Role of Culture in Engaging Consumers in Organizational Social media Posts

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ABSTRACT

Despite the wide consensus on the importance of culture in the deployment and use of information systems, very few studies have investigated whether and how organizations should incorporate the societal culture in their social media (SM) content strategy to increase consumer engagement. Recently, Chinese organizations have succeeded in engaging consumers using their local applications, such as WeChat and Weibo, calling for research on the role of Chinese cultures in such successes. Our research objectives are therefore to identify how organizational SM content strategy manifests and what makes SM content engaging in Chinese cultural contexts. As a theoretical framework, we chose the typology of symbolic-utilitarian message appeals and applied it to the six prominent areas of consumer engagement. We then analyzed Chinese organizations' preferences for message appeals for each of the six areas using thematic analyses. The results of our analyses demonstrate the roles of Guanxi (interpersonal relationships), the changing nature of Mianzi (saving face), and the emergence of sympathy appeals in Chinese firms' choice of SM content strategies. Based on these findings, we propose an expanded conceptual framework that encompasses cultural perspectives in organizational SM content strategies.

1. Introduction

Over 1 billion and nearly half a billion user accounts access WeChat and Weibo, respectively, on a monthly basis (Baidu 2019; Shujike 2019). WeChat started as a mobile messenger application and was transformed into a social-networking site equipped with various connection features. Weibo started as a micro-blogging application and was later enhanced by the addition of instant photo-sharing features, much like Snapchat and Instagram. The majority of Chinese firms use WeChat and Weibo (WCWB) to increase consumer engagement (Li 2018). For instance, in May 2017, the Chinese cosmetics manufacturer, Pechoin (百雀羚), featured a new anti-aging product called "Moonlight Box" on Weibo as a gift for mothers who forsake their needs to care for their children. Within days, this sentimental post on Weibo had been viewed over 30 million times.

Despite the success of WCWB in China, very few studies have investigated whether and how organizations should incorporate the societal culture into their social media (SM) content strategy to increase consumer engagement. The SM content strategies are devised to increase user engagement with posts; these strategies have received a great deal of attention from information systems (IS) researchers (Li et al. 2013; Sun, Fang, and Lim 2012). However, culture has rarely been discussed in these extant studies although culture is among the critical success factors for IS deployment and use (Myers and Tan 2002) and influences consumer behaviors on e-retailer sites (Chau et al. 2002).

Our primary objective, therefore, is to fill this important gap in understanding organizational SM content strategy, which manifests divergently across cultures. In so doing, we not only contribute to culture studies in IS, but we also address the paucity of research on organizational SM content strategy. Specifically, we identify SM content strategies for increasing consumer engagement in China and to examine if these strategies differ from those used in US. China provides us with rich soil upon which we can investigate cultural influences on organizational SM content strategy for three reasons. First, we should note the amount of SM users engaged in firms' social media posts on WCWB, as noted above. Second, a unique social media ecosystem, represented by WCWB, has emerged in China due to the ban of foreign social media applications. Third, China has an amalgamation of cultures, such as collectivism, Confucianism, and, lately, emotional ontology (Cheng 2011, 2012, 2013). The strong collectivist and Confucian culture in China (Hofstede and Bond 1988) results in a distinct value system characterized by guanxi (which encompasses interpersonal social connections) and mianzi (which refers to saving face; Tsai and Men 2012, 2017). In addition, rapid marketization and the resultant structural changes have led to the emergence of "emotional ontology," in which the expression of grief, loss, and nostalgia have become the dominant cultural narratives among societal members (Cheng 2011, 2012, 2013).

As an overarching theory, we employ the symbolic-utilitarian typology of message appeals in marketing (Johar and Sirgy 1991). We chose this typology because it has previously been used to analyze SM content strategies (Ashley and Tuten 2015) and is efficacious in distinguishing the collectivist and Confucian tradition in message appeals from individualistic and utilitarian US counterparts (Zhang and Gelb 1996). Symbolic appeals focus on the intangible attributes of a product, such as image and personality, while utilitarian counterparts center on tangible attributes, such as costs and benefits (Sirgy et al. 1991). Symbolic and figurative elements in communication carry a great deal of significance in collectivist and Confucian cultures, while functionality and utility do so in individualistic cultures (Hofstede 2011; Huang, Wu, and Cheng 2016). We applied this typology to all the areas in which organizations can engage consumers in their SM posts. According to Hutton (1999), there are six areas in which organizations can increase the engagement of the public in their communication initiatives: persuasion, advocacy, image/reputation management, relationship management, public information, and cause-related activities. We integrated the two message types into these six areas, creating a conceptual framework called "social media appeals for consumer engagement" (SMACE). For each of the six areas, we then investigated whether Chinese organizations prefer one type of message appeal over the other, and we illuminated the cultural values underlying their preference.

We collected 28 cases illustrating Chinese organizations' use of SM content strategies from websites for communities of practice among SM managers in China. For these cases, we applied a thematic analysis, which is a qualitative method used for inferring the meanings of content (Stone, Dunphy, and Smith 1966) and is therefore appropriate for identifying cultural influences in social media posts. Our analysis shows the clear influences of guanxi and the changing nature of mianzi. In addition, we discovered several cases indicating that Chinese firms build camaraderie with their audiences by commiserating with their life adversities and challenges in familial ways. As this finding does not belong to any of the existing categories in SMACE, we coined it as "sympathy appeal." Then, in a follow-up thematic analysis, we verified whether this sympathy appeal reflects Chinese culture, as opposed to US culture. Based on these findings, we suggest an Expanded SMACE, E-SMACE, which encompasses unique SM content strategies devised to engage consumers in Chinese culture in addition to US culture.

We contributed to theory advancement by demonstrating that organizations indeed use different content strategies to harness consumer engagement across culture (especially China vs. US) and suggested E-SMACE to encompass a broader set of content strategies effective for multiple cultures. Our findings thus fill in the important gap in the literature on the roles of culture in corporate social media content strategies by placing culture as an essential factor for consumer engagement. Our findings also inform practitioners of sympathy appeal, the importance of guanxi and the changing nature of mianzi, which they can employ to gravitate Chinese consumers to their SM posts.

2. Literature review

2.1. Prior research on organizational social media content strategy

Social media content strategy for consumer engagement has attracted much attention in previous research (Mackiewicz and Yeats 2014; Senecal, Gharbi, and Nantel 2002; Tong et al. 2008; Van Der Heide and Lim 2016; Wasko and Faraj 2005; Zhang et al. 2010). Despite extensive literature on content strategies, little attention has been paid to how a particular culture renders SM content more engaging than other cultures. Due to the absence of relevant research, we reviewed the communication and public relations (PR) literature. Again, few studies were found. Zhang, Tao, and Kim (2014) compared multinational companies' use of Weibo and Twitter and discovered that multinational firms post more humorous content on Weibo than on Twitter; no other differences were supported by their statistical test results. *In conclusion, organizational SM content strategy that is idiosyncratic to culture remains largely unexplored in the current literature.*

2.2. Importance of culture in IS deployment, design, and use

Despite the lack of research, culture has been considered as a critical success factor for the development, deployment, and use of IS in organizations (Heinzl and Leidner 2012): "Cultural intelligence is a key capability for avoiding problems and ensuring a proper fit among the constitutional elements of information systems: individuals, tasks, and information technology" (Heinzl and Leidner 2012, 109–110). Culture can be defined as the set of norms, practices, symbols, rituals and beliefs that define a specific group of people (Leidner and Kayworth 2006). Culture can refer to organization culture, which represent the philosophy, mission and practices common within an organization (Denison and Mishra 1995). Culture is more commonly understood as the national culture that refer to the beliefs, values, and social structures of a specific nation or region (Hofstede 1984). National culture is the focus of this study, because it not only limited to organizational behavior, but also related to the development, execution and reception of IS practices within organizations and the general public (Vance, Elie-Dit-Cosaque, and Straub 2008).

Culture can affect the practice of IS in a fundamental way. Previous research has looked into how espoused cultural values affect both the production of IS and the perception of digital content. For instance, research show that people from high-collectivist cultures have a stronger link between the perception of source credibility and information credibility (Luo et al. 2014). Other studies also show that people who espouse high collectivistic culture are more likely to follow knowledge-sharing practices consistent with the organizational structure (Jiacheng, Lu, and Francesco 2010). Chau et al. (2002) have shown the idiosyncratics values and usage patterns of e-retailoers' websites, and argued that e-retailers should design websites differently depending on the cultural backgrounds of the customers they serve. Krasnova, Veltri, and Günther (2012) illustrate that US social network users disclose personal information more than German users do, which is attributed to the US users' low levels of uncertainty avoidance, coupled with high individualistic tendencies, that lead to minimal privacy concerns. Myers and Tan (2002) warn IS researchers of the oversimplification problem that ensues when researchers examine the cultural dimension of Hofstede (1984)'s individualism versus collectivism as two polar opposites. Instead, they argue that IS researchers should consider using qualitative analyses to better evaluate the dynamically changing, temporal, and emergent nature of cultures.

