Communications of Frequent Flyer Programs on Weibo and WeChat: Examining Social Media in China’s Commercial Sphere

Yang Zhao

Faculty Advisor: Kang Liu

Asian & Middle Eastern Studies

November 2015

This project was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Graduate Liberal Studies Program in the Graduate School of Duke University.
Abstract

In my thesis I set out to explore communications of Frequent Flyer Programs (FFPs) on Chinese social media, particularly Weibo and WeChat, to examine social media’s effects on China’s commercial sphere. My research and scholarly debates reflect that social media affects China’s commercial sphere in three distinct forms. Social media as a cost-effective platform facilitates communications between organizations, and current and potential customers. In addition, it tends to be a catalyst to stimulate the development of citizen journalism, which largely encourages public participation in commercial activities. Finally, the future of social media will be more concentrated on building strong relationships and increasing communication efficiency. Mobile social media will draw considerable attention in this process, and both organizations and individuals value mobile social media to strengthen the importance of brand identity and marketing communications. Consequently, social media will be more significant in affecting China’s commercial sphere in the future.
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ iii

Acknowledgement .......................................................................................................................... v

Introduction .................................................................................................................................. 1

Literature Review .......................................................................................................................... 5

Research Questions ....................................................................................................................... 6

Methods ........................................................................................................................................ 7

Results .......................................................................................................................................... 12

Discussions .................................................................................................................................... 13
  Transparency, Immediacy, Interactivity and Accuracy of FFP Communications ............. 13
  The Rise of Chinese Social Media. ......................................................................................... 18
  Social Media as a Platform Affecting China’s Commercial Sphere ............................ 25
  Social Media as a Catalyst to Promote China’s Commercial Sphere ...................... 31
  Social Media as a Lighthouse to Guide China’s Commercial Sphere ................... 38

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 43

Appendix ......................................................................................................................................... 45

References ..................................................................................................................................... 47
Acknowledgements

I hope to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the Graduate Liberal Studies program for the intellectual enrichment through my entire program of study, and for the invaluable support to my final project. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Donna Zapf, Director of Graduate Liberal Studies program, for her unconditional support and encouragement throughout my two-year academic endeavors. Also, my special gratitude goes to Dink Suddaby and Dr. Kent Wicker for their generous assistance and guidance in this project.

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to my project supervisor, Prof. Kang Liu. He always encourages me and shares his insights with me when I confront difficulties during researching and writing my thesis. I would not be able to complete this project without his constructive opinions, patient guidance and kind encouragement. He is an amazing supervisor to work with.

I also wish to thank my former faculty advisor, Prof. William Noland, for his consistent support of my final project even if I finally changed my research topic. I feel fortunate to have participated in his photography course and my passion in photography has never diminished.

Last but not least, I am grateful to my parents for their unconditional support when I dealt with obstacles in this process. I sincerely appreciate their encouragement and attention throughout this project. My degree would not be possible without the endless support from my mother and father.
I. INTRODUCTION

Since I started graduate school, I have been obsessed with Frequent Flyer Programs (FFPs), and more specifically, with using miles to elevate my travel experiences. As a graduate student with a limited budget, I can always enjoy truly amazing flight experiences by leveraging my resources while spending significantly less than people might expect. Hence, I believe it is necessary for individuals to understand FFPs. On the one hand, it requires considerable effort and expertise to earn miles. I usually pay for a coach ticket when I travel between China and the United States. But I prefer to fly with American Airlines rather than United Airlines, although their prices are similar. United’s MileagePlus program is revenue-based, which means the bonus miles largely depend on the amount I spend. But American’s AAdvantage program is distance-based, which means bonus miles are related to the distance I actually fly. On the other hand, it demands relevant knowledge in this field to maximize the value of miles. Seventy-thousand American Airlines miles are sufficient to redeem for either a first-class award ticket from North America to Northern Asia or a year of airport lounge access. It would be more rewarding for me to choose the former, because it costs significantly more than the latter.

Consequently, I launched my public account “Zhao and Points” on Weibo and WeChat (Appendix) in July 2015 to share my knowledge of FFPs, especially my experiences in earning and using miles. I am determined to share FFP-related information on these two platforms mainly because an increasing number of Chinese citizens are relying on social media platforms, especially Weibo and WeChat, to obtain information. Substantial social media users provide me with possibilities to attract many followers and I take pride in sharing
what I have learned.

At the same time, an increasing number of scholarly debates about Chinese social media focus on its role in domestic political and societal issues, for example, “censorship” (Tai, 2015; Lorentzen, 2014; Yang, 2014) and “civic engagement” (Cheng et al, 2015; Wei, 2014; Chen, 2014). But limited attention has been given to social media’s influence on the commercial sphere. Gates (2005) argues that we have just seen the beginning of what the Internet can do for us in revolutionizing communications. According to China Internet Network Information Center’s (CNNIC, 2015) reports, the number of Chinese Internet users has increased from 22.5 million in 2000 to 668 million in 2015. The significant increase in Chinese Internet users has influenced many aspects of the society. Therefore, I set out to explore communications concerning FFP on Chinese social media. My goal is to examine how social media is affecting China’s commercial sphere.

Weibo, one of the most popular social media platforms in China, is a Twitter-like micro-blogging service launched in August 2009 by Sina Corporation. It allows users to post messages, comments, photos, and videos and has since expanded with “scorching speed” (Magistad, 2012). According to “The 34th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China” released by CNNIC (2015), the number of Weibo users reached 249 million in December 2014. Users generate around 100 million posts every day, significantly increasing the speed and scale of information dissemination and social networking on this platform (Yuan, 2013). But Weibo is not alone. WeChat is a mobile communication tool developed by Tencent Corporation in China, first released in January 2011, claiming to offer a new way to connect and a new way of life. WeChat supports group chat, text, voice, photo, and video
messages. Based on Tencent Quarterly Report (2015), by the end of June 2015 WeChat had 600 million users.

As social media platforms, Weibo and WeChat share several important characteristics. Both Weibo and WeChat possess a large number of users, they are unprecedentedly efficient at disseminating information, and they have a significant impact on the way their users obtain information. But the differences between these two social media platforms are worth mentioning as well. The most significant difference between Weibo and WeChat, I believe, lies in the emphasis placed on social networking or media. Fundamentally, Weibo is a media platform offering social networking functions, and WeChat is a social communication tool providing media functions. As a platform focusing on media function, Weibo values the speed, range, and transparency of information dissemination. The relationship between users on Weibo is established on the basis of common interest in a certain topic, and a relationship formed on that basis tends to be relatively weak. In contrast, WeChat is a platform focusing on social communication and it values interactions and communication among individuals who are already familiar with one another. WeChat disseminates information relatively slowly, but it significantly increases the effectiveness and quality of communication. The relationship between users is thus relatively strong.

Considering the large number of users on Weibo and WeChat, and the similarities and differences shared by these two platforms, most domestic airlines have launched official accounts on both. These accounts not only attract followers but also rely on followers. Ashley and Tuten (2015) have measured consumers’ engagement in an airline’s social media activities and suggest that the intensity of an airline’s social media activities is positively
related to consumer engagement. Moreover, Bonson and colleagues (2015) note the importance of frequent updates and incentives for public participation in branded content. They contend that creative strategies, including experiential, image, and exclusivity messages, are associated with customer engagement in social media activities.

