

The Cult of Fashion Brands in China and the Application of Microblogging

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Thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the Master's Degree in Communication

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Keywords: Microblogging, Fashion Brands, China, Uses and Gratifications, Content Analysis

Abstract

In China, an increasing number of individuals and companies are adopting microblogging, a popular form of social media, in order to connect and interact with other people, and recent online events indicate the power of microblogging in Chinese society. Holding the belief that microblogging brings out the interactive nature of new media as well as the audiences, many companies are exploring microblogging in order to better communicate with their audiences. However, very little is known about how those brands use microblogging to promote themselves and what the audiences' preferences are on this platform.

Employing uses and gratifications and feminism theories, this study examined how fashion brands use Weibo.com, one of the main microblogging platforms in China, to promote themselves and what the Chinese women, the main audience of both Weibo.com and fashion brands, ask for from fashion brands' tweets. The quantitative content analysis of the tweets of three major fashion brands, namely Burberry, Louis Vuitton, and Bvlgari, shows the general pattern of how microblogging are being deployed. A further investigation was conducted through ethnographic content analysis in order to examine the implicit values conveyed by fashion brand's tweets and the audiences' preferences towards these values.

Results from the analyses revealed that the prevailing topics covered in the fashion brands' tweets included their products, related celebrities, and the brands' events or projects, and fashion brands usually combined several topics in one tweet in order to provide more information to the audiences. Taken a deeper look at the latent message of the tweets, fashion appears to play a positive role in emancipating contemporary Chinese women.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis supervisor, Dr. Rukhsana Ahmed for her constant encouragement, insightful advice, and valuable comments. I could not have completed my thesis without her extensive support. In addition, it is an honor for me to have Dr. Lise Boily, and Dr. Luc Dupont as my committee members. I have benefited greatly from their invaluable suggestions and advice.

I wish to thank my friend Phil Rushworth for helping me proofread my thesis for spelling, grammar, and punctuation. His support and caring helped me get through all the difficulties.

Last but not the least, I would like to thank my parents, Jian Lu and Jianli Wu, who encouraged me to pursue my study and have been offering constant support. To them I dedicate this thesis.

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Chapter One: Introduction

“Fashion is not something that exists in dresses only. Fashion is in the sky, in the street, fashion has to do with ideas, the way we live, what is happening.”

-- Coco Chanel (as cited in Karbo, 2009, p. 221)

This statement about fashion is made by Coco Chanel who is the founder of Chanel, a French house of high fashion that specializes in haute-couture and ready-to-wear clothes, luxury goods, and fashion accessories. Coco Chanel used her entire life to practice this philosophy. She revolutionized fashion by replacing opulent and over-designed clothes and accessories with garments that were functional and flattering to the woman's figure. She was famous for designing female clothes with masculine elements, for example adding blazer and pants to women's closets, broadening color choices such as grey and navy blue to women. Even her personal life is considered as an example of women's liberation. She enjoyed love without getting married throughout her life and fought hard to build her own career. This inspiring thought about what fashion is not only presents her belief about fashion, but also changes concepts of fashion from an outward focus on appearance to an inward focus on holistic life attitude, and it speaks to lots of fashion supporters' heart.

Statement of the problem

The rapid development of media enables fashion to be a popular cultural phenomenon rather than a privilege within a small group of people. New media play an important role in propagating fashion to the mass audience. New media, according to the popular understanding,

are identified with “the use of a computer for distribution and exhibition rather than production” (Manovich, 2001, p. 19). The new media revolution affects almost all stages of communication: from how a sender encodes information and how the message is conveyed all the way to how a receiver decodes the information and even how the feedback works. New media can present information in multiple ways, and new media changed the traditional one-way communication model into a mutual process involving a large amount of interactivity¹ (Shi, 2009). Shi (2009) also mentions that new media greatly improved promptness and mobility of media. Among the new features stated above, interactivity catches people’s attention most as social media become increasingly popular. (Zappavigna, 2012). Social media refer to the wide range of Internet-based and mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchanges, contribute user-created content, or join communities (Dewing & Canada Parliamentary Information and Research Service, 2010). Microblogging, which was originally defined as “text messaging” (Safko & Brake, 2009, p. 263), has evolved into “a social network system where one person can enter text and it is sent out to anyone following that account or anyone who views that account’s page” (White, 2011, p. 98). Microblogging is a status-update service which allows people to share short updates about themselves and to see updates about others (Zappavigna, 2011). But sometimes microblogging works as more than a status-update service. It can also be used as a social networking platform (Dewing & Canada Parliamentary Information and Research Service, 2010). A microblog differs from a traditional blog in that its content is typically smaller in size. It allows users to “exchange small elements of content such as short sentences, individual images, or video links” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011, p. 105).