In sum, national culture was shown to have an impact on system design (Dagwell and Weber 1983), system quality perception (Massey et al. 2001), risk perception (Weber and Hsee 1998), software failures (Matheson and Tarjan 1998), technology acceptance (Srite and Karahanna 2006), IT privacy (Bazarova and Choi 2014), decision making (Lowry et al. 2010), and a host of other related constructs. *This show a wide consensus on the importance of culture, including its likely impact on the management of organizational SM content.*

2.3. Research questions

To close this important gap in the role of Chinese culture on corporate social media content strategies, we aim to answer the following questions:

(1) Do Chinese organizations, as opposed to the US counterparts, use different strategies to foster consumer engagement in their SM posts? If so, how are these choices attributed to the unique culture of China?

(2) Do any new strategies emerge in China in comparison to the US which have not been identified in an existing framework for SM content strategies? If so, which cultural values explain the new appeals?

In answering the above questions, some may argue that the different interface features, and not the underlying culture, determine Chinese organizations' choice of an appeal. To argue against such a claim, we have compared two sets of SM applications – Weibo versus Twitter and WeChat versus Facebook. The detailed results are presented in the Appendix 1. In essence, WCWB provide affordances similar and equivalent to those provided by Facebook and Twitter in all six areas of consumer engagement. These comparative results are aligned with the findings of Martínez-López et al. (2020). Therefore, concerns of unfair comparisons due to dissimilar affordances between the Chinese and US applications are mitigated.

3. Conceptual framework

In order to answer the two research questions above, we first referred to the literature on Chinese culture, including Hofstede's dimension of collectivism-individualism, historic Confusianism, and contemporary emotional narratives. Then, we identify how these cultural values shape Chinese firms' SM content strategies, using our integrated framework that combines Sirgy et al.'s message appeals with Hutton's public relations activities.

3.1. Definition of culture

Hofstede (2011) defines national culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (p. 1). Culture can be analyzed either in terms of espoused values or material artifacts (Leidner and Kayworth 2006). Most IS researchers focus on the former – i.e., values – because cultural values are generalizable and enduring, as opposed to the latter – i.e., material artifacts – and because the values shape the production of material artifacts (Srite and Karahanna 2006).

3.2. Characteristics of Chinese cultural dimensions – collectivism

Among several dimensions of culture suggested by Hofstede and his colleagues, individualism versus collectivism has received the most attention as this distinction changes the way people interact and communicate with one another (Ralston et al. 1992). Individualistic culture emphasizes individual independence, growth, and achievement over the success of groups (Hofstede 2003, 2011). Moreover, individualistic cultures have been associated with a preference for more direct communication, competitiveness, emphasis on uniqueness, privacy, and freedom, as well as self-reliance (Mikucka 2014).

In contrast, collectivist culture embodies the tendency to "stick with the group" and emphasizes the collective benefits and rules approved by the larger society over individual needs (Stone, Dunphy, and Smith 1966). Collectivists are interdependent with their in-groups; that is to say, in-group goals are prioritized over individual goals (Lee and Choi 2005). Collectivists are characterized as harmonious, cohesive, loyal, more likely to conform, and more deeply entrenched in social groups (Schmid and Klimmt 2011). According to Hofstede (1984), while the US is on the individualistic end of this

spectrum, China is on the collectivist side. Although individualism-collectivism helps us understand how people within a culture perceive and construct their relationships, obligations, and expectations from other group members, this is only one dimension of national culture and cannot encompasses the entirety of US or Chinese culture, this dimension (Myers and Tan 2002). Thus, we look deeper into the characteristics of Chinese culture below.

3.3. Characteristics of Chinese culture – confucianism

The collectivist aspect of China's national culture is intertwined with Confucianism. Confucianism includes core concepts such as authority, order, and harmony (Y.-H. C. Huang, Wu, and Cheng 2016), resulting in unique values characterized as *guanxi* and *mianzi* (W. (Sunny) (Tsai and Men 2012; Tsai and Men 2017). Guanxi (关系) refers to the networks of personal relationships in which informal social bonds between people carry expectations and obligations to facilitate the exchange of favors among them (Leung et al. 2016). Guanxi is not transactional (explicit understanding of returning the favor), but rather reciprocal (bao: implicit understanding of returning the favor)). Bao means that individual ties within a guanxi network involve long-term commitments and reciprocity that concern equity and the exchange of favors. Even in the age of the Internet, personal connections and face-to-face trust remain a common factor in connecting with the public, those in power, and for resource transmission (Hofstede 2003, 2011). Guanxi has different levels of relationships: family members, friends and colleagues, and acquaintances (Leung et al. 2005). Family relationships consist of expressive ties based on love and commitment, and relationships with acquaintances consist of instrumental ties based on mutual benefits, whereas friendships comprise a mixture of the two (Leung et al. 2005). Simultaneously, those who do not share common guanxi are detached and walled into a separate social network (Chen and Tjosvold 2006, 173). As such, the more communal an organization is perceived to be by its audience (i.e., the higher its level of guanxi), the more affectionate, favorable, and loyal are the relationships that can be built by the organization (Zongchao Li and Li 2014). Guanxi values compassion because the creation of harmony and good relationships at a communal level is critical for building guanxi. To create harmony, members of society are raised with a worldview based on empathy and compassion rather than rationality. As such, members of society share their life adversities to elicit empathy and compassion instead of emphasizing their successes and strengths, which may put group harmony at risk (Cheng 2013). Although this heavy focus on emotional values rooted in guanxi is declining due to the marketization of China over the last 30 years, such values are still the unspoken and underlying norms in Chinese society (Cheng 2011).

Further research has illustrated that alongside guanxi, Chinese societies value face saving (Huang, Wu, and Cheng 2016), also known as mianzi (面子). Mianzi refers to one's awareness of their public image in the minds of others. It is important within Chinese social settings and especially so in a business context, such that neglecting it can have serious consequences for an individual or business (Smith 2012, 2). Mianzi shapes the ways in which organizations communicate with their audiences in crisis situations (Lyu 2012). Being fearful of losing face, Chinese companies move only gradually to a full apology without disclosing harmful facts about themselves. A common phrase, "家丑不可外扬" (jia chou bu ke wai yang), denotes that "domestic embarrassment should not be made public." Companies do not publicly discuss their mistakes because they may lose face (diu mianzi). Instead, companies react slowly so as to appear as if a crisis situation is under control (Lyu 2012). Saving face is especially important in China because Chinese public has a higher first impression bias than the American public (Fang et al. 2020). Changing the perception about an entity takes more elaborative efforts in the Chinese context than in the US context (Fang et al. 2020).

3.4. Characteristics of Chinese culture – emotional ontology

These cultural values of guanxi and mianzi are manifested differently in China than in other East Asian countries in the Confucian tradition due to China's societal and historical trajectory (Cheng 2013).

Contemporary Chinese culture embodies socialist and capitalist values that have emerged in recent decades. Such an amalgamation of values that contradict one another is rarely found in other regions (Xiao 2012). For over 30 years, Chinese people's experiences have undergone profound changes related to major historical events (e.g., the Cultural Revolution) as well as political and structural problems in Chinese society. In addition, as a result of the rapid economic growth and consequent social changes, many Chinese people feel left behind, isolated, and marginalized (Cheng 2009). These factors have led to the emergence of "emotional ontology" on the surface of Chinese culture (Cheng 2013). According to Cheng (2011, 2012, 2013)), a sociologist who specializes in contemporary Chinese culture, emotional ontology lies at the core of contemporary Chinese society. This emotional ontology is skewed toward grief and sorrow-based emotions and away from happiness and joy-based emotions.

