, one the newest. Podcasts are recorded audio contents that can be re-listened anytime when anyone wants.

All types of influencers, such as micro bloggers, Youtubers, podcasters don't rely only on their channel, but they promote their posts and contents through other social media platform. For example, in western context, the usage of Instagram is crucial for all the updates about latest contents on all other social media platforms.

Another categorization of influencers is the one by level of influence.

Celebrities were influencers once, when social media influencers still didn't exist. Celebrities, within social media marketing context, don't have such a high influential power, even though they have a huge number of followers in many cases. Celebrity endorsement is not the first thing to be taken into consideration when speaking about sales promotion through influencers on social media. Nowadays, in fact, only few

luxury brands exploit celebrities as influencers and testimonials. They are very expensive and plus, in some cases, they can just address to their target audience, in line with their age, style of life etc. For example, if Justin Bieber promotes a face cream, it would be ok and totally in line with his target audience because of the age range of his fans, but if, ironically, a retirement village company contact him for their promotion, it would sound very inappropriate for him to sponsor them.

Plus, celebrities may have many followers, but this doesn't always match their actual influencing power over their followers.

Another category of influencers is the one of the so called Key Opinion Leaders, which includes: journalists, academics, industry experts, professional advisors etc... they own an important role for brands, because beside their job role, they can also be considered as influencers. In many cases they do it for free, by just writing an article and mentioning a certain brand or company. So, basically the same as any blogger/influencer would do, but with the bonus that they are in a more respected position due to their technical expertise in a specific field. Nowadays, there's a fine line in the distinction between mass media and social media, already.

The only thing to be taken into consideration, when a company is willing to hire a key opinion leader for sponsoring its product/service is that, sometimes they could have a large audience in offline life, but not so much influence within social media context.

So, in summary, the best influencers seem to be those who have built expertise in a specific niche, and mostly the ones who have built their audience directly through social media channels, and that weren't known before. Their fame is only due to their knowledge in that specific niche and to their power of communication and ability to establish a strong relationship with their followers. Each post they create has high percentages of feedback, reactions, comments and that's because followers trust them. Even though their niche of action could be very small, in comparison, their audience is composed by a big amount of people and, most importantly, this type of influencers have a concrete effect on people's choices. There's not yet a specific name to categorize them better, but a British agency, the PMYB, owns influencers with the highest engagement rate with their followers, and this means they have the highest power of influence over their followers, so they can be considered as the best in their field and in

their job of influencers. This British agency named their influencers “Chromo Influencers™”.

3.2 Influencer marketing in China: who are KOLs?

In China influencers are more often called KOL, acronym that stands for key opinion leader. As well as western ones, they can be bloggers, and in general people with a high influence and big audience within social media context. As stated above, the most important feature for an influencer/kol is not merely the number of followers, but how much these followers trust him/her due to the strong and, moreover, durable over time relationship that has been created.

The history of KOLs started together with the birth of Chinese social media, in the late 90’s with Tianya Club 天涯社区 and Netease Blog 网易博客.⁹³

So, forums were the starting point of influencers environment, as we have already described for Western influencer marketing. One of the most popular forum in China was Tianya Club 天涯社区, that was born on 14th of February 1999. Most Tianya users had a great education and they use to write articles about various topics. It was used as we use social media today: sharing pictures, reviews and all kind of contents. One of the example of today bloggers prototype was Shi Hengxia, known as Sister Furong 芙蓉姐姐. She was videos and photos of herself wearing skimpy clothes in sexy poses, she was very self promotional, as we can define nowadays bloggers. This personality led to controversial discussions in forums and that’s the reason why people started following her, they were attracted to know more about her.

Even though in 2013 Tianya still had 85 million users, the birth of Weibo took over and most of them abandoned Tianya.

In addition to Sister Furong, other personalities started to gain online followings and fame. The actress and director Xu Jinglei opened a blog in October 2005 on sina.com. She can really be considered as one of the first influencers, as we understand this today, she started sharing on her blog daily life episodes and normal things of her life, like videos or photos of her cats, or sharing opinions about her favorite TV shows. And that’s what people expect from a blogger: a genuine share, that make followers feel as

⁹³ Ashley Galina Dudarenok, Lauren Hallanan “*Digital China: Working with Bloggers, Influencers and KOLs*” chapter 1, Alarice International Limited, 3rd November 2018

part of his/her life, like a real friend. In fact, she grew a big success, by July 2007 her blog was the most visited one by users with more than 100 million page views.

Another forerunner of modern bloggers was the writer Han Han, who blogged about politics, daily news and car racing. His strong argumentation about sensitive themes led him to overcome his colleague Xu Jinglei, and by 2008 he reached 210 million visits to his page.

A good Chinese social media KOL has to have certain qualities to be successful in his/her job. First of all, he/she has to be specialized in a specific area of expertise that he/she is passionate about and, the majority of his/her contents, have to be related to this field. A good influencer doesn't deal with partnerships with brands that are not aligned with his/her main topics or values.

Second, it's better if they have professional experience on the topic they talk about. For example, photographers, journalists, makeup artists tend to be more reliable if they set up a blog, based on the above topics.

Another core quality KOLs have to possess is uniqueness. Successful KOLs don't follow any random trend, but stay consistent with their own personal style. This is becoming even more influential, because China's Generation Z consumers, young people born among 2000-2009, developed strong individual personalities.

The fourth point is that KOLs have to address all their attention on their relationship with their followers, and spend, both time and efforts, in order to interact with them daily. Since young people spend many hours per day connected on social media, KOLs have to do the same trying to answer to as many comments and messages as possible, building and strengthening their feeling day by day.

Fifth place is occupied by the concept that KOLs don't have to move randomly from a social platform to another one, but they have to grow at a steady pace in a long term view and be present in multiple social media platforms that are in line with the topics they carry on. In this way, they can reach broader audience and mitigate the risk to fail. Usually they have a support team and, when they are on the top of their fame and success, sometimes they launch their own brands.

Sixth requirement for an influencer is not to grow overnight, for example, using appealing titles that encourage followers to click on articles, which don't say anything

substantial in the end. The best thing is to grow gradually and with a steady pace that provide real loyal followers, that get attached day by day.

Seventh point in favor of a top KOL it to value reputation, more than money. Influencers have to select and choose carefully the brands to work with, because if they are too distant from the his/her core values, even though that sponsorship could generate high revenues, it could lead to a loss of trust by followers and a related decrease of them.⁹⁴

Influencer marketing in China is not just a plus in a business strategy, but it represents the indispensable basis for any brand that want to approach Chinese market. To understand this better is necessary to make an overview about Chinese consumer and its features. First of all it's important to take into consideration that China is not a single market⁹⁵, but due to the fact that is a huge country, it is characterized by many different regional peculiarities. Consumers coming from different parts of China would need a different approach. It would be very exhausting for Western brands carry on marketing campaigns on their own, having in mind all this differentiations for each sub-market. Dealing partnerships with KOLs is the best choice for brands, for sure, because they know better their target audience and know how to approach followers correctly. Consequently, they can successfully help brands to reach each sub-market.

Second thing is Chinese young consumers are totally uninterested in traditional media advertising and only look at social media, influencers and niche online communities because it's easier to meet people that share same interests and passions on these platforms, rather than on mass media channels. Future trends expect that this situation will evolve in even more niche contexts.

Chinese consumers are very addicted to shopping and they have plenty of choice among which to shop. There's not anymore the need, as in the past decades, of Western products, since the number of domestic local brands really boomed. Only some niches are still more attractive as foreign brands, rather than Chinese ones. Due to the expertise

⁹⁴ Ashley Galina Dudarenok and Lauren Hallanan "*Digital China: Working with Bloggers, Influencers and KOLs*" chapter 1, p. 13-15. Hong Kong: Alarice International Limited, 3rd November 2018

⁹⁵ Ashley Galina Dudarenok, Lauren Hallanan "*Digital China: Working with Bloggers, Influencers and KOLs*" chapter 1, p. 18-22 Alarice International Limited, 3rd November 2018

of Chinese consumers, Western brands that want to approach Chinese market have to rely on personalities that can boost their products, namely, KOLs.