Apart from airlines, individuals also engage in FFP communications on Weibo and WeChat. To be specific, based on my observation, opinion leaders and “We Media” (Gillmor, 2003) in this field perform actively. They are individuals and groups rooted in social media, influencing the public by delivering thoughts and insights from their own perspectives. They are seen as trustworthy and non-purposive whereas most airlines are likely to be seen as “forcing a concept” (Watts, 2007) on social media users.

Given these conditions, my research asks: What features are demonstrated in FFP communications in Chinese social media? What is the role of opinion leaders and We Media in bringing about the features I perceived? How does social media affect China’s commercial sphere?

My thesis demonstrates that social media strongly impacts China’s commercial sphere, and will be more important in its future development. More broadly, through the analysis of my statistical research and relevant literature on social media, this thesis indicates that social media affects China’s commercial sphere in three distinct forms. Social media as a cost-effective platform facilitates communications between organizations, and current and potential customers. In addition, it tends to be a catalyst to stimulate the development of citizen journalism, which largely encourages public participation in commercial activities. Finally, the future of social media will be more concentrated on building strong relationships
and increasing communication efficiency.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on Chinese social media concentrates on its role in domestic political and social issues, for example, “censorship” (Tai, 2015; Lorentzen, 2014; Yang, 2014) and “civic engagement” (Cheng et al, 2015; Wei, 2014; Chen, 2014). On the one hand, a number of scholars tend to be pessimistic about the impact of social media on political and social affairs. Nugent (2001) argued that political landscape would not be changed because “a new technology or communications medium is more likely to reflect and supplement the existing political order than alter it” (p. 224). Kalathil and Boas (as cited in Goble, 2001) mentioned that the Chinese government has been successful in controlling the Internet and preventing Internet users from challenging the existing regime. Therefore, they considered that “the diffusion of the Internet does not necessarily spell the demise of authoritarian rule” (as cited in Goble, 2001). On the other hand, some scholars prefer to approach social media’s influence from more optimistic perspectives. Taubman (1998) predicted that the Chinese leaders’ sway “over the ideational and organizational character of domestic affairs” (p. 268) would finally be diminished. Moreover, Yang (2008) regards the Internet as a fundamental focus of contention in China, with this contention reshaping Chinese society and politics. The Internet and its users are creating a cultural and social revolution in China, and leading to what Yang calls “unofficial democracy.”

However, limited attention has been given to social media’s influence on the commercial sphere. Liu (2015) prefers to access its impact more comprehensively. He argues
that the power of science and technology has become significantly valuable in China’s economic reform and has simultaneously impacted Chinese political power towards a more open, accountable, and transparent state power. Meanwhile, the economic and commercial power that the Internet has brought to China with both “innovative dynamics and closer global integration” (Liu, 2015) boosts the domestic economy. Therefore, the relationship among the economy, politics, technology and commerce has never been more interactive than it is in the current China’s society.

In terms of social media’s commercial power, Edosomwan and colleagues (2011) claim that social media helps companies communicate collaboratively, and helps companies serve current and potential customers in terms of receiving feedback, developing products, or providing customer service and support. In addition, Paridon and Carraher (2009) suggest social media offers a cost-effective means of marketing communications. Moreover, Carraher and colleagues (2006) notice that customers can experience a brand privilege while using a product or service and also when interacting with a company. But Kumar (2013) argues that the widespread generation and consumption of content has created an extremely competitive online environment where different types of content vie with each other for the scarce attention of the user community. Therefore, the advantages and challenges that social media brings to commercial activities encourage me to further explore the influence of social media on China’s commercial sphere.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

These are the research questions I addressed in my thesis: What are the features of FFP
communications on Weibo and WeChat? What impact do opinion leaders and We Media have on FFP communications? How can we understand the research results, evaluate the effects of social media on China’s commercial affairs, and predict the future impact of social media on China’s commercial sphere? In brief, how does social media affect China’s commercial sphere? In particular I set out to study social media’s influence in terms of direct impacts, how it might work as a catalyst to promote citizen journalism as well as its guidance for future commercial activities.

IV. METHODS

I conducted independent research on FFP communications on Weibo and WeChat for two months, from August to September 2015. My research methods included performance observations, account classifications, data point collections, calculations, and analysis. I visited selected accounts regularly to record their specific data and provide statistical support for my further explorations.

Regarding my study of Weibo, I conducted research on major account types by focusing on account followers, the total and average number of their Weibo, and the average number of shares, comments, and likes of each Weibo. Based on my observation, three types of Weibo accounts stand out: airlines, opinion leaders, and We Media. Compared to other account types, these accounts mainly focused on FFP-related topics and attracted the most followers. Other account types, travel agencies for example, randomly send FFP-related information and their frequency is relatively low. I selected the time period of the last two months not only because of the fresh data but also because of availability. To be specific,
opinion leaders do not update as regularly as airlines do, but their update frequencies in this period tend to be relatively stable. My statistical data are demonstrated in Table 1.

### Table 1. Major Accounts of FFP Communications on Weibo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Account Name</th>
<th>Property</th>
<th>Followers</th>
<th>Total Number of Weibo</th>
<th>Average Daily Weibo</th>
<th>Average Shares Per Weibo</th>
<th>Average Comments Per Weibo</th>
<th>Average Likes Per Weibo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Air China</td>
<td>Airline</td>
<td>317,313</td>
<td>8,451</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China Eastern</td>
<td>Airline</td>
<td>290,373</td>
<td>7,374</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China Southern</td>
<td>Airline</td>
<td>493,706</td>
<td>10,190</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hainan Airlines</td>
<td>Airline</td>
<td>1,649,215</td>
<td>17,718</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathay Pacific</td>
<td>Airline</td>
<td>144,520</td>
<td>2,151</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring Airlines</td>
<td>Airline</td>
<td>3,475,768</td>
<td>5,019</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juneyao Airlines</td>
<td>Airline</td>
<td>332,833</td>
<td>2,845</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Second, I collected data points of the above three account types on WeChat, seeking for possible differences in their respective communication methods. I selected the same period of time to avoid possible irrelevance in the comparison. In these statistics, “Average Shares” is replaced by “Average Views” because WeChat does not provide the number of shares per article. Moreover, among eleven major samples, five of them do not offer the comment function to their followers, so that category I marked N/A. Additionally, “Hua Zong” is replaced by “Senior Player” because Hua Zong does not launch his official accounts on WeChat, while Senior Player mainly uses this platform to communicate with his followers. My statistical data can be found in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aviation Story</th>
<th>We Media</th>
<th>15,092</th>
<th>11.6</th>
<th>21.3</th>
<th>15.9</th>
<th>13.6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FATIII</td>
<td>We Media</td>
<td>11,250</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hua Zong</td>
<td>Opinion Leader</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>746.5</td>
<td>347.5</td>
<td>527.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troy Liu</td>
<td>Opinion Leader</td>
<td>7,773</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Account Name</td>
<td>Property</td>
<td>Followers</td>
<td>Total Number of Articles</td>
<td>Average Daily Articles</td>
<td>Average Views Per Article</td>
<td>Average Comments Per Article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air China</td>
<td>Airline</td>
<td>78,678</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>9419.1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China Eastern</td>
<td>Airline</td>
<td>297,661</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>42526.6</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China Southern</td>
<td>Airline</td>
<td>961,134</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>100,000+</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hainan Airlines</td>
<td>Airline</td>
<td>344,832</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>47,153</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathay Pacific</td>
<td>Airline</td>
<td>35,385</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>6629.2</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring Airlines</td>
<td>Airline</td>
<td>1,139,801</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>100,000+</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juneyao Airlines</td>
<td>Airline</td>
<td>90,027</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>12831.4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aviation Story</td>
<td>We Media</td>
<td>52,896</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>11024.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FATIII</td>
<td>We Media</td>
<td>18,657</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>724.8</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Third, I classified FFP-related content of each account type on Weibo and WeChat, trying to improve the accuracy of my research. I define FFP-related content as FFP-related promotions, mileage accumulations, mileage redemptions, program schemes and so on. I came up with two figures below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Senior Player</th>
<th>Opinion Leader</th>
<th>326,133</th>
<th>48</th>
<th>0.8</th>
<th>16075.1</th>
<th>50.4</th>
<th>49.2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Troy Liu</td>
<td>Opinion Leader</td>
<td>134,720</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>5876.4</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>32.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Source: data points from Table 1
V. RESULTS