Among many societal and historical upheavals that have contributed to emotional ontology, the Cultural Revolution should be noted (Cheng 2011, 2012, 2013). The Cultural Revolution, which was launched by Mao Zedong and lasted from 1966 to 1976, was a period of civil strife that brought disaster to the ruling party, state, and people (MacFarquhar 2016). The main goals of Cultural Revolution were to prevent the restoration of capitalism, safeguard the purity of the party, and seek China's own path of building socialism. It was defined as "cultural" because of its basis in the criticism of capitalist culture. During this time, Chinese citizens did not express happiness or reveal their wealth out of concern that they would be accused of being capitalists. The impact of the Cultural Revolution is far-reaching. Although more than 40 years have passed since the Cultural Revolution ended, it has had an important influence on subsequent generations through the inheritance of family memories and the collective traumatic memories of a generation (Liu 2016).

The traumatic experiences caused by the Cultural Revolution and its impact on Chinese society is illustrated in "Wound (or Scar) Literature (伤痕文学)." Wound literature dominated the Chinese literary world from the late 1970s to the early 1980s (Zhong Li 2017). The title "wound" originates from Lu Xinhua's short story "Wound" and refers to a personal trauma during the Cultural Revolution (Zhong Li 2017). The wound discourse consists of four dimensions: trauma, victim, the relationship between the victim and the broader society, and shared societal accountability for the trauma (Zhong Li 2017). This literature illustrates those lives and youth that were irrevocably lost during the Cultural Revolution (Zhong Li 2017). Wound literature aims to restore the status of the people, their lives, and their pain that were ignored during the Cultural Revolution (S. Fang and Lu 2001). This new literary perspective resonated with the Chinese public, fostering compassion and attention to life adversities as shared public responsibilities. For example, the novel entitled, "Human, Human (人啊, 人)" not only comments on the pain of history, but also shows concern for individuals tangled in historic events (S. Fang and Lu 2001).

Wound literature, with its infectious and dramatic rhetorical effect, shaped the public emotional experience and constituted the social foundation of a new ideology and political practice in the late 20th century (Fang and Lu 2001). The emotions, such as sadness, confusion, and anxiety about the present and future, that are depicted in the wound literature are deeply engrained in the contemporary Chinese cultural narratives. An example of the impact of Wound literature on the contemporary Chinese cultural narratives is "reflective literature (反思文学)" that succeeded Wound literature in mid-late 1980 (Fang and Lu 2001). Compared to wound literature, reflective literature is not dedicated to the past sufferings and trauma of the Cultural Revolution but instead provides reflection of the past and emphasizes compassion for the broader society. Reflective literature contains broader retrospection and reevaluation of social/political systems and meanings of life (Fang and Lu 2001). Wound literature and Reflective literature therefore substantiate the emotional ontology (Cheng 2013) that underpins contemporary Chinese culture and exert strong influence on the contemporary Chinese cultural narratives to this day.

3.5. Typology of message appeals

In order to illuminate how these guanxi, mianzi, and emotional ontology shape Chinese organizations' SM posts within the nomological network of concepts and theories relevant to corporate social media

content strategies, we employ Sirgy et al.'s (1991) typology of symbolic versus utilitarian appeals. We chose this typology because it has previously been used to analyze SM content strategies (Ashley and Tuten 2015) and is efficacious in distinguishing the collectivist and Confucian tradition in message appeals from individualistic and utilitarian US counterparts (Zhang and Gelb 1996). Symbolic appeals involve building an "image" of the message source based on intangible attributes. They highlight emotional and figurative images with which the target audiences can identify. In contrast, utilitarian appeals emphasize benefits that are functional or relevant to target audiences (Sirgy et al. 1991). Symbolic and figurative elements, therefore, carry a great deal of significance in collectivist and Confucian cultures, while functionality and utility do so in individualistic cultures (Hofstede 2011; Huang, Wu, and Cheng 2016).

Other typologies have been employed to find differences in the types of appeals used across culture. For instance, Huang (1998) employed the typology of basic-emotional appeals (e.g., happiness, love, and sadness) versus social-emotional appeals (e.g., humor, warmth, and surprise) to examine consumers' emotional responses to those appeals in the UK, US, Hong Kong, and mainland China. Nonetheless, this typology focuses only on emotional appeals and does not encompass functional or utilitarian appeals (which are dominant in the US culture); this typology is thus not ideal for demonstrating the differences between Chinese and US cultures.

We integrated this symbolic-utilitarian typology into the six areas of public engagement, resulting in a total of 12 SM content strategies, as illustrated in Table 1. We refer to this framework as Social Media Appeals for Consumer Engagement (SMACE), which is based on Hutton (1999) proposed six domains of public relations. Persuasion activities usually take place when a firm wants to introduce a new service, or for popularizing existing ones. Advocacy happens when the firm wants to defend itself against accusation, or to clarify some misconceptions about its practices. Reputation management is concerned with maintaining and enhancing the brand image, by reinforcing the brand identity and distinctiveness via branding messages and public activities. Relationship management refer to customer supports, and the efforts to answer customers' complaints and inquiries. Public information is mostly about raising awareness, with different initiatives the firm is engaging in, and the most important developments in the business to different stakeholders. Finally, cause-related marketing refer to the set of charitable activities and monetary support to benefit the general welfare of citizens (Hutton 1999). Each one of the six domains of public relations has two parallel appeals – i.e., symbolic vs. utilitarian – in our framework (Table 1).

Applying SMACE as an integrative framework allowed an examination into what appeals firms use for each of the six areas of consumer engagement. Thus, using this framework, we investigated why and how Chinese firms select a type of appeal for a given area of consumer engagement, contingent upon the cultural connotations of the appeal specific in that respective. In so doing, we avoided the overly simplistic binary classification (Myers and Tan 2002), as in the argument that Chinese organizations invariantly prefer one type of appeal to the other. Therefore, SMACE enabled us to have a deeper and broader understanding of the cultural underpinnings of organizational SM content strategy.

4. Methodology

We chose a qualitative research method – specifically, thematic analysis – which provides valuable cultural insights through an examination of cases (Stone, Dunphy, and Smith 1966). We used a qualitative thematic analysis for a number of reasons. First, the main objective of the research is to see how corporate social media posts are constructed within the symbolic-utilitarian typology, and what other appeals could emerge aside from the pre-established appeals. First, the interpretive nature of qualitative content analyses are suitable for exploring social meanings of narratives (Schreier 2014); Hence, it would allow for explaining how specific posts represent some cultural values and norms within Chinese society, fulfilling our first aim. Second, a qualitative approach can capture the intricate meanings of those social media posts. Thus, a qualitative thematic analysis allows for more in-depth

Table 1. Social media appeals for consumer engagement (SMACE).

	Sirgy et al.'s Typology of Message Appeal	
	Utilitarian Appeal	Symbolic Appeal
Hutton's areas for public engagement	Definition: Message appeals using tangible attributes of the firm or the firm's offerings	Definition: Message appeals using an image of the firm or the firm's offerings
	Our application of utilitarian appeal to the six areas	Our application of symbolic appeal to the six areas
Persuasion	To change the public's mind by informing the audience of the specific utilities of the firm (e.g., benefits and functions)	To change the public's mind by creating an image with which the audience can identify themselves and resonate
Advocacy	To defend the firm by correcting false claims or informing of corrective actions by the firm	To defend the firm by creating a positive image of the firm with the audience
Image/ reputation management	To create a favorable reputation for the firm by describing its socially desirable functions and roles	To create a favorable reputation for the firm by creating socially desirable images of it
Relationship management	To build relationships with customers by providing functional solutions to, and redress for an issue	To build and maintain relationships with customers by connecting to customers using intangible assets
Public information	To inform the public of the specific features and utilities of the firm's offerings	To inform customers of the firm's offerings through images and tones
Cause-related activities	To encourage the public to participate in a cause by convincing them about its purposes	To encourage the public to participate in a cause by appealing to emotions

interpretations of case-studies and narrative social media posts. As such, a qualitative analysis enables us to identify new types of appeals that correspond to specific cultural variables. Third, a qualitative thematic analysis allows for developing a new framework for future deductive studies (Stone, Dunphy, and Smith 1966). Given the absence of a framework for social media appeals that encompass Chinese cultural norms, a qualitative analysis is conducive for developing a new conceptual model. Accordingly, a qualitative thematic analysis, as opposed to a quantitative counterpart, serves our purposes of analyzing Chinese cultural influences.

Although inductive coding is often used in combination with thematic analysis, the use of deductive coding has been suggested as a way to increase the rigor and trustworthiness of thematic analyses (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006; Nowell et al. 2017). As such, we applied theory-driven deductive coding whereby we matched our coding results to the pre-established framework through precise, consistent, and exhaustive processes (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006; Nowell et al. 2017).