Chinese consumers are afraid of making the wrong choice when purchasing products, so trying to convince them to buy a product from a new brand can be a hard challenge. Due to scandals occurred in China, because of product quality and fakes, Chinese shoppers became suspicious to experience new things. When they purchase something, they want to be sure of its certified quality, also because dealing with customer service for cross-borders buying and potential refunds and replacements is really difficult.

Authority possessed by a brand has a crucial role in China, Chinese consumers take highly into consideration the reputation of the brand when making purchasing decisions. Hence, a brand's reputation can be enhanced by influencers' endorsement.

Chinese consumers make a lot of researches before making a purchase, in order to see the product under many aspects and points of view. This happens in particular when considering luxury products, and so, e-commerce platforms, search engines and KOLs are the main sources of research.

One of the most important characteristic of Chinese consumers is that they rely a lot on word of mouth recommendations. From a research of 2018 ⁹⁶, conducted by Azoya Cosulting, it was found that 50% of cross-border consumers are influenced by in-person and online reviews, 32% by social media account contents and 25% by search engines results. This means that shoppers value the opinion of influencers, as same as close friends' ones. In fact, from the research, also emerged that KOL reviews and advices were the most influential factor in purchasing process, with 67% of Chinese cross-border consumers that declare this. This percentage was higher among people aged from 25 to 34, with the 75%. KOL advices also surpassed product discounts, that held 65% in purchasing factor and e-commerce platform recommendations the 58%.

It's important for brands to understand the right strategy to adopt for influencer marketing in China, in order to avoid crisis that could occur, as we have seen in chapter

⁹⁶ Ibidem

2 for Dolce&Gabbana. There are basic rules to be followed⁹⁷. The first one is not to turn a blind eye and not to ignore critics, especially on Weibo.

Second huge mistake to be avoided is to target the wrong influencer. It's necessary to find the right influencer, that reflects the value and the style of the brand, even better if the influencer in question was already a customer and a fan of the brand, before dealing the partnership. For brands that are about to do their first entry in the Chinese market, it is likely to hire KOLs that can make them visible and spread awareness to their followers. The choice of the influencer, also, depends on the budget the brand wants to invest in the social media marketing strategy. If the budget of the brand is high, it can hire very popular influencers, that can immediately spread brand's credibility and awareness, among consumers and smaller KOLs⁹⁸. But, if a brand has a moderate budget, it's better to focus on medium-size KOL or on more than one small KOLs with 10.000 followers more less, in order to reach different and more loyal audiences. KOLs with fake followers have to be avoided because they won't generate any boost in sales, due to the fact that their followers were bought and have no influential power on them.

Another mistake that brand should keep away is to enter in Chinese market without an overall social media strategy, that is based on key factors such as brand's: industry, budget, level of brand awareness, e-commerce strategy and level of desire for risk and experimentation. A good strategy cannot be based on only one factor, for example, an alcohol brand⁹⁹ was very successful in China, thanks to its strategy of massive collaborations, spending a lot of money, with bloggers, influencers, celebrities. When in 2016, they stopped such activities of sponsorship their sales dropped and going back on massive advertising right after, didn't work to fix the situation.

Another important point to be taken into consideration is not to forget about latest Chinese regulations not to end in serious troubles, because they can change from one day to another.

⁹⁷ “*Top mistakes to avoid on Chinese social media*” Youtube Video. Posted by “Retail in Asia”. January 1st 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFiKUaFgWjs>

⁹⁸ Ashley Galina Dudarenok and Lauren Hallanan “*Digital China: Working with Bloggers, Influencers and KOLs*” chapter 4, p. 73-79, Hong Kong: Alarice International Limited, 3rd November 2018

⁹⁹ “*Top mistakes to avoid on Chinese social media*” Youtube Video. Posted by “Retail in Asia”. January 1st 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFiKUaFgWjs>

Avoid to use the same content on all social platforms: it's important to show that a brand is able to manage and recognize the different purposes of each social media. Social platforms in China are around 60, so it's important to identify which one suits better for a brand and how to use it.

3.2.1 Influencers' pioneers

With the rise of Weibo, other ways of creating contents and influencers precursors came into existence. One of the first to reach success on Weibo, has been Yao Chen, the actress of a famous TV series in 2005. She immediately attracted followers, due to her popularity gained in offline world thanks to her participation in the TV series. She is also known as "The Queen of Weibo" and she, actually, is a real queen of the social media since, she can now, by 2020, boasts 83 million followers on her Weibo verified VIP account. Compared to her, "our" Chiara Ferragni, an Italian influencer famous worldwide, "only" has 18.3 million followers on Instagram and the incredible thing is that she is followed by people coming from all around the world, while Yao Chen's audience is mainly made by Chinese people. That's impressive! It means that she really won the heart of her followers. All the love towards this online celebrity is due not only to her stunning beauty and model body, but for the values she convey and her humanitarianism. She takes care of sensitive topics that she has at heart, like refugees, pollution, censorship, and in 2013 she was even elected UNHCR's, that stands for The UN Refugee Agency, first goodwill ambassador in China. Only between 2012 and 2013 UNHCR tripled¹⁰⁰ its incoming donations from China. She has a huge influential power over followers, due to her genuine heart and her authentic personality. In an interview on Telegraph dated back to summer 2014, Yao Chen told a very moving episode: after having posted pictures and shared contents about her travel in Africa, Beijing headquarters of UNHCHR association let her know that there was an old lady, who started visiting their offices quite assiduously and that once she donated around \$80. She explained her action by saying that, after having read Yao Chen's diary about the situation in Africa, she realized that there were people more in need of money, than her. The moving part of the story is that the old lady used to take buses to get to the association's headquarters, once, she was asked where she lived and she replied that she lived very far from there, in Beijing's suburb. After having heard this answer, she was

¹⁰⁰ Letizia Coccia "Yao Chen, la social star cinese da 71 milioni di followers, 28th January 2015 <https://www.informazioneenzafiltro.it/yao-chen-la-social-star-cinese-da-71-milioni-di-followers/>

asked why she didn't use to take the subway. She replied that 20 RMB (less than \$3) for the subway ticket was too expensive for her. Those \$80 might have been all she possessed. This is a very touching story, that is linked to the topic treated in chapter 2, when speaking about philanthropy generated by social media celebrities. That's a clear example of it: the respect towards certain online personalities can lead to beautiful results, as in this case, a poor old lady was moved to donate most of her belongings, after having become aware of Africa's situation, that otherwise she would have never known about.

This story shows us a remarkable data within Chinese social media context. Let's put a question: " why Chinese influencer marketing is the most productive in the world?". There are some points as answers to this question, one of these can be clearly taken from the old lady anecdote: within Chinese society there is no age barrier for mobile penetration. The age of users within Chinese network , and so followers of online influencers and online purchasers, vary from age 10 to 100 in Chinese society. Of course, it's out of doubt that the great majority of online audience is composed by youngest generations, but this does not exclude the presence of users of any age. In Western societies this, actually, doesn't happen so often because senior generations more rarely are active social media users. The other answer about why Chinese influencer market is the best in the world is that Chinese users are always connected through their devices, all their daily actions are connected to the use of a smartphone: even paying fruits at the stall of farmer's market, they use their telephone through WeChat or other apps feature's for payment. The important thing that needs to understood is that, while these kind of things (pay by smartphone apps etc) in Western world are still managed by a minority of people (most of them young people), while in China is ordinariness for everyone.

Another precursor of influencer figure in china, has been Papi Jiang, known on Chinese social media as papi 酱 . Papi Jiang started her social network carrier in 2015, posting short videos on Miaopai, 秒拍 , which is a Chinese video sharing and live streaming service¹⁰¹. But, the real turning point was in 2016, when she started posting on Weibo and her videos went viral getting more than 290 million views over many different

¹⁰¹ Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. January 20th 2020 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miaopai>

media platforms in just four months¹⁰². Her real name is Jiang Yilei¹⁰³, she is a very simple girl, who embodies the typical next door girl, characterized by a strong sense of humor and ability to debate, even serious issues, with an ironical tone, that catches whose' watching attention. Her description could be: she has bangs, wears minimum amount of make-up and lives with two cats. In the first year of her carrier, from 2015 to 2016, she had already 44 million followers over multiple platforms, who were watching all her short satirical videos, in which she talks personally. In July 2016¹⁰⁴, she launched her first live broadcast, a 90-minute video without following any script, that reached more than 74 million watches in just one day, which is more than Taylor Swift, a super famous Western singer, reached in four months with her music video "New Romantics".