My research results led me to explore the implications of FFP communications, including the development of social media in China, the direct influence of social media on commercial activities, the importance of citizen journalism in China’s commercial sphere, and the future opportunities and challenges social media offers to domestic commerce. My main findings include the number of people engaged in FFP communications, the dominant role of airlines, the significance of opinion leaders and We Media, platform preferences, and interactivities between social media users and various accounts. These findings reflect that Chinese social media is affecting the way that FFP-related information disseminates.

In the first place, on Chinese social media, airlines remain the dominant information disseminators in FFP communications. Spring Airlines attracts 3,475,768 followers and Hainan Airlines’ followers also reach 1,649,215 on Weibo. Meanwhile, Spring Airlines and China Southern Airlines are dominant on WeChat, possessing 1,139,801 and 961,134
followers respectively. Most of the airlines post and interact with followers actively and regularly. Four out of seven airline accounts post more than three Weibo every day, while six out of seven release at least one article every two days on WeChat.

In addition, opinion leaders and We Media have become increasingly important in FFP communications. Both of them have more impressive performance in interacting with account followers compared to airlines. For example, on every Weibo Troy Liu released, he had an average of 34.2 shares, 37.4 comments, and 25.3 likes. In response to Liu’s Weibo activities, Aviation Story achieved an average of 21.3 shares, 15.9 comments and 13.6 likes. Moreover, opinion leaders and We Media interact frequently with followers on WeChat as well.

Furthermore, according to Figure 1 and 2, opinion leaders and We Media are more concentrated on FFP-related topics than the airlines tend to be. Their concentration largely surpasses airlines on both of the social media platforms. The FFP-related content of opinion leaders and We Media’s accounts tends to be around 40 percent of their overall posts. But for airlines FFP topics amount to no more than 30 percent. Hence, opinion leaders and We Media have become the best sources of information for account followers, better than most of the airlines.

VI. DISCUSSIONS

Transparency, Immediacy, Interactivity and Accuracy of FFP Communications

My research results suggest multiple accounts are participating in FFP communications. While airlines continue to play a dominant role in this process, individuals like opinion
leaders are becoming increasingly important. Large numbers of information providers and followers, social media’s instant nature, and interactive communication methods improve the transparency, immediacy, interactivity, and accuracy of FFP communications.

Multiple information providers and a large number of followers contribute to the transparency of FFP communications not only because social media users can now obtain related information from diverse perspectives but also because users can learn from each other to deepen their understandings. According to Table 1 and Table 2, eleven selected accounts attract more than 7.5 million followers on Weibo and more than 3.3 million followers on WeChat. These figures demonstrate that FFP communications are influencing a sizable audience, and indicate that social media platforms offer FFP communications to a large number of potential customers. Given that many small domestic airlines and influential individuals are not included in this research, I believe FFP communications are affecting a substantial population and will draw more attention in the future. In addition, my research reveals that opinion leaders and We Media are increasingly important in FFP communications. Based on Table 1 and 2, popular opinion leaders and We Media attract as many followers as most of the airlines on Weibo and WeChat. But compared to airlines, their messages and articles are shared, liked and valued by more social media users. This reflects that social media users can now acquire information from both multiple accounts and ordinary followers. Hence, the diversity of information providers and the quantity of followers help to increase the transparency of FFP communications.

Transparency is valuable for potential loyalty flyers on social media because it enables them to make “informed decisions” (Hotz, 2009). Flyers are well-informed because social
media more effectively “facilitates conversations” (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009), internally and externally, compared to traditional media, offering low-cost ways to acquire transparent information (Wright & Hinson, 2010). I agree that social media facilitates conversations so that users can obtain information effectively, but I also suggest social media sharpens the depth of conversations and encourages considerable participants to affect transparency.

Organizations like airlines value opportunities to use social media to make themselves transparent. In their 2010 study, Wright and Hinson found that 81 percent of public relations professionals believed social media influences organizational transparency. But, as Rawlins (2008) has stated, simply providing information does not guarantee transparency. I believe that transparency is achieved by communicating profoundly and proactively on social media platforms. Users must include personal insights, expertise, and practical experiences to “improve understanding” (DiStaso, 2012). Furthermore, multiple disseminators are engaged in this process to further improve transparency. As Table 1 and Table 2 reflect, three major account types play important roles in communicating information about FFPs. Apart from organizations, opinion leaders and We Media also affect the way information is disseminated. They are individuals and groups rooted in social media, and they influence the public by delivering thoughts and insights from their own perspectives. They are seen as “trustworthy” and “non-purposive” in the process of communications because most airlines are likely to be seen as “forcing a concept” (Watts, 2007) on the general public. Therefore, due to the improvement of transparency, social media users now have access to multiple resources to obtain information concerning their fields of interest.

But the transparent feature is not the only important aspect. Social media platforms also
significantly improve the immediacy of FFP communications. Information providers instantly deliver messages to their followers once they post. Information does not wait any longer on traditional media to be discovered. Instead, it actively comes to users as soon as account operators send it out on Weibo and WeChat. As a result, the communications of FFP have transformed from sluggish to instant. In addition, I believe social media alone cannot guarantee immediacy. I consider this transformation also contributes to social media users’ desire for immediacy. It is the desire that leads them to learn avidly from each other (Bolter, 2000). Specifically, the desire is demonstrated by actively following major accounts concentrated on FFP communications, spontaneously sharing, commenting on, and endorsing their posts. Once major accounts deliver a message, followers can immediately react to it by spreading the message to create more popularity and influence, by responding to the message adding personal insights or seeking additional information, and by compliments it as a way of demonstrating “identification or belonging” (Lambert et al., 2013). Social media complements the relatively sluggish communications of FFP on traditional media, and enhances the possibility of users benefiting from immediate information. Hence, the immediacy of FFP communications satisfies the desire of social media users for acquiring information immediately.