4.1. Theoretical sampling

We followed Glaser and Strauss's (1999) principles for theoretical sampling, which entails the iterative processes of data collection and analyses. Specifically, we gathered data, analyzed them, and then iteratively continued this process of data collection and analysis until the saturation point was reached, wherein the collected data sufficiently explained the concepts, and the collected data did not provide additional insights (B. G. Glaser and Strauss 2017, 2009).

We collected data from websites for online communities of practice for Chinese SM practitioners where they obtain information and connect with one another, leveraging the wealth of up-to-date knowledge contributed by a large crowd (Argyris and Ransbotham 2016). We conducted a comprehensive search to identify suitable sites without overlooking any that were relevant. As a result, we discovered 15 such sites, including China PR (www.chinapr.com.cn), 36 kr (www.36kr.com), Social Beta (www.socialbeta.com), Huxiu (www.huxiu.com), Jiemian (www.jiemian.com), and Adquan|Crunch Base (www.adquan.com), among others.

Because these sites are intended for practitioners' use, it was important that we selected credible cases only. We applied the following four criteria for collecting reliable cases. First, the cases must appear on more than one website. Second, the researcher must be able to verify the cases on the website of the company about which the PR cases were written. Third, the cases must be detailed enough to identify cultural influences. Short cases, such as those including the company name and the

number of likes, for instance, were excluded. Fourth, the cases must have appeared in the popular trends on Weibo at least once. Since the popular trends on Weibo list well-known social media campaigns, an appearance on this Weibo list validates a case as credible.

4.2. Coding

4.2.1. Unit of analysis

Following the research of Krippendorff (2008) and Miles and Huberman (1994), we conducted a two-phased analysis of data – namely, segmentation and encoding. **Phase one** involved segmentation of the articles found in the aforementioned forums to ensure a robust unit of analysis (Ericsson and Simon 1984; Krippendorff 2008; Miles and Huberman 1994; Vonk, Tripodi, and Epstein 2007). The unit of analysis chosen for this study is a "semantic chunk," that is, a thematic section of the article (Krippendorff 2008; Miles and Huberman 1994). Each article was segmented into semantic chunks, each of which pertained to only one case of SMACE. As a result of Phase 1, segmentation, a total of 28 semantic chunks were identified, pertaining to eight companies: HaiDiLao Hotpot, China Southern Airlines, Haier, Joyoung, DiDi, VANCL, Huang Taiji, and The Beast (Table 2). One company could have more than one case. Phase Two of our analysis involved the coding of each of the 28 semantic chunks against SMACE (Ericsson and Simon 1984; Krippendorff 2008; Miles and Huberman 1994; Vonk, Tripodi, and Epstein 2007). Specifically, we used deductive coding, which is used when a researcher's goal is mapping collected data to a pre-established framework (Frederick et al. 2014; Mayring 2000). We coded each of the 28 chunks as one or more of the 12 SM strategies in SMACE. We also identified chunks that do not fall into any of these strategies.

4.2.2. Coding scheme

For reliable deductive coding, it is important to create explicit definitions, examples, and coding schemes for each deductive category, noting "exactly under what circumstances a text passage can be coded with a category" (Mayring 2000, 5). In other words, coding must adhere to the pre-formulated definition of the overall framework and for each sub-theme, and all of the themes must fit together coherently (Maiorescu 2016). As such, a coding scheme was developed prior to the beginning of encoding. Two examples illustrating our coding schemes for a symbolic and a utilitarian appeal for persuasion are demonstrated in Table 3. Such coding processes were repeated for all 12 message appeals.

Table 2. Eight companies collected in the Phase 1 coding.

Company name	Description
HaiDiLao Hotpot 海底捞	A chain of restaurants specialized in dishes prepared in a traditional cooking method involving "simmering pots."
China Southern Airlines 中国南方航空	A Chinese airline that operates worldwide.
Haier 海尔	A manufacturer of consumer electronics and home appliances.
DiDi 滴滴出行	A ride-sharing company, equivalent to Uber in the US. DiDi now has more than 10 million users every day. In May 2016, Apple announced a 1-billion-dollar investment in DiDi.
VANCL 凡客诚品	An online business-to-consumer apparel retailer. It opened one of the first Sina Weibo business pages.
The Beast 野兽派	A high-end customized flower shop. At first, the Beast had a Weibo account only without a physical store. The Beasts now has a WeChat account, more than 18 physical stores, and more than 844,000 fans on Weibo.
Joyoung 九阳豆浆机	A manufacturer of home soy-milk makers. To gain more followers on its WeChat account, the company prints a quick response code (QRC) on its products and provides a free one-year product warranty to new followers.
HuangTaiji 黄太吉	A crepe restaurant chain. The CEO of HuangTaiji, Chang He, focuses on social media to promote his restaurants and earn loyal customers.

Table 3. Coding schemes (Partial).

Symbolic Appeal for Persuasion	Utilitarian Appeal for Persuasion
Definition: To change the public's mind by creating an image with which the audience can identify themselves and resonate	Definition: To change the public's mind by informing them of the specific utilities of the firm (e.g., benefits and functions)
Example: To persuade consumers that The Beast is not an ordinary online flower shop, but instead a personalized luxury flower shop, it uses story- telling on social media. An example is the behind-the-scenes story about the bouquet called, Fondation Claude Monet ("Monet Foundation" in French). One day a customer ordered a bouquet for a special lady who reminded him of Water Lilies, a painting by Monet. However, there were no proper flowers for this theme. The store manager embarked upon several months of searching, including a visit to the Japanese museum that collects pictures of water lilies. There, the manager got inspired, found the proper flowers, and then completed the bouquet. This story highlights the attention paid to each customer, persuading customers to change their stereotypical views about an online flower store (i.e., online flower stores fulfill inexpensive, last- minute orders).	Example: The PR goal of China Southern Airlines is to convince foreign travelers that it is the leading airline in China, and that China is a desirable destination. To achieve this goal, the home page opens a window with the image of "China Southern Airlines, Your China Travel Specialist," and presents not only travel destinations in China, but also lists Chinese traditional foods, tourist attractions, tourist information, and various regional festivals.
Coding rules: 1. The case must clearly show how consumers' attitudes about the firm have changed for it to be considered as a case for persuasion. 2. The case must show that the firm should try to persuade the public by changing an abstract image of it, and not by resorting to the tangible utilities it provides. 3. If the case focuses on the utilities, then, code it as a utilitarian appeal for persuasion.	Coding rules: 1. The case must clearly show how consumers' attitudes about the firm have changed for it to be considered as a case for persuasion. 2. The case must show that the firm should try to persuade consumers by listing the tangible utilities it provides, and not by creating an abstract image. 3. If the case focuses on the images, then, code it as a symbolic appeal for persuasion.

4.2.3. Coder

For thematic analysis, hiring multiple coders and calculating inter-coder reliability is not required; the primary purpose of thematic analysis is not to test a hypothesis, but to explore the subtle cultural differences under given contexts (Maiorescu 2016; Van den Bogaert et al. 2018). Instead, researchers must ensure that the coders are given the detailed coding scheme for each deductive category. Researchers must also ensure that coders are familiar with the cases of analysis, research context, speak the proper languages, and come from the culture under examination (Frederick et al. 2014). As such, a domain expert who speaks both Mandarin and English fluently, is familiar with all four applications and the SM content strategies, and is **_unaware_** of the research purpose coded the 28 cases.

5. Analyses of the coding results

A brief result of our coding is presented in Table 4, and detailed cases are demonstrated in the Appendix.

Chinese firms use social media for all six areas of consumer engagement. However, we can clearly discern the organizations' preferences for symbolic appeals for image management, especially combined with cause-related activities, which can be interpreted as an influence of guanxi. The influences of guanxi in relationship management are also evident, as well as the changing nature of mianzi in advocacy. Lastly, a new category that did not fall into any of the existing 12 categories emerged. We describe each of these findings below.

5.1. Heavy reliance on symbolic appeals for image management

No case of using a utilitarian appeal for image management was found, whereas multiple cases relied on symbolic appeals. The following example of Huang Taiji demonstrates a concentrated use of symbolic appeals for image management.

Table 4. Summary of coding results*.