Of course, everything that has to do with China has huge numbers, since Chinese population itself is around one billion and a half approximately, but even in Chinese context, Papi Jiang's numbers are impressive, to the point that Chinese media selected her as the number one online celebrity of 2016¹⁰⁵ for popularity. The chief executive of the Beijing-based online community app Linglong, Yu Kunkun stated that she was the most popular online celebrity by that time and that a lot of Chinese young people consider her as their idol.

Papi Jiang satisfies Chinese people insatiable hunger of social media contents, boomed over the last decades. As stated above, one of the main reason why Chinese people are so in influencer marketing is their massive use of mobile phones, rather than any other device. As reported by China Internet Network Information Center in 2016, 92% of 710 million of Chinese internet users, connect via their mobile phone. This has been a fertile ground for influencers, that share media produced by themselves and spread them through social media, that, obviously, are available through smartphones. Her business partner, Yang Ming, revealed during an interview that when they understood that online environment was becoming always more prominent within Chinese society, and in business, decided to give it try. And it worked for sure.

The novelty Papi Jiang introduced in mid-2015 within social media, was the feature of short videos, that wasn't still so much popular in China by that time. While in the

¹⁰² Ashley Galina Dudarenok and Lauren Hallanan "Digital China: Working with Bloggers, Influencers and KOLs" chapter 1, Hong Kong: Alarice International Limited, 3rd November 2018

¹⁰³ Amy Qin, "China's Viral Idol: Papi Jiang, a Girl Next Door With Attitude", The New York Times 24th of August, 2016

¹⁰⁴ Ibidem

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem

United States, YouTube videos were already pretty popular, even if they weren't either "short videos", but just videos. The three characteristics, recognizable in most of all Papi Jiang's videos, that have become her trademark, are: voice altered through digital devices, super fast scenes and jump cuts.

Jiang Yilei tells that at the beginning she was really scared when her video, in which she was making fun of some Shanghai woman because of their tendency to pronounce random English words within conversations, went viral. She was so shocked for this unexpected success, that she couldn't even eat anything. After having taken the flight and got the hang of it, she didn't stop to produce videos about any kind of topics. She also talks about serious issues, keeping her ironical tone. One of this, for example, was the video about gender-based discrimination occurring in China. In such video, she mentions all the nasty sentences that a woman is forced to listen to, at least once in her lifetime. Phrases such as :“This job is too tiring. It's not suited for women”, “Playing basketball? Women are better off at home”, “Women should have long hair”, “Women dabbling in homosexuality is fine, but I can't stand it with men”, and she presses on: “A male nurse? Ew.” She ends the video with the statement, that has become, then, her slogan: “ I'm Papi Jiang, a woman possessing both beauty and talent”. The whole video is imbued with funny and sarcastic spirit, but it conveys critical concepts, especially for Chinese young girls, that haven't reached yet the complete gender equality. It's an empowerment video, that motivates girls to be themselves and to go beyond gender discrimination, fighting and carrying on social battles.

Another social issue took on by Papi, is the fact that there are 39year-old white-collar workers that are still unmarried and this represents something wrong for society.

Papi Jiang was the first online celebrity, in whom a big group, made of four investors, decided to invest \$1.8 million. This happened due to her ability of keeping popularity and followers' attention over a long term period, while other online celebrities only last for a short period and then fell by the wayside.

In fact, one of the main characteristic, a company has to look for when recruiting influencers, is their capability to keep alive followers' attention and interest towards their contents. This a general statement, but it becomes even more fundamental, when talking about Chinese market, that offers a huge panorama of influencers, that are

continuously changing due to the trend of the moment, so, it's necessary to bet on a solid one, with loyal followers that truly trust him/her.

Papi Jiang, also, had to face censorship, because of her scurrilous language, with a lot of bad words in her videos. She uses this type of language to appear funnier and to remark her humoristic tone, but, of course, government doesn't appreciate all this. In April 2016 she was forced to withhold most of her videos temporarily, but this did not take her down. On the contrary, a few days after the censor of her videos, she auctioned off an ad spot present in one of her videos to a online makeup seller from Shanghai, for \$3.3 million. By the way, even though her impressive success, her shy and humble personality didn't change at all, in fact, she didn't show up on the day of the auction, just because she was "nervous", as she answered herself, when got asked about it.

Other two pioneers of influencer, as a professional figure, are Gogoboi, on Weibo, and Becky Li, who is a WeChat star, the "buying Goddess", as her followers define her, in Chinese is 买神, *maishen*.

Becky Li started with her WeChat blog, named "Becky's Fantasy" in 2015. She suddenly had huge success and now she can count around 4.5 million¹⁰⁶ followers on WeChat and around 10 million¹⁰⁷ followers among different social media platforms. From the first moment, she captured the attention of her followers because she takes on issues they really are interested in. She is mostly a fashion blogger, but speaks about different topics, such as traveling, lifestyle, beauty and current events.

Her real name is Fang Yimin and she started working as a journalist in 2002, for the *Southern Metropolis News*, a daily newspaper in Guangzhou. Her field was about local and entertainment news, but decided to quit in 2015 to focus on her carrier as blogger. We can state for sure she made the right choice.

Let's see in details what was determinant in Becky Li's experience that let her build such an empire. In an interview with Vivian Chen¹⁰⁸, she revealed all her secrets. She

¹⁰⁶ Vivian Chen, SCMP STYLE, "China's "Goddess of shopping" Builds trust by sharing her imperfections", re-published by JingDaily on May 9th 2018 <https://jingdaily.com/goddess-of-shopping-trust/>

¹⁰⁷ Lauren Hallanan. "CIM054: Becky's Fantasy COO Tristan Cui Shares the Key Drivers of Becky Li's Success". China Influencer Marketing Podcast. November 22nd 2019 <http://www.chinainfluencermarketing.com/2019/11/cim054-beckys-fantasy-coo-tristan-cui-shares-the-key-drivers-of-becky-lis-success/>

¹⁰⁸ Ibidem

thinks that new Chinese generations are more likely to trust in what KOLs endorse, because they are smarter, than previous generations. They don't buy the first product they run into, but they are oriented towards a conscious purchase. And here comes into play the role of the influencers, that have to share their opinions and followers can make their choices by comparing different KOL's reviews. Becky Li truly believes that KOLs are an actual bridge between brands and final purchasers. For example, her readers really appreciate stories about brands' histories and all details about them, that, otherwise, they probably wouldn't check themselves, but this make them feel as part of the whole process, especially when they purchase something sponsored.

For her, the most important feature, a KOL has to gain, is the trust and loyalty from her fans and, of course, she applies this to her case in the first place. Trust is not a concept to be taken for granted, it implies a strong relationship between influencer and his/her followers, built over time and that has to keep steady on the long term. In Becky Li's opinion, influencer is like a friend to his/her followers, and that's why she keeps them posted about her daily life. The key of an influencer, to build a loyal relationship with followers, is to always select carefully his/her job offers, and eventually, he/she has to even refuse those that are not in line with her blog topics, or, even worse, with her core bearing values. Otherwise, this would lead to a decrease in the engagement rate and he/she could lose following, likes and, especially, the reputation of loyal KOL.