In addition, my research results demonstrate frequent interactions between account operators and followers. According to Table 1, airlines interact with followers regularly on Weibo, and opinion leaders and We Media also perform impressively in terms of interaction. Similar situations happen on WeChat as well. Previous research claims that interest in a topic is a key factor in online interactivity, which may be indicated by fast message retrieval and
distribution (Sundar et al., 2003). I thus predict that Chinese social media users’ interest in FFP-related information will increase, and they will tend to express their interest on social media platforms. But contrary to opinions that social media is a tool for self-expression, Rettberg (2009) advocates that users may be more interested in representing a topic and belonging to a community than communicating personal insight. In my research, I find evidence for this claim according to the common use of “share” and “like,” which requires social media users to recognize the original posts and information providers. Based on Table 1, eight out of eleven accounts possess more “shares” and “likes” than “comments.” Table 2 also shows that among seven accounts offering a “comment” function, six of them have more “likes” than “comments.” Therefore, I argue that social media platforms promote interactivity between information providers and followers who are interested in FFP-related topics. But the interactivity is largely influenced more by followers’ sense of belonging to FFP or an FFP-related community than it is by their willingness to express themselves. Social media tools that facilitate “topic alliance” (Smith, 2010) may lead to more interactivity by facilitating user-topic connection. In other words, the amount of interactivity is based on a platform’s ease of use in connecting a user to his or her intended interest. Moreover, Guilory and Sundar (2008) argue that the interactivity of social media is based on the interconnected nature of message posts. This idea reflects that the interactivity is based on a user’s need to be one of a group of individuals who support a topic or share a common interest. As a result, social media’s ability to promote interactions and form topic alliances, and users’ increasing interest in FFP-related information and their demand of similar individuals, together influence the interactivity in FFP communications.
Last but not least, the accuracy of FFP communications is valued both by account operators and followers. As an official channel to acquire FFP-related sources, airlines’ accounts guarantee the accuracy of the information disseminated. Followers can conveniently track current promotions, mileage earning opportunities, and mileage redemption requirements. Moreover, opinion leaders enlarge the scope of accurate information by adding FFP-related experiences which they examine through practical travels. Specifically, users discuss the legitimacy of award ticket routes, the actual tax that airlines charge for mileage redemptions, and accurate reviews of various airlines and aircrafts. But in terms of FFP communications on social media, the accuracy not only refers to accurate information but also includes accurate methods of information dissemination. According to Figure 1 and 2, opinion leaders and We Media in this field mainly concentrate on disseminating FFP-related content. In other words, the most accurate and effective methods for followers to obtain FFP-related information are to follow those accounts of opinion leaders and We Media. In addition, the accuracy of Weibo and WeChat improves the method of information acquisition as well. Taking WeChat as an example, only account subscribers can receive articles released by account operators. In other words, the communication objects are those who are interested in FFP-related information because they subscribe voluntarily. This phenomenon demonstrates an effective method of information dissemination because every article is effectively making an impact on subscribers.

The Rise of Chinese Social Media
Weibo and WeChat, two of the most popular social media platforms in China, play significant roles in FFP communications. FFP communications have become increasingly effective and convenient not only because numerous followers demonstrate interest in FFP but also because of the power of social media platforms. By investigating the case of FFP communications, I intend to examine the reasons for the emergence and popularity of Chinese social media in general.

With the rapid development of information and communication technologies, a large number of social media platforms have emerged in China in recent years. The expressive and interactive features of social media such as instant messaging and micro-blogging have drawn an increasing number of people to express personal thoughts, share information, and obtain information online. Since Weibo and WeChat were launched, they have become the most popular social media platforms in China. According to “The 34th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China” released by CNNIC (2015), the number of Weibo users reached 249 million in December 2014. At the same time, WeChat had 600 million users by the end of June 2015 (Tencent Quaterly Report, 2015). For a large number of people in China, using social media tools has become an everyday experience. Recently, available forms of social media have created an emerging public space where users can report news, circulate information, and express opinions. While Weibo has become the preferred platform for reporting and circulating news and making short comments, WeChat provides possibilities for instant communication among friends and familiar individuals. Through these platforms, social media users become both news reporters and newsmakers. In the case of FFP communications, individuals like opinion leaders reported news on multiple social media
channels, including Weibo and WeChat. And followers can obtain information effectively, disseminate it in their social networks and interact with each other to deepen their understanding.

I believe there are multiple reasons for the rise of Chinese social media, including economic development, structural changes in society, and technological advancement. For the past four decades, China has successfully implemented a number of economic policies to increase economic growth and to improve the quality of individuals’ lives, for example, policies pertaining to investment and finance. These policies have stimulated businesses and have gradually transformed the economic model from a government-controlled planning model to a market-oriented model with Chinese characteristics. In terms of overall economic performance, China has achieved impressive records in almost all aspects of economic measurement. To be specific, China’s gross domestic product (GDP) has increased from RMB 365 billion in 1978 to RMB 63 trillion in 2014. Chinese citizens have thus become wealthier, with annual GDP per capita rising from RMB 379 in 1978 to RMB 46,531 in 2014. More specifically, in the domestic aviation industry, the average number of flights taken per person in China was 0.07 in 2002, and it increased to 0.2 in 2011. Jiaxiang Li (2012), Head of the Department of Aviation, predicts that the number will reach 0.5 in 2020, indicating domestic airlines will witness more than 700 million people flying within five years from now, in 2020. Therefore, China’s economic development has improved the quality of individuals’ lives, increased consuming capacity, and provided the economic foundation for further advancement in business, communications, and other fields.

However, rapid economic development is a double-edged sword. It provides numerous
opportunities for Chinese society, but it inevitably has side effects. As China has emerged as
the world's second largest economy, it has also transformed from one of the most “egalitarian
countries” in the world to one of the countries with the highest level of “social inequality”
(Naughton, 2007). Inequalities in income, housing, consumption, education, and social
welfare benefits remain serious issues in China (Wong, 2002; Wei, 2012). Rural-urban
differences, government policies, and geographic location further exacerbate these
inequalities. Scholars have determined that a coastal-inland development gap and rural-urban
divide are the main ingredients of overall inequality in China. According to Huang and Lao
(2009), the urban-to-rural household-per-capita income ratio increased from 2.2 times in the
late 1980s to 3.2 times in 2004. The most obvious impact of increasing inequality is on
“social cohesion” and “political stability” (Zhu, 2012). To be specific, Wang et al. (2009)
find that China’s migrants are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with local governments.
The lack of confidence and trust in government is likely to encourage crimes against the
public and even render government policies ineffective (Zhu, 2012). The conflict between the
government and the general public stimulates Chinese citizens to seek equality in other
aspects of their daily lives, for example, places where they can express their opinions and
participate in social affairs. The desire of Chinese citizens for platforms to express
themselves and participate thus has become unprecedentedly strong.

In addition, technological advancement fulfills the demands of Chinese citizens who
were influenced by economic development and structural changes in society, positively or
negatively. A series of technology corporations, such as Sina and Tencent, realized Chinese
citizens’ demands and the market potential in social networking. They also learned from the
success of Facebook and Twitter. When they launched social media platforms, they not only copied Western models but also added Chinese characteristics. For example, WeChat provides multiple functions including public accounts, which aim to offer opportunities to individuals who are interested in writing insightful articles covering any field and aiming to deepen communication effects. These technological endeavors fulfill users’ desire for instant, effective, and influential communications online.

Chinese social media and the Internet have attracted considerable attention from day one. McMahan and Chesebro (2003) claimed a correlation exists between changes in communication technologies and the political transformations of nation-states. The dominant media system of a society, they predicted, would “profoundly influence the political system and cultural stability of a nation-state” (p. 129). Social media and the Internet are regarded not only as tools to interact with others but also as platforms to “facilitate democratic development” (Yuan, 2010). Their impacts on political and social issues have been addressed by scholars from various disciplines. Nugent (2001) argued that the Internet itself would not change the political landscape because “a new technology or communications medium is more likely to reflect and supplement the existing political order than alter it” (p. 224). Kalathil and Boas (as cited in Goble, 2001) mentioned that the Chinese government had been successful in controlling the Internet and preventing Internet users from challenging the existing regime. Therefore, they considered that “the diffusion of the Internet does not necessarily spell the demise of authoritarian rule” (as cited in Goble, 2001). Huang (1999) also predicted that the Internet would only play a limited role in democratic development in China because of strict censorship and the low number of Internet users.
But some scholars prefer to approach democratizing effects from more optimistic perspectives. Taubman (1998) predicted that the Chinese leaders’ sway “over the ideational and organizational character of domestic affairs” (p. 268) would finally be diminished. Moreover, Yang (2008) regards the Internet as a fundamental focus of contention in China, with this contention reshaping Chinese society and politics. The Internet and its users are creating a cultural and social revolution in China, and leading to what Yang calls “unofficial democracy.” Ultimately, he perceives democratic governance in China. He tends to be optimistic about the role the Internet will play in promoting further changes.