PR Activity	Utilitarian Appeal	Symbolic Appeal	
		Symbolic Appeal	Sympathy Appeal (New finding)
Persuasion	China Southern Airlines for disseminating tourist attractions	The Beast for persuading consumers about the new concept of a luxury online flower shop	No case found
Advocacy	HaiDiLao (1st case), for apologizing the quality of its dishes in 2016. HaiDiLao (2nd Case): for using insanitary ingredients used in its dishes in 2011. China Southern Airlines: for apologizing its failure to respond to a medical emergency during the flight in 2015. Joyoung: for correcting a false claim about its use of banned materials in the products in 2011	No case found	No case found
Image/ reputation management	No case found	The Beast: for reinforcing the image of a luxury flower shop. Huang Taiji: for managing its image through storytelling. VANCL (first case) for encouraging its employees to to post how relaxed and flexible the work environment VANCL provides. VANCL (second case): On May 5, 2011 for creating a caring image of the CEO.	DiDi for creating the campaign on "everyday heroes" who go through life adversities.
Relationship management	HaiDiLao for providing customized recommendations based on the order history. China Southern Airlines: On May 1, 2011 for addressing customer complaints on Weibo. Haier: for identifying target consumers and direct advertisements to them. VANCL for addressing customer comments.	China Southern Airlines for creating loyal customer events and a fan page by providing games, favors, and special events. Huang Taiji for the CEO personally addressing every comment from customers. Hair for using humor when addressing customer complaints	No case found
Public information	HaiDiLao for posting the company culture. Haier for announcing the company's new technologies and products. VANCL for announcing new products. Joyoung for announcing new technologies and products	The Beast: for announce new products using storytelling	DiDi for helping parents with fewer means drop off/pick up children and for creating romantic Valentines' day for elderly couple with fewer resources
Cause-related	DiDi for donating a portion of their sales to various foundations	No case found	HaiDiLao for visiting senior homes in need and helping take care of them. Haier for supporting a charity that focuses on education for underprivileged children. Joyoung for running a charity project to improve nutrition for children in poor rural areas.

* New findings from this study are shaded.
* Detailed cases are found in the Appendix.

5.1.1. Huang Taiji

This restaurant franchise company manages its image through storytelling on WeChat. The posts generally do not directly mention the restaurant, but instead merely allude to it. For instance, after the Chinese novel, "The Three-Body Problem," won the Hugo Award, Chang He (the CEO of Huang Taiji) gave a speech about aliens and prehistoric cultures (settings of the novel) in which he alluded that Huang Taiji's restaurant is nothing like other restaurants.

We interpret this preference for symbolic appeals from the perspective of guanxi rooted in collectivist Confucianism. Directly boasting one's own desirable aspects is frowned upon, and humility is deemed acceptable in collectivist societies (Hofstede 2011). Guanxi is more affectional than practical (Hackley and Dong 2001); thus, Chinese companies use symbolic appeals in which they create affectionate images and build family-like relationships with their customers. This stands in stark contrast to what has been found of major US corporations' image management practices, in which functional appeals are more common than emotional appeals (Ji et al. 2019).

In addition, we note a unique way in which Chinese firms employ symbolic appeals to manage their image/reputation: They do so indirectly by taking up a cause. DiDi's case makes this clear.

5.1.2. DiDi

builds a positive image of being caring and compassionate toward the less fortunate. In 2014, the company posted on Weibo about the pressure and stress experienced by its drivers who must leave their families in rural areas and be relocated to a city to provide for the family. DiDi featured videos of various DiDi drivers and their stories on Weibo, calling them "everyday heroes."

All of the cases of cause-related activities reflect organizational efforts for building altruistic and benevolent images of the firms. Naturally, Western firms also engage in causes to create socially desirable corporate images and reputations (Hutton 1999), but the appeals which Chinese firms use is different. Whereas Western organizations highlight positive outcomes and bright futures that accrue from taking up causes, Chinese organizations illustrate life's adversities and hardships and then show how the firms help alleviate these adversities. In so doing, Chinese firms attempt to establish their images as firms whose ultimate goals are to create a greater good for the society. Guanxi explains these firms' concentrated use of cause-related activities for managing images: Guanxi emphasizes "the whole" and contributions to the greater good (Hackley and Dong 2001). Moreover, emotional ontology explains why these cause-related activities focus on alleviating life adversities and why firms partake in alleviating those adversities. Haier and Joyoung are examples of such.

5.1.3. Haier

frequently donates to Hope Primary School Foundation, supporting a charity for educating under-privileged children in rural areas who have no access to quality education. In addition, the company supports various causes, such as rebuilding cities destroyed by natural disasters and raising funds for the disabled.

Similarly, *Joyoung* has a separate civic-engagement Weibo account to run a charity project called Hope Kitchen. The project mission is to reduce malnutrition for children in poor rural areas. The company invites businesses and individual customers alike to join its project in creating a greater good for the society.

5.2. Equivalent use of symbolic-utilitarian appeals for relationship management

Reflecting the characteristics of guanxi, Chinese organizations are eager to build relationships with their audiences using both symbolic and utilitarian appeals, as indicated in multiple cases dedicated to relationship management in Table 4. Chinese firms strive to make personal connections with customers and pay individual attention to them. There is equal emphasis on both utilitarian and symbolic appeals in these efforts, as evidenced in Table 4 by multiple cases using both appeals. This finding suggests that firms place strong emphasis on guanxi in Chinese culture and that firms will use either

appeal if it helps them foster relationship building with their customers. The following example of Huang Taiji illustrates the company's effort in building personal relationships with their customers.

5.2.1. Huang Taiji

The CEO, Chang He, operates Huang Taiji's Weibo account and personally replies to every review and post on Weibo. In so doing, Chang He learns about the customers and their needs and wants customers to feel that they are valued.

5.3. Use of utilitarian appeals for advocacy suggests changes in Mianzi

The cases of advocacy we found suggest changes in the characteristics of mianzi. Instead of concealing hurtful claims or using symbolic appeals in which they indirectly address the complaints, China Southern Airlines and HaiDiLao used utilitarian appeals, admitting their fault promptly, remedying the problems, and offering sincere apologies.

5.3.1. China southern airline

On November 22, 2015, a Weibo user posted that he experienced a medical emergency during the flight, but the crew failed to take immediate action, which caused a delay in his treatment. The next day, the airline sincerely apologized to him on Weibo, announcing that the company had already started an in-depth investigation and that it would learn from the incident to prevent future incidents.

5.3.2. HaiDiLao

On October 18, 2016, HaiDiLao published an apology letter to a customer who found a mouse in his dish at the company's restaurant. The company explained how seriously they took this incident and improved the hygiene of its franchised restaurants to prevent any repetition of this event.

These examples suggest that the face-preserving tradition of mianzi may be changing with the advent of social media. The approach of saving face by fending off negative press will not work and may result in mob-like attacks, mobilized by highly engaged social media users in China. They are likely to challenge and protest against companies that try to conceal hurtful facts, creating a surge of negative comments and a viral spread of negative word of mouth. To prevent such negative virality, the above companies promptly admitted their mishaps and offered apologies on public platforms. This finding suggests the possibility that social media are changing and transforming Chinese cultural norms, which we will discuss further in our suggestions for future researchers.

5.4. The need to generate a new type of message appeal entitled "sympathy appeal"

In US culture, symbolic appeals often involve excitement, sensuousness, and adventure (Swani et al. 2017). In contrast, half of the symbolic appeals in our Chinese data set embrace life adversities experienced by ordinary people.

5.4.1. DiDi

launched a "children's plan" on Weibo for helping less fortunate families who cannot drop off/pick up their children at/from school. DiDi also provided car services to enable elderly couples who were not able have proper marriage proposals due to poverty and lack of resources to create the event again.

We refer to this as a "sympathy appeal" on the ground that it is an appeal based on Cheng's notion of "emotional ontology," in which people resort to induce emotions rather than rationality. In particular, these sympathy-appeals are based on emotions such as sorrow, loss, and the acknowledgment of life adversities (that are prevalent in Chinese society; (Cheng 2011, 2012, 2013). These sympathy appeals differ from symbolic appeals in the US and ought therefore to be separately defined. As our review indicated, the shared trauma of the upheavals of the cultural revolutions and the memories associated with it, could explain why sympathy appeals are characterestic of Chinese public

messaging. Talking about the emotions of sadness and sorrow to draw sympathy is normal in contemporary Chinese cultural narratives, in a way one can rarely see in the American narratives.

5.5. Definition of sympathy appeal and its use as a social media content strategy by Chinese firms

In this study, a sympathy appeal is coined as *a message appeal that aims to establish emotional camaraderie with consumers based on shared compassion and empathy toward familiar life adversities in the firm's attempt to harness consumer engagement through SM content*. This is a new type of message appeal that is not completely explained in the bipolar spectrum of symbolic-utilitarian typology. Sympathy appeals, like symbolic appeals, resort to the intangible aspects of an organization with which consumers can resonate and associate themselves. However, the differences are found in that sympathy appeals focus on life adversities and compassion toward the adversities, while symbolic appeals involve sensuousness, excitement, and adventure.