During the interview, she tells that she doesn't think too much about how to please her followers, she just follows her instinct and writes about the topic she feels like in that moment. She speaks to them really like a friend would do and most importantly she never follows trends of the moment on fashion or social media, but stays consistent with her own personality, only writes about what she really likes and promotes products that she personally tested and that she would buy as well as a common consumer. Not as many other KOLs do, who just look for a fast run of success. But that is not the winning strategy to be a successful influencer, for sure, since by doing so, his/her fame is supposed to last very short and go out of style, as soon as a new one take his/her place. An important thing to understand is that Chinese social media environment is so variegated and has so many influencers, bloggers, KOLs, that is very easy to reach success, as it's also super easy to lose it. In fact, while other platforms are trending at the moment, and WeChat bloggers are decreasing their audience, Becky Li is in constant and rising growth, both in terms of number of followers and in terms of

engagement. Her secret motto is: never grow too fast, but always steady. In 2019, she also started to host some live streaming on WeChat and, for her, really felt like a reunion with friends, it was magical that they all knew her and interacted with her truly as she was their best friend, knowing all her secrets and details.

Another plus point, which characterizes and makes her so much beloved by million people is her genuineness and the fact that she doesn't pretend to be perfect, in contrast to those model figures that usually pursuit perfection on social media and want to appear flawless, even using tools to edit photos and videos, conveying the worst message to youngest generations. She does the exact opposite: she declares not to be perfect- as no human being actually is-, and, plus, since she has a petite body shape, instead of trying to hide it, she even share advices on what clothes to choose and wear to look taller. She easily admits that she's not that photogenic and so she shares best poses to look good on photos. This attitude is really the best plus point an influencer can boast: it overcomes the stereotype of the influencer that is a step higher than followers, with his/her aura of perfection, but, on the contrary, makes followers feel comfortable and confident with themselves and reduces the gap, that has always existed, between VIPs and ordinary people. And that's what Becky Li herself states: the difference between a celebrity (pop, cinema or TV star) and a blogger, that has grown her fame on social media, lies on the fact that the relationship between blogger and her followers is an equal one. A celebrity fandom just follow their idols and buy the products he/she promotes to reach an ideal social status, just because he/she uses. When speaking of an influencer, the relationship was built directly with his/her followers online and, so, the relationship itself grew hand in hand with the blogger. So, a follower, would be likely to buy the product his/her trusted influencer sponsors, because of their loyalty relationship.

Another very relevant thing the influencer must do, to enhance the connection with his/her followers, is to go always through the comments they leave. From the comments he/she can get the feedbacks from followers, which is an important feature to understand whether everything is going in the right direction or if he/she has to change something. For example, Becky Li, is committed in this activity of reviewing comments on a daily basis. This is important also for brands she works with, because she provides them data about potential problems consumers could run into. When she finds negative comments, she always ask the reasons of the issue. Even if it's just one negative

comment out of 100¹⁰⁹, she would care about it and forward the disservice to the brand involved. This is the best way of communicating, both with brands and followers, and of enhancing the influencers' level of reliability, boosting the relationship with followers. For example, once, fans told Becky that the customer service of a brand she was sponsoring wasn't satisfactory. Becky promptly reported the issue to the brand. This sometimes happens with international brands that have just entered Chinese market, and so it's not easy at all for them at the beginning. It's important for brands not to ignore critics, especially on Weibo, in order to be successful, they need to have a marketing team that works all day to answer to all followers' (who are potential consumers) comments and it has to be ready to deal promptly possible negative comments and immediately apologize or provide solutions to them.¹¹⁰ That's also one of the reasons why it is always better to rely on an expert influencer when entering Chinese market for the first time.

One of the best-known cases, that involved Becky Li in influencer marketing, also in the Western world, is that of the partnership between Becky and the very famous automotive brand, Mini. Their partnership began for the launch, by Mini, of their new car model: Countryman. The post written on her WeChat blog, for the promotion of the new car exceeded, 300,000 views and 2,500 shares¹¹¹. After such a substantial success, Mini chose Becky Li, once again, for the launch of a special edition of MINI YOURS car, declined in a Caribbean Aqua color shade. It was a limited edition model, at the price of 285,000 yuan (US\$ 45,500)¹¹² each, that was made available as a preview for Becky Li's WeChat blog, Becky's Fantasy. On July 9th 2017 this launch took place on Li's account and she was capable of selling them out within just five minutes. In less than a week Mini received more than 1,000 orders for this car. This unbelievable success was reached even before the official launch on Mini's website. The choice made by Mini to be represented by Becky Li is not random at all, they selected her because she matches the core values of the brand to perfection. She is the spokesperson of the

¹⁰⁹ Yiling Pan @SiennaPan, "The secret to Fashion Blogger Becky Li's Magical Ability to Sell", on JingDaily, September 14, 2017 <https://jingdaily.com/chinese-fashion-blogger-becky-li-interview/>

¹¹⁰ "Top mistakes to avoid on Chinese social media" Youtube Video. Posted by "Retail in Asia". January 1st 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFiKUaFgWjs>

¹¹¹ Global Business Solution S.r.l. "La Chiara Ferragni Cinese lancia la Mini ed è boom di acquisti: il potere dell'Influencer Marketing". GBS.web. <https://www.gbsweb.it/blog/la-chiara-ferragni-cinese-lancia-la-mini-ed-e-boom-di-acquisti/>

¹¹² Vivian Chen, SCMP STYLE, "China's "Goddess of shopping" Builds trust by sharing her imperfections", re-published by JingDaily on May 9th 2018 <https://jingdaily.com/goddess-of-shopping-trust/>

brand, since she is a loyal customer first of all. She loves this product and depicts Mini's cars as her dream cars, in fact, it really is the first car she used to dream to purchase, and, plus Caribbean aqua is her favorite color. So, at the core of this sponsorship there is the share of same values among brand, influencer and her audience, that, as deeply stated above, is one of the most important feature in influencer marketing strategy. Becky's Fantasy audience represents the perfect context of Mini potential consumers for many reasons: firstly, 90% of Becky's followers are women, totally in alignment with MINI YOURS target; secondly they are luxury buyers, with very high spending power and this goes hand-in hand with MINI consumers; the third point is the alignment between MINI's philosophy and the values of the influencer; fourth point is the adherence and deep share from followers of the values conveyed by Becky, such as independence, empowerment, freedom to be themselves, ignoring others' opinions.

Becky Li describes the MINI YOURS car as a microcosm, in which she can take a break from her very busy life and disconnect its frenetic pace.

× 经典MINI三门 MINI YOURS 加... ⋮



Only 100 people will have the chance to drive blue
只有**100**人，才有机会驾驭的蓝。



MINI 携手时尚博主黎贝卡独家发布
经典 MINI 三门版 MINI YOURS 加勒比蓝限量版，全国仅供**100**台。
建议零售价：¥285,000

Becky Li partnership with Mini. Source: China channel

One of the strategy used by Becky Li is the “Content is King” rule, in fact, she really puts big efforts in writing her posts in order to create solid contents for her target audience, choosing with care all her partnerships. She declares to spend even 10 hours for the creation of just one post, spending many hours even for the research of the perfect image to choose and, once the post is online, she reads all the comments and interacts with followers.

After this great success with brands, Becky decided to set up her own fashion line, having well in mind the needs of her followers. Li launched this fashion line through her WeChat account on December 19th 2017 and it sold out in just three hours.¹¹³

Before launching it she made an incredible work of research, she really wanted this line to be functional for her followers, and she didn't perceive it as just a way of making more money. The idea came to her because her followers (mostly women) were always asking her where she purchased the most basic items of the outfits she posted. She thought that it was pretty easy to find those, because of their simple style, but then she realized that most of women didn't have so much time to spend in seeking for the perfect basic item, such as white T-shirts, blouses, jeans. She understood to be in a privileged position, due to her job that made her travel a lot and so she could compare and choose among many brands, not only the ones sold in mainland China. So, she finally decided to make the effort of selecting and choosing the perfect basic pieces herself, on behalf of her followers, and to launch her own fashion line. Her research of materials and designs lasted one year for making "only" 100 items of clothing, she wanted quality in first place, and not quantity. She reserved special attention also to the fit of her clothes, taking into consideration all the different body shapes. This is of great importance, in the scope of feminine empowerment and in the aim of unhinging beauty standards imposed by all medias and, in particular, on social media where usually flawless bodies are shown and people take them for real, even if they are not, because of the use of photo editing tools.