I believe the Internet will play an increasingly significant role in China’s democratizing transformation. First, China’s transition to a market-oriented economy encourages the active participation of individuals from both the public and private sector. Relatively active, equal, and transparent commercial activities offline will in turn promote similar pursuits online. Second, the Internet, especially social media, largely boosts civic engagement in China in a way that facilitates democratizing transformation. For example, a hazardous product warehouse exploded on August 12, 2015, in Tianjin. Social media users not only shared firsthand information regarding this tragic explosion but also continue to question the local government about the location of the warehouse, the government’s inefficient actions, and possible solutions. Social media allows ordinary citizens to become news reporters, and “inform, empower, and engage one another” (Chen, 2014). Third, China has become a major participant in globalization. The openness of domestic social and economic activities, the effects of Western media and democratic ideology, and the willingness to communicate without geographic limitations have led to a series of democratizing changes in Chinese
social media. Furthermore, I argue that the political effects of Chinese social media are exaggerated and biased. In the Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate, Liu (2015) states that the Internet plays a leading role in China’s power transformation and transition yet to be fully comprehended and recognized. When thinking about power in the digital age, we need to change our perspectives on the role of political power, especially Chinese political power, as purely repressive and negative, i.e. its censorship, and cyber warfare with the U.S. etc. We should reconsider the issue from the positive impact that the Internet has brought to the political power in China.

I agree that simply focusing on the repressive and negative effects of Chinese social media’s political power is insufficient. On one hand, social media provides Chinese citizens with opportunities to participate in political and social affairs so that it decentralizes the political effects of Chinese government and promotes “grass-roots democracy” (Huang & Chen, 2011), which is an important embodiment of China’s democratic progress. It advocates civic engagement in major social and political conflicts, and positively enhances citizens’ engagement in the democratizing process. On the other hand, the role of the Internet in China’s power transformation has not been “fully comprehended and recognized” (Liu, 2015) and only evaluating its power from a political perspective tends to be unilateral. More specifically, the power of science and technology has become significantly valuable in China’s economic reform and has simultaneously encouraged Chinese political power towards “a more open, accountable, and transparent state power” (Liu, 2015). Meanwhile, the economic and commercial power that Internet has brought to China with both “innovative dynamics and closer global integration” (Liu, 2015) boosts domestic economy. Therefore, the
relationship among economy, politics, technology and commerce has never been more interactive than it is in current Chinese society.

The rise of Chinese social media not only attributes to economic development, social structural changes and technological advancement, but also affects the relationship among economy, politics, technology and commerce in turn. As the commercial activities remain a significant component of our daily lives, I set out to further examine the effects of social media in China’s commercial sphere with a focus on FFP communications and explore the way social media might drive commercial activities in the future.

**Social Media as a Platform Affecting China’s Commercial Sphere**

As an effective platform for building brand identity and facilitating marketing communication, social media directly impacts the commercial sphere. According to a McKinsey Global Institute’s report (2012), 70 percent of organizations were regularly using social media for business purposes, a figure that may have increased significantly since then. For most commercial organizations, the challenge has already shifted from whether to use social media or not, to how to use it more effectively.

The key indicator for the success of commerce on social media is frequent and effective communications. Edosomwan and colleagues (2011) claim that social media helps companies communicate collaboratively, and helps companies serve current and potential customers in terms of receiving feedback, developing products, or providing customer service and support. He believes that companies must be as dedicated to communication through social media as the customers are, and they must take time and effort to review and respond to customers’
comments. In addition, through regular communication on social media, Onete and colleagues (2013) argue that organizations can analyze the needs from the market and can determine the customer’s expectations, and they can find out faster whether the products or services they provide meet their customers’ expectations or not. Therefore, I believe social media enables organizations to conveniently and effectively communicate with customers to understand customers’ demands, improve products or services, and satisfy their expectations. Organizations that realize the significance of communications on social media tend to perform much better than their commercial competitors.

According to my research results (Table 1), Hainan Airlines is the most active organization in FFP communications. By the end of September 2015 it posted a total of 17,718 Weibo messages. More specifically, from August to September 2015 the number of Hainan Airlines’ average daily Weibo was 6.2. Among investigated airlines, their messages were most often shared, commented on, and liked. This demonstrates that Hainan Airlines has successfully taken advantage of social media to build up frequent and effective communications with potential customers, which in turn will help Hainan Airlines to understand customers’ demand and improve its loyalty program. For example, it released a message on September 29th regarding changes in mileage redemption requirements. Among relevant comments to this post, follower AIR320 mentioned that the mileage redemption function was still not available on mobile APP, and follower dawnforpeace suggested the company launch a mileage calculation function on its official website so flyers could estimate bonus miles obtainable on specific routes. By evaluating similar reactions to original posts, organizations like airlines can gather customers’ opinions regarding existing products or
services and make improvements accordingly. Hence, frequent and effective communications between organizations and customers on social media platforms will create possibilities for organizations to improve and thus make their products or services more “sustainable” (Onete et al., 2013).

A second important point is that social media offers a cost-effective method for commercial organizations. According to Paridon and Carraher (2009), social media offers a low-cost means of marketing. Wright and Hinson (2010) also found that 81 percent of public relations professionals believed social media offers a low-cost method for marketing communications. By freely releasing messages and interacting with followers, social media is helping commercial organizations to market and advertise products and services at a minimal cost. But the effects of the cost-effective methods do not stop at this point. Based on the research conducted by Carraher and colleagues (2006), they noticed that customers can experience a brand privilege while using a product or service and also when interacting with a company. In other words, social media not only provides organizations with cost-effective ways of marketing communications but also offers cost-effective methods for reinforcing brand identities. It reinforces brand identities through increasing brand exposure, enhancing organizational reputation, improving products and services, and improving brand recognition.

Based on my research results (Table 1 and 2), Spring Airlines has obtained the largest number of followers among investigated accounts on Weibo and WeChat: 3,475,768 and 1,139,801 respectively. This large number allows Spring Airlines to influence many potential customers while spending significantly less than other airlines do. According to independent market research on Spring Airlines conducted by Social One (2013), more than 20 percent of
its social media account followers are its registered FFP members. In addition, Spring Airlines had more than 5,000 employees in 2013, and only 12 of them served its designated social media department. However, the inconspicuous department created more than RMB 250 million sales revenue in 2013, which occupies 5 percent of its entire sales revenue as a corporation (Social One’s Report, 2013). On both of its Weibo and WeChat accounts, Spring Airlines sets up dedicated sections for loyalty, and for potential customers to inquire about FFP-related information and promotions, which will redirect account followers to its mobile APP or official website to proceed with possible purchases. Thanks to social media’s cost-effective communication method, Spring Airlines successfully used 2 thousandth of its employees to complete 5 percent of its sales revenue. Moreover, by taking advantage of social media platforms, Spring Airlines reinforces its brand identity to current and potential loyalty flyers, reminding them that it is and always will be an airline that any ordinary Chinese citizen can afford to take. This is a brand identity which customers can “connect and identify with on an emotional as well as a rational level” (Lorenzo-Romero et al., 2011).