Resorting to family-like sufferings is an effective way to harness consensus among the Chinese public because firms can effectively urge the public's participation in their efforts to alleviate life's adversities (Gregory and Munch 1997). Our findings indicate that firms indeed employ these cultural appeals to harness consumer attention and engagement. By resorting to presenting life adversities, compassion, and efforts to help alleviate these challenges, firms build emotional connections leveraging the memories accumulated in the historical and societal trajectory of China (Liu 2016). Cognizant of this cultural narrative of their society, Chinese firms evoke the collective memories though the narrative of the previous generations' sufferings and call for the alleviation of life adversities encountered by ordinary people as a shared, societal, and communal responsibility.

6. Follow-up study to validate sympathy appeal as a unique Chinese SM strategy

Although we witnessed sympathy appeals in our cases, it was essential to verify whether this appeal is used primarily by Chinese firms, as a result of its unique cultural narratives, in comparison with US firms. For this reason, we conducted a small-scale follow-up study.

6.1. Theoretical sampling

As in the main study, we followed Glaser and Strauss's principles for theoretical sampling. We selected a list of successful cases of organizational SM campaigns for consumer engagement from 2017 in China and the US. We searched for a list of the most successful Chinese and US social media cases on Baidu and Google, respectively. Our selection criteria for a fair and unbiased comparison were the credibility of the source websites and the availability of critical examination regarding the cases in other sources. The two lists selected for subsequent analysis were www.Jianshu.com's New Media Operations 2017 top 10 cases and www.adherecreative.com's top 10 influential social media marketing campaigns of 2017.

Of the 10 Chinese cases, two involving US-originated companies – McDonald's and Durex – were not included in the analysis. We also excluded an Alipay case because it involved the use of subway billboards, not social media. Of the ten US cases, we eliminated three that concerned purely civic movements and a whole business sector (e.g., small businesses), given that our purpose was to identify corporate SM content strategies. As a result, a set of seven cases per culture was chosen for both China and the US.

6.2. Coding

As in the main study, the unit of analysis was a semantic chunk, and the coding scheme and detailed coding rules (Table 3) were provided prior to encoding (Maiorescu 2016). Two coders, who were domain experts and were not aware of our research questions, coded the cases. One of those experts was not of US or Chinese descent, ensuring fair and unbiased coding.

6.3. Analyses of coding results

As expected, four of the seven Chinese cases employed sympathy appeals, while none of the US cases did, confirming that sympathy appeals emerge in a Chinese cultural context only (Table 5).

Two examples that illustrate the clear distinction in appeals are found in peer-to-peer music streaming sites, namely NetEase Cloud Music in China and Spotify in the US.

NetEase posted its consumers' reviews of certain selected songs on WCWB. The contents of these reviews were so heart-wrenching that the readers were left nearly in tears. For example, reviews said, "How many people can love someone whom they cannot confess their love to?" and, "I met someone special this year, but I have no means to make her happy," among others.

In contrast, *Spotify* launched a New Year's resolution campaign, in which it shared some of the company's most humorous user data that were then turned into resolutions for the following year. An example is this: "Be as loving as the person who put 48 Ed Sheeran songs on his 'I love Gingers' playlist."

Both companies have the same business models of streaming music, and both published their user-generated content on SM, but NetEase Cloud Music selected users' sorrowful comments, while Spotify published their witty comments. This comparison reinforces the follow-up study's findings that sympathy appeals are uniquely found only in Chinese culture as compared to the US counterpart.

7. Analysis of the overall findings and expanded framework

7.1. Summary of the integrated findings of the two studies

Our results from the two studies are summarized in Table 6. Specifically, we note five primary findings that demonstrate Chinese firms' preferred appeals in some areas of consumer engagement, and we illustrate cultural underpinnings for those preferences.

Among these five findings, two (#2 and #5, shaded cells in Table 6) stand out because they do not fit into the existing SMACE. Firstly, in Chinese culture, many firms manage their image through cause-related activities. This is partly due to the social norms rooted in guanxi that discourage self-promotion while valuing the creation of common goods. This indicates the need for a new category, namely "image-management through cause-related activities," in order to distinguish it from the existing, general image management that does not involve cause-related activities. Secondly, we found that Chinese organizations use "sympathy appeals" as a new SM content strategy to foster consumer engagement, substantiating the emotional ontology that underlies the contemporary Chinese cultural narratives. Although the other three points are equally important, the existing SMACE can sufficiently demonstrate them within the framework. Findings #2 and #5 in Table 6, in contrast, require that the existing SMACE to be expanded.

7.2. Expanded social media appeals for consumer engagement

To encompass the two idiosyncrasies that emerge in Chinese firms' SM content strategies, we propose a newly expanded framework, Expanded SMACE (E-SMACE, Figure 1). To address #2 in Table 6, we have separated image/reputation management into (1) image/reputation management and (2) image/reputation management through cause-related activities devised to create greater good for the society. We have thus created seven areas of consumer engagement, as opposed Hutton's (1999) six. We also suggest that the sympathy appeal be added to the bipolar symbolic-utilitarian spectrum, creating three types of message appeals. The combination of seven areas of consumer engagement with three types of message appeals expands 12 SM content strategies in SMACE to 21 in E-SMACE.

The new category of image management through cause-related activities in E-SMACE denotes that managing images/reputations of a firm through a common cause is a distinctive activity that stands on its own. This new activity carries significant weight given the Chinese cultural emphasis on promoting the greater good of society that originates from Guanxi and emotional ontology. This activity should hence

Table 5. Summary of the follow-up study that compares Chinese and US cases.

Utilitarian Appeal		Symbolic Appeal		Sympathy Appeal	
China	US	China	US	China	US
Netease cloud music (for cause-related): Ding Lei, the CEO of NetEase has been raising organic, non-GMO black pigs for the last eight years under the company's agricultural affiliate Weiyang. When the pork was ready to go mass-market last winter, he was one step closer to his vision: bringing better, safer food to Chinese people.	*Cisco (for relationship management)*: The networking and technology provider Cisco used SM to drive sales in 2017. Its Cisco Champions Program offered incentives for its community of information technology advocates and experts for sharing their experiences with Cisco on social media. Cisco harnessed powerful promotional content for its brand by utilizing the experience and advocacy of these individuals. *General Electric (for cause-related)*: GE announced that it would work to fill 20,000 new positions in science, technology, engineering, and math with female hires by the year 2020. If successful, GE would be the largest tech company in America to claim a 50:50 ratio of male-to-female employees working in technical entry-level positions. *Kentucky Fried Chicken (for image management)*: In order to increase the audiences' awareness of KFC's use of 11 herbs and spices, KFC started following 11 people on Twitter: the five original Spice Girls, and six males named Herb.	*China merchants bank (for image management)*: China Merchant Bank created an image of a mother's unconditional love and tried to associate that image with the firm's new credit card, designed particularly for Chinese students studying abroad. *Jiang Xiaobai (for image management)*: Jiang Xiaobai is a brand for small white wine with his own cartoon characters. With the slogan, "I am Jiang Xiaobai, life is very simple (我是江小白, 生活很简单)," the brand resonated with Chinese young consumers' thirst for a simple life, free from the pressure for achievement in a competitive society.	*Chiquita Banana (for image management)*: Taking advantage of the 2017 solar eclipse, Chiquita dubbed the sun's crescent shape as the Banana Sun. For three weeks leading up to the solar eclipse, the company created memes of a massive glowing banana. *Kellogg's Eggo (for image management)*: Kellogg formed a partnership with Netflix to place its Eggo's products during the premier of Stranger Things 2, a popular show on Netflix, in order to revive Eggo's image as the iconic 80's waffle. *Astro (for advocacy)*: The professional baseball team, Astro, began an "Earn It" campaign to fend off negative and sarcastic perspectives about the team. The team surprisingly won the World Series. *Spotify (persuasion)*: Spotify launched a New Year's Resolution Campaign in which it shared some of the company's most humorous user- generated posts, which it then turns into next year's resolutions. An example is: "Be as loving as the person who put 48 Ed Sheeran songs on their 'I love Gingers' playlist."	*Netease cloud music (for relationship management)*: Netease Cloud Music tracked all of the reviews of selected songs and then distributed the reviews, which showed it cared about and paid attention to its users. The contents of these music reviews were so heart-wrenching. For example, some reviews said, "How many people can love someone whom they cannot confess their love to?", "I met someone special this year, but I have no means to make her happy," and so on. *Pechoin (for public information)*: Pechoin (百雀羚) is a skin care brand. The package of this product is often a small round iron box in yellow or blue. Pechoin launched a new product, Moonlight box, which is a Mother's Day custom gift box, and advertised it on Weibo. The message theme was to depict how hard mothers work for their families, and as a result, how fast they grow old.	No case found

(Continued)

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Table 5. (Continued).