The prices range of her collection vary from 200 RMB (more less \$30) to 1.800 RMB (approximately \$250) because she wanted her fashion line to be accessible for many people as possible. This doesn't go in contrast with her luxury fashion promotion, because the high quality of the pieces signed by her, perfectly match with high-end handbags or shoes that she usually wears and promotes through her blog.

Another pioneer figure in Chinese influencer marketing is, for sure, Ye Si, better known as "Gogoboi", his official name on Weibo. He is considered one of the firsts and one the most influential KOLs in China.

¹¹³ Jessica Rapp @jrapppp. "WeChat Star Becky Li Goes Back to Basics in New Fashion Line". *JingDaily*. December 21st 2017. <https://jingdaily.com/wechat-fashion-star-becky-li-bringing-back-basics/>

He first graduated at Zhejiang Gongshang University and started to work as an English teacher and, at the same time, in a clothing company¹¹⁴. Before heading to social media, he worked at Grazia China as fashion features editor. Then, the turning point arrived in 2010, when he started to share the hashtag #whowearwhat¹¹⁵ on his personal Weibo account. By using this ironic hashtag, he started commenting celebrities outfits, turning his personal page into a fashion blog, on which, in a witty and hilarious tone he posted photos of celebrities wearing questionable looks and he used to define each of them “car crashes”, in an evident desecrator accent. He goes against the classic model of fashion journalist that uses words such as “sexy, elegant, luxurious” to describe celebrities and decides to give a fresh touch to this world. Because of his revolutionary way of being, he suddenly gained huge support, with millions of followers on Weibo, that he can now count around 9 millions followers.

The thing that all four influencers’ pioneers have in common and that made them so famous and followed by millions of people is the ruthless honesty they talk to their audience. They don’t make fun of them, they don’t tell them lies. And this was the trump card for Gogoboi as well. He used to criticize luxury brands as well, he shameful said what he really thought, with his strong sense of humor. When his audience started to grow through the roof, luxury brands started to understand the huge potential of this guy and that they could exploit it. Such brands started to invite him at their events around the world.

In 2014 he co-founded Missionary, an influencer marketing company, that recruits all the best Chinese influencers and Gogoboi acts as a mentor to them, giving advices on the right strategy to adopt when working with social media. So, he not only has to create contents for his Weibo account, but he also helps others to develop their social media pages. He says “I don’t have as many fresh new ideas as today’s young people. So, the people I recruit have to be crazy”¹¹⁶.

He is a clever guy, he speaks Chinese, Japanese, Korean and English, and this helps him to interview celebrities during events for his blog. When he has to deal with personalities, such as the actress Cate Blanchett, he gets a little nervous, but he never

¹¹⁴“Gogoboi Ye Si|BoF 500| The People Shaping the Global Fashion Industry” *Business of Fashion*. October 8th 2019 <https://www.businessoffashion.com/community/people/gogoboi-ye-si>

¹¹⁵ Generation T “How Chinese Social media Influencer Gogoboi Turned his Fashion blog Into a Mini Media Empire”. GenT. October 16th 2017 <https://generationt.asia/leaders/how-chinese-social-media-influencer-gogoboi-turned-his-outspoken-fashion-blog-into-a-mini-media-empire>

¹¹⁶Ibidem

shows it and acts as if nothing happened. He learnt Korean just for the purpose of interviewing Korean celebrities and only after one month after he was studying it, he had to interview Im Yoon-ah, a very famous Korean singer and actress. During the interview, he was able to understand everything she said and he made it on being fluent.

Despite his great success he stays humble and doesn't self-depict him as a "businessman". He also says that he thinks about retirement many times, but his biggest concern is toward his team that would lose its job.



Gogoboi. Source: The business of Fashion

3.2.2 Not only KOLs

The Chinese internet scenario is very broad and it incorporates different online personalities, that are involved in influencer marketing. As we have seen above for the Western world, in which coexists different types of influencers, in the Chinese one this happens as well and deserves a separate discussion.

There are five main categories of online figures on Chinese social media.

- 1) Wanghong 网红, that literally are internet celebrities. This is not the best category a brand should choose, when seeking for an influencer to develop a social media marketing strategy. The reasons why they don't suit brands are:

usually they are famous for their good-looking, fashion style, but not because they possess any special knowledge or skills about any topic.

Second reason is that wanghong are really popular and followed, but often this doesn't reflect a high degree of influence over their followers, since they are not considered to be a reliable resource.

They usually become famous due to viral online contents, so their followers don't know them very well, but just start to follow them for these contents.

They are not oriented toward a long term fame, but their rise is just temporary, until the next Wangong takes over.

- 2) Key Opinion Leaders (Kols): before reaching this high position, their first aim is to share contents on social media to convey messages or to talk about specific topics. This is the main difference between Wanghong and KOLs, the first ones just want to reach fame to get rich and no matter how they pursue this goal, while KOLs fame is mostly casual, and in many cases really deserved because of the share of substantial and useful contents.
- 3) Next-generation Content Creators: these online personalities are very talented in creating entertaining contents. But often their followers just want to be entertained by them, and not, receiving advices on what to buy or anything else. So, maybe it wouldn't be first choice for brands for developing an influencer marketing strategy because it's not the best way to promote sales. They usually work on short video platforms, like Douyin.
- 4) Celebrities: celebrities are those who established their fame in real world, for example singers, actors, actresses, TV show presenters. Thanks to their popularity offline, they also set up very followed social media accounts because people are likely to see what their idols look like in everyday life. It could be a good choice for high positioned brands, but not for small ones, because, of course, dealing partnerships with celebrities is really expensive.
- 5) We Media: smaller media companies, usually founded by journalists. They operate on many different social media platforms and speak about current affairs and social issues that people are interested about.

Another category that is starting to catch on, both in Western and Chinese world, is that of virtual influencers. Virtual influencers¹¹⁷ are non human being, digital

¹¹⁷ Chiara Morini. "Chi sono i virtual influencer e come hanno conquistato anche la Cina". Ninja Marketing. February 26th 2019 <https://www.ninjamarketing.it/2019/02/26/virtual-influencer-cina/>

creatures that generate real revenues. One of the most famous virtual influencer is the 23-year old Japanese girl, named Erica. She became famous because the Italian brand Gucci chose her for a marketing campaign in China. She is a robot, created with artificial intelligence, by Hiroshi Ishiguro, director of Osaka Intelligent Robotics Laboratory. Erica speaks thanks to a speech synthesizer and learnt how to use facial expressions. She took part in July 2018 in the campaign held by Gucci on WeChat, called “Why are you scared of me?”. She was actually the first one involved in a virtual influencer campaign in China, dressed in a Gucci total look .



Source: Ninja Marketing

Luxury brands are really attracted by virtual influencers because of their contents malleability. So it would be easier for brands to avoid social crisis gaffe, that can happen during on a partnership with real influencers. On the other hand, giving birth to a virtual influencer means to have a whole team of expert engineers for computer graphics and 3D programming for creating and managing the social account, with very high costs that not each brand can uphold.

3.2.3 KOLs' formats and techniques

There are many formats and techniques KOLs can use to promote sales for brands. The most popular are eight.¹¹⁸

- 1) Tutorials are always one of the main techniques used by influencers to talk about a product and how it can be used. They are videos, in which they show the product itself and how to reach a certain goal by using that product. These are entertaining contents with commercial purposes.
- 2) Unboxing videos are also a tool used by influencers to show products they sponsor. It usually happens when brands send the influencer, with whom they have a partnership, their products. The KOL make these videos, that will publish on social media, in which he/she shows products in details with focuses on packaging. There's a hype in these videos, since they are supposed to be made "live", when the influencer "unboxes" staff for the first time, and so, there's curiosity peeling away layer after layer, unwrapping products. They should generate the desire of buying immediately on the audience. They are useful because can be used in each sector of product: from clothes, to shoes, to food, basically everything.
- 3) Experience sharing. This way of sponsoring entails the influencer to review, share opinions about products, through her personal experience. For example, the influencer AQin often talks about her skincare routine while she is on travel, because she travels really often
- 4) Reviews. Another fundamental strategy used by KOLs is reviewing products eviscerating all the pros and cons. They can also come together with short

¹¹⁸Jessica Rapp @jrapppp. "8 ways E-commerce Influencers Court Consumers in China". *Jingdaily*. January 10th 2020 <https://jingdaily.com/8-ways-e-commerce-influencers-court-consumers-in-china/>

tutorials or advices on how to use the product at its best. KOLs can incentivize their followers to share opinions about the products, building communities.