A third point to be considered is that social media allows commercial organizations to provide information in considerable quantities and types, but it also brings about a series of negative effects. Kumar (2013) argues that if economics is about the allocation of resources, then the most precious resource in our new information economy is certainly not information, for we are drowning in it. No, the important commodity is the attention to make sense of that information. We have more content than we can experience, which makes our attention selective. Thus the wide spread generation and consumption of content has created an extremely
competitive online environment where different types of content vie with each other for the scarce attention of the user community (507).

I consider Kumar’s argument to be well grounded and persuasive. As Schroeder (2014) stated, it is only in recent years that this particular brand of online attention has come to the forefront, and organizations have begun to take note of the large number of eyes accessible through social media platforms. Social media enables organizations to facilitate communications and improve brand identities, but it also distracts users’ attention from making sense of specific information. Current and potentially loyal customers may lose efficiency in acquiring information concerning their fields of interest because of the mammoth quantity and diverse types of information. Hence, the efficiency of information dissemination can be negatively affected if organizations fail to balance the quality and quantity of their messages on social media platforms.

According to Figure 1 and 2 in my research, FFP-related content of investigated airlines occupies 26.1 percent of their entire messages on Weibo and 29.7 percent of total articles on WeChat, which shows that airlines are less concentrated about FFP communications compared to opinion leaders and We Media. In other words, airlines release various posts on social media ranging from promotional sales to information about their aircraft. Therefore, it is likely that airlines will lose customers’ attention if customers are not interested in topics other than FFP. Moreover, some of the messages themselves are likely to be confusing, which costs customers’ extra time and attention to make sense of. To be specific, Air China posted a message on Weibo on August 10th, 2015, mentioning that it established a partnership with Avianca Brazil and its FFP members can now use Air China miles to redeem awards for
tickets on Avianca Brazil. This is a typical message which will require significant attention if customers are to make sense of it. For most Air China loyalty guests, Avianca Brazil tends to be an unfamiliar brand name. The details of this message are far from satisfactory because customers are eager to know: what is the situation of this Brazilian airline, what are the specific cooperative details of this partnership, and most importantly, how can they redeem miles for award tickets on Avianca Brazil and does the mileage requirement differ from Air China’s current standard? The large amount of information and the lack of content quality naturally lead to concerns about “the important commodity in the information economy” for both organizations and customers, which is the “attention to make sense of that information” (Kumar, 2013).

As discussed above, commercial organizations that properly embrace social media may have an “insurmountable advantage” (Brennan, 2010) over those that do not. Social media directly impacts China’s commercial sphere by offering cost-effective methods to facilitate frequent and effective communications between organizations and customers, and by challenging organizations’ capabilities to balance the quantity and quality of their messages on social media platforms to minimize customers’ attention to make sense of specific information. Properly used social media thus is altering the competitive landscape in the commercial sphere because it will help organizations to facilitate conversations and deliver goodwill towards individuals and collectives, which is defined as reflections of “social capital” (Huy & Shipilov, 2012). Individuals are eager to gain more resources such as information and recognition from organizations by investing their efforts in building feelings of goodwill. Through social media, organizations can conveniently reinforce their products,
services and brand names. As a result, it will help organizations strengthen the brand experience, which will support brand building and lead to sales revenue. By communicating possible issues on time, social media also provides organizations with opportunities to reduce rumors, negative talk, and motivating people to speak for commercial organizations (Hollier, 2009).

Social Media as a Catalyst to Promote China’s Commercial Sphere

Social media as a platform is affecting China’s commercial sphere by facilitating conversation between organizations and customers and providing cost-effective methods for organizations to engage in marketing. Furthermore, with the rapid development of citizen journalism in China, individuals like opinion leaders and We Media on social media are playing increasingly significant roles with online and offline influence. Social media as a catalyst is spontaneously promoting China’s commercial sphere.

My research results demonstrate the importance of opinion leaders and We Media in FFP communications. According to Table 1 and 2, opinion leaders and We Media in this field not only attract sizable audiences but also interact with their followers more frequently than airlines do. In addition, their messages highly concentrate on FFP-related topics based on Figure 1 and 2, and thus become stable sources for followers to obtain information. Weimann et al. (2007) states that recent measures of opinion leadership incorporate indicators of issue-specific discussion, self-perceived ability to persuade, personality strength and frequency and depth of opinion-giving. In general, opinion leaders are defined as such if they are competent individuals who are viewed as honest and trustworthy by opinion followers,
with whom they frequently discuss issues. Moreover, Cho et al. (2011) emphasize the influence of opinion leaders and define them as people in a social network who have the greatest influence on other people's acknowledgment or adoption of products or services in the diffusion process of technological innovation. Hence, in FFP communications on social media, I regard opinion leaders as individuals who have extensive experiences in earning and using airlines miles, frequently interact with followers on social media platforms, possess the greatest influence on followers’ adoption of a certain FFP and are considered as unofficial authorities.

Opinion leaders place particular emphasis on experienced and influential individuals, but We Media significantly extends the covering range. Compared to opinion leaders, We Media is a relatively new concept first proposed by Gillmor in 2003. In his article *Here Comes We Media*, Gillmor mentions that in an emerging era of multidirectional, digital communications, the audience can be an integral part of the process. Call it We Media. Journalism is evolving away from its lecture mode - here's the news, and you buy it or you don't - to include a conversation (20).

Therefore, I argue that We Media has transformed the traditional communication method, which is top-down, to “mass self-communication” (Castells, 2007), which is bottom-up. Because it facilitates conversations and enables ordinary individuals to become newsmakers to disseminate information publicly as most traditional media does, which embraces the idea of “Public DIY” (Peng et al, 2015). According to *The We Media Research Report* published by Media Center of American Press Institute (2003), We Media is defined as an access to try
to understand how the public offer and share the facts and news linked together with the global knowledge hierarchy. Based on this report, We Media mainly possesses three characteristics including plebification, low threshold, and strong interactivity. These three characteristics emphasize the feasibility for individuals to engage in public communications and thus complement the importance of public participation in the process of information dissemination. In addition, due to the availability of “nonstandard” news sources such as e-mails, chat groups, and blogs, Gillmor (2004) reaffirms his finding that news was being produced by ordinary people who had something to say and show, and not solely by the ‘official’ news organizations that had traditionally decided how the first draft of history would look. Hence, individuals who were information consumers are now becoming information producers, and journalism is transforming from a “twentieth-century mass-media structure” to something profoundly more “grassroots and democratic” (Gillmor, 2004). This transformation, according to Gillmor,

is a story, first, of evolutionary change. It is, however, also a story of a modern revolution because technology has given us a communications toolkit that allows anyone to become a journalist at little cost and in theory with global reach (61).

He believes that technological advancement will keep blurring the boundary between traditional media and We Media. But he also expresses his concerns that emerging technology will raise a series of issues including accuracy, trust, ethics and even law (Gillmor, 2004).

The significance of opinion leaders and We Media in FFP communications on social media reflects the active engagement of individuals as newsmakers and news reporters. Their
engagement indicates that citizen journalism is a rapidly developing phenomenon. Katz (2011) depicts citizen journalists as differing from traditional professional journalists in that they are engaged in “collecting and publication of timely, unique, nonfiction information without formal journalism training or professional affiliation” and more simply, he describes them as “members of the public who engage in journalism. (52) ” A number of scholars have been attempting to define citizen journalism, but a particular definition has never been agreed on. Campbell (2014) describes citizen journalism as a process in which “ordinary people, outside of traditional news institutions and professions, create, collect, comment on and disseminate news and journalism.” Cottle (2014) briefly defines citizen journalism as “news content produced by non-professionals.” Rosen (2008) writes that “when the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, that's citizen journalism.” Consequently, citizen journalism represents a combined process in which ordinary non-professionals who used to be news receivers are now becoming newsmakers and news disseminators.