Utilitarian Appeal	Symbolic Appeal	
	Symbolic Appeal	Sympathy Appeal
		Tencent (for cause-related): Tencent's (Company that owns WeChat) public welfare department started fundraising to help people with autism, cerebral palsy, and Down's syndrome, and to help them integrate into society. After the user donates 1 yuan (roughly 15 cents) or more, they can "purchase" their favorite paintings of children with special needs. *Ant wealth (for persuasion)*: Ant wealth is a personal wealth management company. The company tried to persuade audiences to get its financial advisory services by highlighting how harshly life treats the old and the poor.

Table 6. Summary of the findings.

Primary findings of this study	Underlying cultural values
(1) Heavy reliance on symbolic appeals for image management	Guanxi is affectional rather than practical. Chinese companies try to build family-like relationships with consumers at the highest level of guanxi, and thus, use symbolic appeals.
(2) Image management conducted through cause-related activities	Guanxi explains firms' concentrated use of cause-related activities for managing images, as guanxi suppresses self-promotion and instead emphasizes "the whole" and contributions to the greater good (Hackley and Dong 2001).
(3) Strong emphasis on relationship management	The largest number of Chinese cases were dedicated to building relationships. Chinese firms strive to enhance relationships with customers by using any type of appeal.
(4) Changing nature of mianzi for advocacy	The face-preserving tradition of mianzi may be changing with the advent of social media. Simply fending off negative press may result in mob-like attacks mobilized by highly engaged social media users in China.
(5) Emergence of a new type of message appeal entitled, "sympathy appeal"	Sympathy appeals are rooted in emotional ontology, Wound Literature and Reflective Literature. In Sympathy appeals, life-adversities which ordinary people encounter in their everyday lives are illustrated and empathy and compassion are called for.

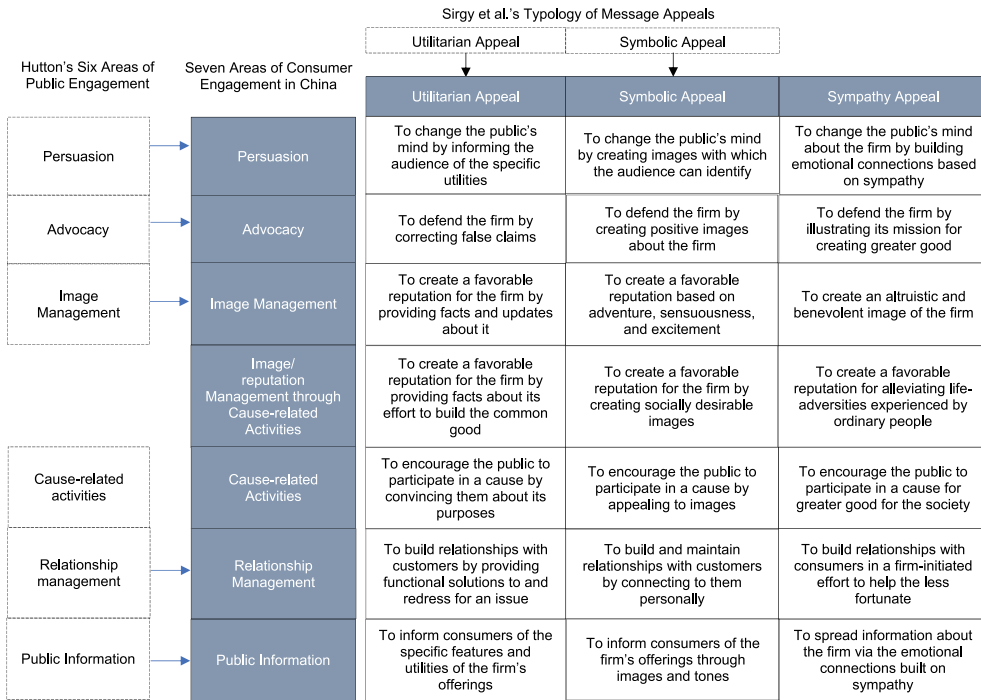* The shaded cells indicate our findings that cannot be explained by SMACE.

Figure 1. Expanded social media appeals for consumer engagement.

be distinguished from the existing, general image managemeHnt. However, our proposed new activity does not preclude other ways of managing images. Chinese firms can and do manage their image and reputation without undertaking cause-related activities. Recall the example of Huang Taiji wherein the CEO provided the analogy of aliens and prehistoric cultures to imply the brand's unrivaled status in the restaurant industry. What we are proposing, instead, is that this image management through cause-related activities is effective and distinct because of its root in Chinese culture.

The new activity of image-management through cause-related activities can be pursued in three message appeals: (1) utilitarian, (2) symbolic, and (3) sympathy appeals. In (1), firms present objective facts about their efforts to create common good, such as the amount of funds raised and donated. In

(2), firms portray their brands' image as cognizant of, and caring for, the problems of society, such as increasing inequalities and disparities between urban and rural areas of China. This becomes more emotional and empathetic in (3), such that firms vividly illustrate life adversities that ordinary people encounter and urge the public to join in the communal initiatives to alleviate these problems.

In addition, E-SMACE presents sympathy appeals for each of these seven areas as promising SM content strategies in the Chinese cultural context. *For persuasion*, a sympathy appeal can be used to build emotional connections with consumers through which a firm can easily change the consumers' minds (Argyris et al. 2020). One example is Liushen Florida Water's brand rejuvenation campaigns, which went viral on WCWB in 2014. Liushen was a legacy brand for floral water in China but had an aging brand image. In its campaign, Liushen illustrated that people could not afford a watermelon in a hot summer, which prompted nostalgic memories among its audience and brought the brand back into the spotlight. *For advocacy*, a sympathy appeal can be used to defend the firm amid negative public sentiment by underscoring its deeply rooted missions that create greater good for the society, which the public may not perceive. *For image management*, firms can create an image of being altruistic, benevolent, and caring for other societal members, instead of only seeking profit. *For image management through cause-related activities*, firms can showcase their efforts to assist those who suffer from life adversities, natural disasters, and poverty. *For cause-related activities*, firms can encourage the public to participate in a firm-initiated cause that creates greater good for society. *For relationship management*, a firm can build connections based on "family-like" traumatic experiences passed down through generations. A good example of this is Nanfang black sesame's 2016 campaign. This campaign demonstrated how buying a bowl of black sesame paste (a popular desert in China) was cost preventive in the past by showing a child licking the bottom of their black sesame paste bowl. This scene created instant emotional connections with the public, who reminisced about the poor yet simple lives of the past. Lastly, the emotional camaraderie prompted by a sympathy appeal can be an effective medium for *disseminating public information* because firms can use these emotional connections to reach broader audiences.

8. Discussion and conclusion

8.1. Theoretical contributions

The findings from our two studies and the E-SMACE developed based on these findings provide contributions to theory advancement. First of all, despite the widely known importance of culture in the success of IS use and of digital content management, there is a gap in the IS literature on the roles of culture in corporate SM content strategies; we propose E-SMACE to fill this gap. As indicated in Figure 1, E-SMACE encompasses a wider variety of corporate SM content strategies that reflect the unique Chinese culture, demonstrating that SMACE rooted in Western culture is limited in recognizing some important strategies. In so doing, we contribute to advancing IS research on organizational SM content strategy by establishing culture as one of the important factors that researchers must consider. Additionally, our E-SMACE is a conceptual framework that will guide future researchers interested in SM strategies with regard to identifying and formulating their research questions and hypotheses in different cultural contexts.

Second, we combined Sirgy et al.'s typology of message appeals with Hutton's six PR activities, illuminating 12 different strategies that firms can utilize to foster consumer engagement. Furthermore, we expanded this integrative framework by including the contemporary Chinese cultural narrative, emotional ontology. To the best of our knowledge, no prior study has ever considered emotional ontology in Chinese corporate SM content strategies although emotional ontology is a dominant cultural narrative in contemporary China.