- 5) Product sharing works well with short videos and live streams on platforms like Taobao Live, through which influencer shows and talks about products. The key role of this tool is the influencer charisma and his/her communication power.
- 6) Celebrity cameos. When a KOL invites a celebrity in his/her videos or vice versa.
- 7) Exclusive discounts are reserved discounts only for that influencer's followers. Influencers can provide flash sales to their followers through live streaming platforms or using common posts through social media.
- 8) Brand collaborations include limited edition of certain products, signed by the influencer in question. The KOL will exploit his/her social channel to promote the product and his/her followers will probably purchase it immediately due to the limitedness of the item.

3.3 Peculiar examples of Chinese KOLs

3.3.1 Fashion and beauty

One of the most relevant personalities in Chinese KOLs context is, for sure, Mr. Bags, 包先生. As its names speaks itself, his WeChat accounts focuses on reviewing bags and giving advices on which to buy. His real name is Tao Liang and it didn't pass so much time since he was a Columbia University graduate students to his huge success on Chinese social media.

His area of expertise is related to luxury fashion, and in particular, to luxury bags. He defines himself "Mr. Bags" and he is always updated on the last trends, but at the same has a great knowledge about the iconic pieces. He makes charts on the best bags to purchase and each month he makes one about the 30 most desirable designer handbags. He has now over 7 million followers on multiple social platforms and he first started his Weibo account

in 2012¹¹⁹. At that time he didn't realize that this could have become a real business, that made him earn success and money.

He was ranked as the most influential fashion blogger in 2017, according to BNP Paribas 2017 rankings¹²⁰. In 2018 Mr. Bags was mentioned in *Forbes China's 30 under 30* list and *Forbes Asia's* under 30 list.

He is very well known for his incredible collaborations with brands and is renowned for his "sold out" within few minutes. One of the first main campaign of him, was the one dealt with Givenchy, made in occasion of Valentine's Day in 2017. Since "Bagfans", as Mr. Bags lovingly calls his followers, are his primary concern, he made a limited-edition collection, composed by 86 pieces of Givenchy bags, created on purpose for them. The result was surprising, the entire limited collection, launched through his WeChat channel, sold out within only 12 minutes. This was just the beginning of a prosperous carrier for Mr. Bags, that keeps on signing amazing campaigns with luxury fashion brands.

On June 2017 he released his first capsule collection with the Italian brand Tod's and it was also the first time he was collaborating with a luxury brand directly in the designing process. They made 200 custom pieces of three iconic styles of the brand: the "Sella", "Double T" and "Wave".¹²¹

He was able to sell them within a few minutes after the launch. After this campaign he didn't stop and he continued building his empire.

In his blog he provides all information about purchasing luxury bags as investments for life, that goes beyond trends. His carrier related choice are all taken together with the approval of his Bagfans. He says "Whenever we are starting a new project, I talk to the brand myself about what I like and what my Bagfans are currently in love with. Then, we decide which bags to promote. There has never been a situation where I have to say I'm fond of a bag that I actually don't like."¹²² He cares about underlining that the main

¹¹⁹ Vivian Chen. "Meet Mr. Bags, the Chinese top digital influencer who's changing the way women shop". South China Morning Post. June 21st 2018 <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/people-events/article/2151768/meet-mr-bags-chinese-top-digital-influencer-whos>

¹²⁰ Business of Fashion. February 9th 2020 <https://www.businessoffashion.com/community/people/tao-liang>

¹²¹ Mr. Bags. July 26th 2017 <http://www.mrbags.com/index.php/2017/07/26/mr-bags-tods-2017/>

¹²² Nina Cresswell. "How to sell luxury bags in minutes: Mr Bags and Givenchy". Influencer update.biz. December 6th 2018. <https://www.influencerupdate.biz/campaign/67759/how-to-sell-luxury-bags-in-minutes-mr-bags-x-givenchy/>

purpose of his partnerships with brands is not about selling out all of the bags ¹²³, but creating something special to his fans, each moment of the capsule collection is magical, from the ideation of it to the launch itself.

After many successful campaigns, Mr. Bags decided to open his own shop through the tool of WeChat mini programme. On June 26th 2018 ¹²⁴ he launched his “Baoshop”, this represents a real turning point, because in this way he can provide much quicker sale experiences for his Bagfans that will be able to purchase his capsule bags, just in one click, through WeChat pay feature. Plus, this store allows much more customization and personal touch by his creator, making all the purchasing experience more exclusive.

There are some steps that are involved in the capsules collections creating moments: endorsement by other celebrities and other influencers’ support; the creation of digital contents that show the inspiration and the designing process of the capsule, Mr. Bags usually uses short videos in order to do this and he creates as many post as possible to create hype and excitement in his fans. Another important step is the promotion through social media, always with the support of dedicated hashtags, for example during the campaign signed with Longchamp, the French leather goods brand, in 2018, in occasion of the year of the dog, the hashtag used on Weibo was #Mr.BagsxLongchampExclusiveCapsule ¹²⁵ and it reached 20 million impressions. However, what he really cares about, is not the number of impressions and likes reached, but the happy feeling he would generate in his Bagfans for purchasing a bag from his collections. These activities, also, started to go from online to offline as well, so he started to host events in China’s major cities for the launch of his collections in physical stores. Another strategy is to entice followers to the purchasing process is to provide them exclusive experiences, for example special gifts and early access to products, if they make pre-orders, in order to ensure their limited-edition, signed by Mr. Bags, exclusive piece. His main purpose is to create unique experiences for his Bagfans and he want them never to get bored and

¹²³ Jessica Rapp @jrapp. “Mr. Bags x Longchamp: how to make 5 million RMB in just two hours”. JingDaily. June 21st 2018. <https://jingdaily.com/mr-bags-longchamp/>

¹²⁴ Danielle Wightman-Stone. “Tod’s and Mr. Bags to debut collaboration on WeChat “Baoshop””. Fashion United. June 26th 2018. <https://fashionunited.com/news/fashion/tod-s-and-mr-bags-to-debut-collaboration-on-wechat-baoshop/2018062621970>

¹²⁵ Jessica Rapp @jrapp. “Mr. Bags x Longchamp: how to make 5 million RMB in just two hours”. JingDaily. June 21st 2018. <https://jingdaily.com/mr-bags-longchamp/>

the only thing to succeed in this is to put all the efforts in making a good product, designed and created for them.



Mr. Bags for Longchamp Source: JingDaily

Another noteworthy figure in Chinese influencer panorama is Li Jiaqi, the male beauty blogger that conquered all his followers for selling lipsticks during his live streams on video sharing platforms. He is only 27 years old and used to be a sale assistant in a cosmetic shop¹²⁶. Then, he started his online activity in 2017, and in less than a year, he actually created a dream carrier. At the very beginning, he says, some people used to post hateful comments to his videos, because it was considered weird for a man to take live streaming shows and, even more weird, that he use to put lipsticks on. So, he can be considered a revolutionary figure, also for Chinese society, because he wanted to show that anyone can be what he/she wants to be. After such beginning, his success kept on increasing day by day and he couldn't even imagine to gain such fame. His live streams usually take place at his home and he wants to make them as informal, as possible, letting his fans literally walk into his life, as they were friends. During his live streams, besides speaking about lipsticks and make-up products, he shows his dog making funny things or just frames from his daily life. He uses some fixed phrases, that have now become his trademark, such as "All you girls! All

¹²⁶ Yuan Ruiyang and Isabelle Li. "In depth: How Internet Celebrities Changed China E-commerce". Caixin. August 21st 2019. <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2019-08-21/in-depth-how-internet-celebrities-changed-china-e-commerce-101453478.html>

you girls!”¹²⁷, catching his fans attention or “Buy it! Buy it! Buy it!”¹²⁸, encouraging them to purchase the lipstick is showing.