The effects of citizen journalism have been extensively discussed by scholars. One narrative focuses on the phenomenon’s positive impacts. Gillmor (2004) proposes that citizen journalism has an advantage over mainstream journalism because it largely enhances public participation. Chang (2005) also claims that citizen journalism has taught mainstream journalism how to communicate with the public, both in and outside the newsroom.

By encouraging the public to participate in the process of disseminating information, Franklin (2009) believes that citizen journalism gives “a voice” to the “voiceless,” to those who previously remained unheard. Hence, citizen journalism is bringing about a revolution in that
millions of ordinary citizen journalists are being empowered in everyday ways through online communication. (Thompson, 2006) In addition, the development of citizen journalism on social media has cultivated opinion leaders and We Media into new online spaces. These individuals adopt new technologies, post messages from mobile devices, and engage in building a new kind of personal brand. Finally, citizen journalism helps to strengthen innovation. Individuals share their ideas and insights with organizations and other customers, and social media enables them to make contributions to the improvement of products and services. Social media witnesses the development of citizen journalism to promote commercial activities. I believe citizen journalism plays a vital role in combining public participation with daily activities ranging from the sharing of personal experiences to expressing opinions about commercial activities. It enables citizens to provide their independent opinions and appropriate information to a larger extent and make their voices heard.

However, another narrative warns of the negative effects of citizen journalism. Concerning the rapid development of citizen journalism, the speed inevitably brings about a series of issues, pressures, and criticism. Lasica (2003) questions the credibility of citizen journalism and mentions that citizen journalists are attracted to collaborate with each other on participatory news sites, “and most of the time, their content is not reliable.” Citizen journalism still requires a great deal of effort to develop a reliable relationship with audiences. Riaz (2011) also expresses doubts about credibility and raises a question, “is the text opinion-based or fact-based?” I contend that the credibility of information is not necessarily affected by the nature of the text. Instead, it largely depends on the topics that information
providers are attempting to cover. In other words, an opinion-based text could be more valuable than a fact-based text in commercial activities, such as FFP communications. More specifically, individuals can summarize diverse views about a specific FFP-related topic. Taking mileage redemption as an example, an opinion-based message will help social media users approach award redemption from a distinct perspective even if a fact-based text tends to be fundamental for practical miles usage. Furthermore, researchers question the availability of citizen journalism and social media, especially in developing countries. Riaz (2011) argues that citizen journalism hasn’t extended to the masses. She focuses on citizen journalism in developing countries and finds the most people around the world, especially “marginalized individuals,” are not yet able to participate in global debates due to financial limitations, social status, illiteracy and geographic location. In addition, criticism has focused on the lack of professionalism, including the lack of professional training and ethical standards. The lack of professional training, according to Pasha (2011), will prevent citizen journalism from fulfilling “the basic journalistic requirements.” It lacks training in ethical standards, which Itule and Anderson (2000) consider crucial in that reporters must separate the ethics of journalism from “the values they hold as individuals”; journalistic ethical standards should “guide reporters’ actions.”

Considering both the positive and negative effects of citizen journalism discussed above, I argue that social media is affecting commercial activities by promoting citizen journalism, and citizen journalism is making a direct impact on the commercial sphere by advocating public participation and providing “independent, reliable, accurate and widespread and appropriate information” (Flew, 2008). In my research, I suggest that the impressive
performance of opinion leaders and We Media reflects the rapid development of citizen journalism in China’s commercial sphere. Citizen journalism evokes public participation in diverse fields and promotes the emergence of opinion leaders and We Media in commercial activities, including FFP communications. It thus creates possibilities for individuals to make their voice heard and demonstrate their influence in commercial phenomena. But it brings about a series of problems in terms of credibility, availability, and professionalism, which require a great deal of effort to fix.

I argue that the positive effects of citizen journalism outweigh the negative, especially in China’s commercial sphere. To be specific, my research proves that the rapid development of citizen journalism positively affects China’s commercial sphere. Opinion leaders and We Media attract sizable audiences in FFP communications on social media platforms. Hua Zong has 334,756 followers and Aviation Story possesses 95,804 followers on Weibo. The number of followers also surpasses 100,000 for Troy Liu and Senior Player on WeChat (Table 1 and Table 2). The large number of participants creates possibilities to access information from distinct perspectives. Specifically, Air China released a promotional sales campaign on Weibo and WeChat on August 1st, 2015, offering tiered bonus miles to its FFP members for the number of flights they actually took. Spontaneously, Troy Liu sent out an article on WeChat, introducing the most cost-effective method to acquire the most bonus miles and use them to redeem a first-class award ticket from Hong Kong to Europe on Cathay Pacific Airways due to its partnership with Air China. A number of frequent flyers also post Weibo messages regarding Air China’s promotion with their own interpretations. In this case, the public is participating in news reporting and news making rather than solely relying on
official introductions from organizations. Hence, social media provides possibilities for public participation in commercial activities and ordinary individuals can conveniently produce news to influence others in terms of product and service selections.

Social Media as a Lighthouse to Guide China’s Commercial Sphere

Social media as a platform is affecting China’s commercial sphere by facilitating conversation between organizations and customers and providing cost-effective methods for organizations to engage in marketing. In addition, with the rapid development of citizen journalism in China, individuals like opinion leaders and We Media on social media are playing increasingly significant roles with online and offline influence. These direct and indirect influences are together impacting China’s commercial sphere. This impact naturally leads to discussions of the trajectory of Chinese social media and its future impact on China’s commercial sphere. I believe that social media will become a lighthouse to impact online and offline circumstances, and more specifically, I suggest it will guide social, political, as well as commercial activities in the coming decades in China.

The future of Chinese social media can be comprehensively evaluated in relation to domestic economic, political, and social circumstances. As overall propaganda for future development, the “China Dream” tends to be an appropriate approach to decipher the domestic developmental tendency. President Xi Jinping initiated the term “China Dream” in November 2012, with a commitment to fulfilling this dream under his leadership. As Collahan (2013) stated, China has many visions of this dream, reflecting robust debate and competition to define the nation’s future course of reform and development. Although the
specifics of this dream have yet to be determined, its major objectives will be decisive for this nation’s future reform and development. According to Sullivan (2014), China needs to make a great deal of effort toward a more sustainable economy that guarantees long-term growth, and a service-based economy and consumer culture that is facilitated by urbanization, migration, and the development of greater creative capacity. These objectives are reinforced by the ambition to become an innovative nation, and to develop soft power accompanied by economic achievement.