Lastly, through this study, we contribute to the advancement of the typology of message appeals. To date, the bipolar classification of utilitarian and symbolic appeals has received the most attention, although a large number of audience-related factors that may affect choices of appeals (Sirgy et al. 1991) have been

neglected. Toward this end, we expand the typology of message appeals to include sympathy appeals that firms can use to foster consumer engagement in the SM posts. This is the first study that has proposed a sympathy appeal as a content strategy for fostering consumer engagement in China.

8.2. Practical implications

This study provides several important practical implications. E-SMACE diversifies the areas in which firms should concentrate their efforts in the Chinese culture – namely, it asserts seven areas as opposed to six. Furthermore, our findings elaborate the guanxi foundations upon which enterprises and consumers build relationships with each other on WCWB. Truly grasping this impact would be challenging for firms that have not yet operated in Chinese culture. To this end, our findings and E-SMACE provide clear directions to SM developers and managers. For instance, we have demonstrated a strong emphasis on guanxi-based, long-term relationships in China, and guanxi can be built via a series of favor exchanges that occur on the basis of reciprocal expectations and not transactional obligations (Hackley and Dong 2001). The difference between transactional relationships and reciprocal one is that the first has usually an explicit quid pro quo, or that a remuneration is expected in the short-run. Whereas reciprocal relationships are built on trust, such that a favor might be returned to the giver in the distant future, but without an exact agreement on the time and manner of returning this favor (Schuler 1979). Similarly, organizations in China may consider providing favors on their SM platforms in the form of coupons, discounts, and special events for loyal customers as a way of building guanxi with consumers and thus fostering their long-term loyalty (Leung et al. 2005). Finally, firms should recognize the importance of showing sympathy in their messaging appeals, in order to build family-like connections with the Chinese public (Ki, Kim, and Ledingham 2015, 223). Sympathy appeals will be effective for reducing the perceptive gap between foreign companies (e.g., US-based firms) and local audiences; firms can demonstrate their deeper understanding of everyday life issues encountered by the ordinary people of China. Accordingly, a sympathy appeal will enable these foreign companies to build instant connections with local consumers through which they can reach wider Chinese audiences, thus facilitating the dissemination and promotion of new products and services via WCWB.

8.3. Limitations

This study has several limitations. A notable limitation is associated with qualitative analysis, which has some known weaknesses, including the challenges in eliminating the researcher's subjective judgment. However, thematic analysis has many benefits that offset such weaknesses, especially in the interpretation of subtle cultural influences on firms' operations and strategic choices (Stone, Dunphy, and Smith 1966). Moreover, qualitative methodology has the capacity to provide further insights that will guide future quantitative researchers (Glaser and Strauss 2017). To overcome this limitation associated with qualitative analysis, we chose deductive coding according to the pre-established framework and hired coders who were domain experts yet were not informed of our research questions. In so doing, we prevented our subjective judgments from affecting the coding results while gaining in-depth insights into SM content strategies idiosyncratic across cultures. Finally, we have to mention that Chinese culture is multi-faceted, and is rapidly evolving due to rapid economic and social changes that Mainland China is going through, it is hard to attribute every charecterestic of SM in China to one cultural construct.

8.4. Suggestions for future research

Two notable suggestions for future researchers center on the changing nature of advocacy and the emergence of sympathy appeals. How the practice of advocacy is changing with the permeating use of social media in China is an important topic to explore. Traditionally, companies have adopted the

practice of "putting things to rest" as their primary form of advocacy in order to save face in observance of the traditional value of mianzi. However, a highly engaged social media crowd in China may no longer tolerate such a practice and may demand immediate and transparent acknowledgment, apologies, and redress from the companies. Future researchers may thus want to further study whether the traditional value of mianzi is declining or changing in nature and subsequently reshaping the managing principles for SM content. To explore this topic, future researchers can use quantitative content analysis, whereby they count the frequency of the occurrence of mianzi in recent crisis management cases and compare it against that in time periods before the use of social media became prevalent in China. Any significant differences in the frequencies will indicate the changing nature of advocacy. Furthermore, researchers can use a participant-observant ethnographic research methodology, whereby researchers participate in real-world organizational SM management processes and report signs of declining mianzi.

The other notable suggestion for future researchers is in regard to sympathy appeals. Researchers may want to examine whether this appeal type has greater persuasive effects among consumers and/or accrues greater social influences (e.g., an increase in the numbers of likes, following, and sharing) than other types of appeals. To do this, machine-learning based algorithms, such as text analytics, that classify the types of message appeals may be useful. Using these algorithms, researchers may classify the types of message appeals and then analyze the social influences that each type of message appeal generates. Similarly, researchers can employ survey and field/laboratory experiments to test their hypotheses regarding the impact of message appeals on persuasion and social influence.

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Appendix 1: Comparative Analyses of Interface Features of WeChat and Weibo against Those of Facebook and Twitter

Objectives

This analysis compares representative social media applications between China and the US. We aim to answer the two specific questions: (1) what features WeChat and WeiBo (WCWB), as compared to Facebook and Twitter, provide for business organizations to use for the purpose of consumer engagement and (2) whether WCWB lack any features necessary for business organizations to carry out any of the SM content strategies in the six areas of consumer engagement.

Methodology

The Unit of Analysis. The unit of analysis we chose is an "item" (Miles and Huberman 1994), which is an icon on the social media applications that performs a specific set of functions. Although these icons are already segmented and intuitively easy to recognize (Miles and Huberman 1994), identifying a myriad of icons that are consistently changing required us to clearly define the unit of analysis. Toward this end, first, we chose only the icons on mobile applications, not on their desktop counterparts, because the majority of people use social media on mobile devices (Clement 2019). Second, we analyzed the interfaces of the latest versions of Mandarin WeChat and Weibo, and the latest versions of English versions of Facebook and Twitter, at the time of data collection (July 2018) to capture subtle cultural connotations embedded in the features. Because social media applications consistently update their features and icons, we ensured that coders use the most recent applications at the time of data collection.

Coding Scheme. There are several layers of icons that are interconnected to enable one function. Thus, deciding "what" to code was not a trivial matter. In order to increase the reliability and to ensure fair comparisons, we developed a coding scheme across the levels of nested features, as shown in Table A1.

Table A1. Coding scheme.

Code	Definition	Example of coding
First-level features	Icons on the main landing page	A "personal profile picture" on the personal page
Second-level features	Icons that appear from the pages branched out from the activations of the first-level icons	"Make post" icon on his/her timeline to which users are led after clicking on the profile picture
Third-level features	Icons that appear from the pages branched out from the activations of the second-level icons	Choice between "newsfeed" and/or "your story," given once the user clicks on the "make post" icon

An analysis deeper than the third level would be unfeasible due to rapid technological developments and the complexity of analyses. Boyd and Ellison (2007) advised researchers to focus on "backbone" features instead of attempting to analyze each and every feature.

Coding Results and Discussion of Findings

Table A2 lists some of the common interface features that the two coders identified. As expected, WeChat and Facebook support establishing and maintaining social networks; Weibo and Twitter support short messaging and endorsements. Thus, the results of this analysis confirm that Chinese social media applications have features equivalent and comparable to their US counterparts in all the six areas of consumer engagement. Due to the features presented in Table A2 are several selected examples only, due to the vast number of features we identified.

Table A2. Comparative analysis of features between China and US applications.

Six areas of consumer engagement	Facebook	WeChat
Persuasion	Facebook Messenger; Timeline	Chats; My post
Advocacy	News updates; Comments; Likes (endorsement feature)	Moment; Comments; Likes (endorsement feature)
Image/reputation management	User Profile; Timeline	User Profile; Timeline
Relationship management	Nearby Friends; Discover people; Friends' list	People Nearby; Message in a Bottle; Contacts
Public information	Search; Timeline; User profile	Search; Moment; User Profile
Cause-related activities	Facebook groups; Local events; Fundraisers	Group Chats; Seamless integrations into third-party services for event planning; Wallet
	Twitter	Weibo
Persuasion	Tweets; Retweets	Post Content; Repost
Advocacy	Like (endorsement feature); Tweets; Reply	Like (endorsement feature); Post Content; Reply
Image/reputation management	Profile Picture of Tweeter	Poster's Profile Picture
Relationship management	Button for adding people to follow	New Friends
Public information	Search Twitter; Commercial Content (Link, picture or video)	Search Bar; Advertisement
Cause-related activities	Top Recommendation (Today's Moment)	热门 (Hot Topics)