Fun fact is, in occasion of 2018 Single’s Day fest, which in China is one of the biggest commercial events, when Chinese people do massive shopping, it took place a live streaming night event¹²⁹ at Alibaba’s Tmall, during which a was issued a challenge between the billionaire founder of Alibaba, Jack Ma and the beauty blogger Li Jiaqi, about who could sell more lipsticks. The result was unbelievable: Jack Ma just sold 10 lipsticks during the show, while Li was able to sell thousand of lipsticks just in a few minutes¹³⁰.

He is such a phenomenon, that many others after him tried to imitate him by opening similar social accounts, but no one could reach his levels. Now is one of the most influent personality within the beauty industry for sales promotion. Also, the channel used by him, live streaming, is a sector that is growing extensively in China and that will keep on growing, until the point that some people think that is going to become the first platform for social media marketing. Li Jiaqi’s incomes from the live streaming activity are huge: 10 minutes of live on Taobao’s live streaming platform can cost, for a brand that wants its lipsticks to be promoted by him, \$14.164¹³¹ (100.000 RMB), while 15 seconds short video on Douyin can reach the cost of \$71.695 (500.000 RMB)¹³².



Li Jiaqi and Jack Ma during the Live stream. Source: Vcg

¹²⁷ Cai Xuejiao. “Lips Don’t Lie? China’s Livestreamers Provoke sales, scrutiny”. Sixth tone. November 14th 2019. <http://www.sixthtone.com/news/1004839/lips-dont-lie%3F-chinas-livestreamers-provoke-sales%2C-scrutiny>

¹²⁸ Ibidem

¹²⁹ Yuan Ruiyang and Isabelle Li. “In depth: How Internet Celebrities Changed China E-commerce”. Caixin. August 21st 2019. <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2019-08-21/in-depth-how-internet-celebrities-changed-china-e-commerce-101453478.html>

¹³⁰ Ibidem

¹³¹ Ibidem

¹³² Ibidem

3.3.2 Art of wine

One of the main personalities in the oenology social media marketing field in China, which is a completely new one, due to the fact that wine is starting to peep on Chinese dining tables only in recent years, is Wang Shenghan¹³³, whose name on Weibo is 醉鹅娘, literally drunk goose, and reknown as “Lady Penguin”. She was born in Beijing in 1990 and graduated from Brown University and Le Cordon Bleu Wine and management¹³⁴. In 2015 she founded her blog, Lady Penguin 醉鹅娘, in which she teaches Chinese people how to purchase top quality wines and how to taste them. She describes wines telling her followers all the characteristics and peculiarities of wines. She dealt partnerships with some of the most famous wine brands: Bacardi, Moet & Chandon, Wine Australia, Vins de Bordeaux and many others. Hers is not just a blog in which she provides technical details and tells the histories of wines, but it’s an actual e-commerce, in which each subscriber pays 200 RMB (around \$28) monthly to be a member of her Penguin Club¹³⁵, gaining by a bottle of wine carefully selected by Penguin and other benefits. For the most exclusive, it’s available Lady Penguin Vip 2000 Club, which is a membership that, at much higher costs, provides monthly wine tastings events of great vintages of Champagne, Bordeaux and other top quality wines¹³⁶ and access to exclusive cellars of wines. Her website section “Lady Penguin’s Wine Daily” is a wine show, made by 90 episodes, in which she entertains her followers showing her deep knowledge about wine¹³⁷. This video series is often used by many wine as teaching materials and it is also the official wine-content provider for Baidu Baike, the largest Chinese encyclopedia.¹³⁸

¹³³ “Chi è lady penguin, top influencer del vino in Cina”. Tenuta Belvedere Press Office. January 24th 2018. <https://www.tenutabelvedere.it/lady-penguin-top-influencer-del-vino-cina/>

¹³⁴ Lady Penguin 醉红娘. December 1st 2019. <http://www.qietuan.org/>

¹³⁵ “Chi è lady penguin, top influencer del vino in Cina”. Tenuta Belvedere Press Office. January 24th 2018. <https://www.tenutabelvedere.it/lady-penguin-top-influencer-del-vino-cina/>

¹³⁶ Ibidem

¹³⁷ Lady Penguin 醉红娘. December 1st 2019. <http://www.qietuan.org/>

¹³⁸ Ibidem

Forbes China ranked Lady Penguin among “30 Under 30” entrepreneur in 2017¹³⁹.

Her selling point is the fact that having created a strong community, with which she has established a loyal relationship. One of her aim is to expose table wines overpricing and, in fact, her blog section “Lady Penguin Smart buy” provides lists of table wines from 28 to 88 RMB (\$4 to \$12), making her subscribers aware and comfortable when taking purchasing decisions about wine.

Lady Penguin not only has her e-commerce and a Weibo profile that counts one million followers ¹⁴⁰, that could seem “irrelevant”, compared to the number of followers in fashion context, but, actually, it’s a great result, since the topic she takes on, wine, is not something rooted in Chinese tradition, and so, this field just started to make its way in a few years and Lady Penguin was clever enough to be a pioneer of this new trend taking it on social media. Besides her social networks activity, she also provides wine guides to the most popular, 5 stars hotels and restaurants, including: Shangri-La, Four Seasons, St. Regis etc... in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.

After the insight into Lady Penguin, we can say that for Western wine brands, entering the China market could represent a real challenge, because they face an uneducated market, in the sense that Chinese market doesn’t have any knowledge or tradition about wine, so it is something that needs to be explained to Chinese consumers from the very beginning, from its origins. This fact is due to a big cultural distance between China and countries that produce and enjoy drinking wine as a daily habit. So, the need of KOLs that can tell their followers facts about wines and about how to pair it with their meals, becomes extremely important in a good marketing strategy. That’s why, while Italian wine is renowned all over the world, its diffusion in China, only comes after other producing wine countries, such as France, which is the actual leader ¹⁴¹ for trading wine in China. After France, we find Australia, Chile and Spain. Only after them, Italy occupies the fifth position in exporting wine to China. This happens because we, as a country,

¹³⁹ Ibidem

¹⁴⁰ Last update February 11th 2020

¹⁴¹ “Vendere il vino in Cina: perché è fondamentale affidarsi agli influencer”. East Media. December 10th 2019. <https://www.east-media.net/vino-in-cina-influencer-kol/>

underestimate the value of social media and haven't attributed yet fundamental importance to correct marketing strategies. We cannot reason with the mentality that "wine sells itself", because in the cultural context of China, consumers need to be educated and informed about something that is totally unknown for them. So, the winning card for France is relying to Chinese e-commerce and social media. Lifestyles and wine habits need to be well taught to Chinese market, with the support of videos, post, created by expert KOLs, speaking about "when to drink, how to drink and pair with what kind of food".

One of the most famous Italian wine company, Cantine Pasqua, from Verona, decided to entrust themselves to Chinese KOLs for their enter in Chinese market. They hired 12¹⁴² KOLs, with common main characteristics, such as: being under 30 and that they barely speak English. Among them there are many different type of influencer: Invy,¹⁴³ who accepted the challenge to double Cantine Pasqua's turnover in Beijing within a couple of years. Uktimes, a 15 million followers young blogger, that is specialized in talking about Western lifestyle to Chinese people. Dimples Guoguo, an award winning photographer and travels journalist, who even though can "only" count 310 thousand followers, holds an interesting niche for people exporting Made in Italy and related culture wine. One of the difference lying between Italian consumers and Chinese ones, is that we, as Italian, care more about substance of what we are drinking or eating, while Chinese consumers are much more attracted by packaging or exclusivity that a product has. In fact, one of the best seller from Cantine Pasqua is the wine bottle decorated with Romeo & Juliette wall's graffiti.

To sum up, for wine brands the best way to enter Chinese market is to deal partnerships with KOLs and to make their products available on e-commerce platforms.