My research results demonstrate that individuals like opinion leaders and We Media tend to be more concentrated on FFP communications compared to airlines (Figure 1 and 2). It indicates that public participation has increased rapidly in commercial affairs and that citizen journalism has already extended its effects to the commercial sphere. Hence, I predict that social media may gradually transform organizational attention from broad social media users to individuals whom organizations can effectively make an impact on. In other words, the future of online communications will be more focused and targeted rather than blindly pursuing the range of communications. For example, China Southern Airlines and Troy Liu have similar performance on Weibo in terms of the total number of followers and posts (Table 1). But the average shares, comments, and likes of China Eastern Airlines’ messages significantly fall behind Troy Liu’s. I consider the reason for this phenomenon is not only that Liu has been offering more informative and practical content concerning FFPs, but also because Liu demonstrates his concentration on this specific field (Figure 1). Therefore, Liu possesses higher efficiency in affecting his followers even if China Eastern Airlines have nearly 60,000 more followers compared to Liu.
According to my previous discussions on the interactivity of FFP communications, followers endorse social media messages by complimenting it as a way of demonstrating “identification or belonging” (Lambert et al., 2013). And social media consequently serves as an effective platform to form “topic alliance” (Smith, 2010) in this process. I argue that social media’s function of forming potential alliances will be an essential developmental direction in the future. First, contradictory to mass communication, sub-communication is gradually valued by scholars and business professionals because it largely enhances the efficiency of online and offline communication. Specifically, my research demonstrates that the influential efficiency of highly focused individuals with fewer followers significantly surpasses that of less focused organizations with more followers. Second, specific topic alliances will effectively decrease social media users’ attention to make sense of information, which is regarded as “the important commodity in the information economy” (Kumar, 2013). Future social media platforms that focus on creating possibilities for users to form topic alliances will naturally possess strong attractiveness because these platforms fulfill users’ demand in effectively spending their time and attention. Third, organizations gradually value the effectiveness of marketing communications instead of the range of marketing campaigns. In other words, effective communications are more likely to create sales revenue than broad communications. Organizations will gradually shift their focus from the range of communication to the efficiency of communication. They will aim to build up an effective online community, providing customers with stronger relations and a sense of belonging. The theme of each community will become more concentrated and much clearer instead of being broad. In addition, Dubois (2014) argues that the future of social media focus will shift from
“positional equity” to “relational equity” because he believes that social media tools will further strengthen relationships between individuals. He regards social media as a “flow media” defined by the depth and breath of relationships among brands and various individuals. While most organizations tend to pay much attention to the quantity that represents their position in the competitive landscape, for example, their positional equity, what they often overlook is the relational equity with their communities. Instead of blindly investing in paid reach, such as advertising, brands should focus on what truly matters in the long-term and engage in sustained interactions with customers.

Therefore, I predict that a number of focused social media platforms will emerge in the future. For example, economic development will provide Chinese citizens with financial foundations to select their preferred transportation methods. Li (2012) estimates the average number of flights taken per person per year in China will increase from 0.07 in 2002 to 0.5 in 2020. With the increasing number of Chinese frequent flyers, I assume that potential social media platforms focused on social networking among frequent flyers will emerge. Furthermore, the emergence of focused social media platforms will consequently guide commercial organizations to participate in and influence these platforms.

Another possible developmental direction of social media is the significant transition to mobile social media. In other words, the significance and influence of mobile social media will notably increase. When people access internet through their phones, unsurprisingly, they frequently access social media (Donner & Gitau, 2009). Suresh and Sriraam (2013) also assume that mobile phones will be the future of social media. In 2011, China had 859 million mobile phone users, which seizes approximately 73.2 percent of the national population (ITU,
Mobile phones enable users to conveniently access the Internet without geographic limitations, but there are more practical approaches to evaluate its importance in China. Urban residents are accustomed to acquiring mobile phones for daily usage, but rural-to-urban migrants in China value the importance of mobile phones more significantly. Wallis (2013) mentions that Chinese migrants removed from familiar social worlds are immobile in the city and they regard a mobile phone as the first big urban purchase. Sullivan (2014) argues that mobile phones help Chinese migrants overcome alienating circumstances by allowing them to establish and navigate social networks, engage in entertainment, participate in consumer culture and construct a modern self. In addition, WeChat primarily focuses on mobile social media services and it had 600 million users by the end of June 2015 based on Tencent Quarterly Report (2015). But according to my research results, the number of major account followers on WeChat tends to be relatively limited compared to the number on Weibo. This phenomenon can be attributed to the comparatively recent emergence of WeChat and the extensive influence of Weibo. But it also reflects the huge potential of this mobile social media service. As a result, the popularity of mobile phones, the increasing number of mobile social media users, and the huge potential of mobile social media will together lead the direction of social media in the future.

Consequently, the development of social media will create focused platforms for specific fields and promote mobile social media in the coming future. Therefore, the developmental tendency of social media will serve as a lighthouse to guide China’s commercial sphere. Based on this tendency, commercial organizations need to pay close attentions to the focused social media platform to effectively impact and interact with
customers. Moreover, organizations must value the importance of mobile social media because of substantial users and the huge growing potential.

VII. CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that social media improves the transparency, immediacy, interactivity and accuracy of FFP communications in China. As social media becomes an increasingly significant disseminator for political and social issues, its impact has already extended to China’s commercial sphere. My research and scholarly debates reflect that social media affects China’s commercial sphere in three distinct forms. Social media as a cost-effective platform facilitates communications between organizations, and current and potential customers. In addition, it tends to be a catalyst to stimulate the development of citizen journalism, which largely encourages public participation in commercial activities. Finally, the future of social media will be more concentrated on building strong relationship and increasing communication efficiency. Mobile social media will draw considerable attention in this process, and both organizations and individuals value mobile social media to strengthen the importance of brand identity and marketing communications. Consequently, social media will be more significant in affecting China’s commercial sphere.

The limitations of this research mainly lie in the quantity of available samples. As a relatively new phenomenon in China, FFP has cultivated only limited numbers of opinion leaders and We Media, which prevent this research from developing a comprehensive understanding of social media in China. Moreover, previous research on Chinese social media has primarily focused on its influence in political and social issues rather than on
commercial activities. Therefore, my consultation in similar scholarly debates tends to be relatively limited.
Appendix

My Public Account “Zhao and Points” on WeChat (unique ID: zyandpoints)

Total Number of Followers (July 15th, 2015-December 4th, 2015)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>7日</th>
<th>14日</th>
<th>30日</th>
<th>2015-07-15 至 2015-12-04</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

![Graph showing follower growth]

The Number of Views, Comments, Likes, and Cash Rewards of My Articles

- [图1] 住一晚便宜的娃乐轩，送两晚洋气的喜来登 (阅读 1169, 评论 22, 点赞 12, 赞赏 25.00)
- [图2] 最好的时光：在美航里程贬值前抢兑换 (阅读 499, 评论 8, 点赞 7, 赞赏 16.00)
- [图3] 希尔顿开放高级会员等级匹配 (阅读 1603, 评论 9, 点赞 6, 赞赏 29.00)
- [图4] 动动手指，拿600或750里程之王英国航空里程 (阅读 253, 评论 1, 点赞 2, 赞赏 0.00)
- [图5] 最好的时光：在美航里程贬值前抢兑换 (阅读 536, 评论 14, 点赞 10, 赞赏 11.00)
Gender of My Subscribers (F: Blue, M: Green)

Geographic Location of My Subscribers (Top Three: Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangdong)

My Public Account “Zhao and Points” on Weibo

http://weibo.com/zyandpoints
References


http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1096963.html. 2001


Hollier, P. The "intangible" benefits of social media. Retrieved from seowizardry:
http://seowizardry.ca/The_Wizards_Blog/the%E2%80%9Cintangible%E2%80%9D-be
nefits-of-social-media/ Internet relay chat. 2009.


through Social Technologies. Retrieved from:


Nugent, J.D. If E-democracy is the Answer, What’s the Question? National Civic Review. 90. 3. (2001): 221-233.


Yang, G.B. The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online.