¹⁴² Micaela Cappellini. "Gogoboi e gli altri: ecco gli influencer che mettono il turbo all'export in Cina". October 8th 2019. <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/gogoboi-e-altri-ecco-influencer-che-mettono-turbo-all-export-cina-AEng3qWE>

¹⁴³ Ibidem



Lady Penguin

3.3.3 Travel blogger

Another category of KOLs are traveling influencers. As for other ones, collaborating with them could be very important in a marketing strategy in the travel industry: hotels, restaurants, flight companies... a travel blogger becomes the ambassador for all these kind of services and his/her followers will be more likely to repeat the experience seen from influencers. Besides just posting and reviewing a hotel room or a restaurant, the ultimate trends in marketing say that influencers need to show a whole experience. For example, if they are staying in a hotel, they will have to keep posted all their followers about the exclusive experience¹⁴⁴ of accommodating in that hotel and, consequently, arousing their followers' desire to go there. Customization is an important strategy in this case: surprising the influencer letting them find flowers or champagne in the room, coming together with a nice and friendly note at their arrival. All these experiences will have a big audience (through, posts, stories and videos) on social media and could have a good impact on business. Also in this case the most important thing is to hire the right influencer, that matches the target we want to engage: if you are a luxury resort, you must hire an influencer that most likely will have an audience that has a sufficient spending power.

¹⁴⁴ Jessica Rapp. "4 China Marketing Experts: How can brands use traveling influencers?". Parklu. February 20th 2019. <https://www.parklu.com/china-marketing-experts-traveling-influencers/>

One of the main KOLs in this field are: 旅游约吗¹⁴⁵, which literally means “travel appointment”, she is a young Chinese girl, a professional traveler who owns 11 millions¹⁴⁶ on Weibo. She shares popular tourist attractions and travel notes, through short video clips.

猫力 Molly is another young Chinese girl, very popular for her travel adventures. She has 7¹⁴⁷ millions on Weibo and represents a poster child for FIT (free independent traveler)¹⁴⁸ among youngest generations. She started being popular in 2013, because of the book she wrote about her boyfriend and hers travel experiences and background episodes. She captured her readers’ attention and her fame grew till the point that she dealt partnerships with brands, like the jewelry maker Tiffany to promote a city-themed accessory or she went to a Canadian cruise trip, as a La Mer’s guest to learn about their skincare products and a key ingredient of them. She also appeared in some promotional spots for T Galleria by DFS¹⁴⁹ showing her experiences during her trip to Auckland in New Zealand.

So, brands can definitely exploit also the travel type KOL to promote their products and boost sales.

3.3.4 Country life

Country life is a completely different field, than all the others above, that are mainly focused on fashion and exclusive lifestyles.

Li Ziqi is a 29 year-old girl, that has become a blogger for her posting about life in rural China. Ziqi used to live in the countryside when she was a child, but then at the age of 14¹⁵⁰ went to the city because her stepmother used to mistreat her. After a few years she decided to go back to Sichuan countryside to look after her grandmother that was left alone.

She started to post videos about her daily country life in 2016 and she suddenly started to garner million of followers over multiple platforms. She

¹⁴⁵ Regina Yang. “Top 10 China Influencers (KOL)- Travel”. Dragon Social. May 22nd 2019.

<https://www.dragonsocial.net/blog/china-travel-kol/>

¹⁴⁶ Update February 11th 2020. Source: Weibo.

¹⁴⁷ Update February 11th 2020. Source: Weibo.

¹⁴⁸ Ruonan Zheng. “Top 7 Chinese Travel Influencers with Style”. JingDaily. October 1st 2018.

<https://jingdaily.com/travel-influencers-style/>

¹⁴⁹ Ibidem

¹⁵⁰ “Exclusive interview with Li Ziqi, China’s most mysterious internet celebrity”. YouTube video.

Posted by Goldthread. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9CfVcXoYh4>

perfectly reflects Chinese ancient values, those of rural times and they are in sharp contrast with all the values on which Chinese society is focused today. As we were saying in chapter two, nowadays Chinese society is based on materialism, hedonism and old values of hard work are forgotten. Li Ziqi reminds all this tradition and provides a slice of life that is rare now. Her videos are silent, she rarely speaks to her followers and she doesn't so much releasing interviews, she shows all her hard work in the fields with flute music in the background. She crafts bamboo furniture, cultivate cotton flowers, dyes her clothing with fruit skins, grows soybeans and any kind of vegetables, breeds chickens, she does really everything by herself. She says that the first purpose of her videos is to make people feel relaxed and to let them take a break from the stressful rhythms of Chinese megacities and from their work. She can boast 23¹⁵¹ million followers on Weibo and her audience really appreciate what she does.

At the very beginning, she did all by herself with a tripod, then, after earning money, she hired a small team made by a video maker and a personal assistant. She is an antithetical figure in Chinese context, in which all the people are focused on gaining success in urban contexts, with high-sounding carriers. On the contrary, she embodies the failure in such urban context and she preferred the rural life. It seems like a fairytale and probably that's why she garnered such endorsement by her audience, she depicts a fairytale-lifestyle, an escape from reality. In a broad sense, she represents the failure of modern society¹⁵², by her personal failure to live in the city. She depicts the perfect ideal Chinese ancient dream, that appeal also internationally, in fact, she has also a YouTube channel, that reached 8 million subscribers which is an incredible result for Chinese rural girl, in a social media that is actually banned in mainland China. She even set up an online shop, where she sells some of the items she uses in her videos, like the knives she uses to dice vegetables just plucked from her garden or the white old-style T-shirts she wears in the fields.

¹⁵¹ Update February 11th 2020. Source Weibo.

¹⁵² Adrienne Matei. "Country life: the young female farmer who is now a top influencer in China". The Guardian. January 28th 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/jan/28/li-ziqi-china-influencer-rural-life>

She is really enjoyable to follow because she provides a softening of the soul, some may argue whether what she shows is real or not, by the way, this doesn't matter so much, because people love her and benefit from watching her videos.



Li Ziqi. Source: YouTube

Conclusion

The main aim of this thesis is to describe the cross-section of Chinese social media “in influencers’ society”, as the title mentions itself. By analyzing all the cases mentioned above, it is possible to sum up that social media have a predominant role on Chinese peoples’ daily life. Probably they wouldn’t be able to do anything without them anymore: they do grocery shopping, book flight tickets, pay bills... every daily activity, for the great majority of Chinese people, is made by a click on their smartphone. Immediacy of purchasing process is a fundamental feature for Chinese consumers and this is due to the high digitization of recent years. In this scenario are placed KOLs, that have a strong influence on Chinese consumers’ preferences. Social media such as, Weibo and WeChat, that are the pillars of all Chinese social media frame, represent the stage for KOLs, that are the figures that lead trends among Chinese consumers. This should be well understood by brands and companies that want to approach Chinese market: entering Chinese market without a precise social media strategy, that involves partnerships with KOLs is totally worthless and unsuccessful.

The latest innovations on social media are live streaming, that immediately caught on Chinese consumers. Platforms, such as Taobao Live and Xiaohongshu mean the future for social media marketing. Their strong point is to provide a “social commerce”, which is the combination of social media and e-commerce. The need of this mixture comes from the fact that Chinese consumers are inundated with multiple possibilities of purchasing choices, so they heavily base their final purchasing decisions on word of mouth recommendations. So, putting together the access to word of mouth recommendations and direct e-commerce platform is the winning strategy in business.

The implicit question that arouse during my research, was: “*why Chinese consumers have become so addicted to compulsive shopping and why KOLs exert so much influence on them?*”. The answer I found, is that Chinese people values have deeply changed within recent years and from Confucian values such as poorness, thriftiness and modesty, they moved towards Western values’ lifestyles, enhancing their desire of materialism, hedonism and exclusiveness. That’s also why they represent a big slice of consumers in worldwide luxury shopping.

For all the above reasons, in my opinion, social media KOLs marketing will not stop, but, on the contrary will keep growing and developing, finding, for sure, new methods, techniques and platforms.

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