¹ Interactivity: the ability of users to provide content in response to a source or communication partner (Ha & James, 1998).

Weibo.com is the first web portal in China to introduce the microblogging service. Weibo.com, which is a microblogging product introduced by Sina, has one of the highest customer stickiness among all the microblogging products in China (Credit Suisse, 2012). Customer stickiness, or retention, is an intangible ability to keep visitors coming back over a long period of time, and it is one of the main factors that help to create and maintain the competitiveness and sustainability of an organization (Maciag, 2000). Weibo.com is ranked #32 in the world according to the three-month Alexa (2012) traffic ranking, and it has attained a traffic rank of 6 among users in China where 92% of its audience is located. Weibo.com comprises of over 57% of total microblogging users and 87% of the all microblogging activity, ranking as one of the biggest Page View (PV) website in China (Meihua, 2011). Though Weibo.com is also well known as Chinese Twitter, its ambition is more than just being a microblogging website and the history of its development demonstrates that they are fast becoming a more comprehensive social media service. Weibo.com started as a microblogging site and gradually changed into a hybrid website which adapted concepts of social connection sites like Facebook, online picture pinboards like Pinterest, and video uploading and sharing tools like YouTube. Weibo.com encourages instant sharing by not only using text but also picture, video, and so on (see Appendix A) which are also shown in the tweets so that Weibo users can view the information without click (see Appendix B and Appendix C). Credit Suisse (2012) believes that Weibo users are relatively mature Internet users and they will introduce their friends to join in Weibo, which will turn Weibo.com into a new formation that combines the notion of microblogging and social networking sites. And, the functions of the web go beyond entertainment. The audiences use the site to discuss social issues and even politics which has long been considered taboo in China. Moreover, the power of microblogging by retweeting does

not just remain online, instead, it is connected with people's actions offline (Lee, 2011; Du, 2011; Liu, 2012). The two examples below can well explain the influence of Weibo.com in China.

Many big events have taken place surrounding Weibo.com, but two of them need special emphasis. One is a well-known as Guo Meimei Scandal which started from a 20 year-old girl Guo Meimei using her Weibo account to post some photos of herself. Among the photos, one showed her wearing sunglasses and leaning on the hood of a white Maserati. Others revealed her closetful of Hermès handbags, or her sipping a drink in a business-class cabin on an airline flight. None of it was outrageous by the standards of China's nouveau riche. What ignited a firestorm was the fact that this young girl appeared to hold a senior position at the Red Cross Society of China which is a government organization and the country's largest charity (New York Times, 2011). It was like a hand grenade in the world of Chinese philanthropy. This scandal spread quickly from Weibo.com to the whole online world in China. A great number of net users were furious that China's biggest charity organization might be involved in corruption, and a massive search began in order to find out who this girl was and whether the Red Cross was corrupt. The net users as a group showed their power. They dug out almost every detail about this girl and related persons and organizations, including the internal reports of the organizations which were never released to the public, and all the information was posted online. This scandal brought the corruption in charities in China to the front, and the amount of donation to charities severely decreased in the following months according to Lianhe Zaobao's report (2011). According to a survey conducted by *New Weekly* shortly after the scandal was exposed, 82 % of internet users claimed that they would not donate to China's Red Cross again while another 15 % of internet users said they would not decide until they saw the usage of every donation, only 2% people would continue to donate to the Red Cross (Lee, 2011). What is interesting about this issue is

that the luxury brands that are used as a must-have in Guo's show-off pictures were also under heated discussions by web users. They even listed top 10 of flashy brands, including LV, Chanel, and so on (Rui, 2011). This issue had an impact those brands' images which might not be directly reflected on sales reports but they did affect the reputation among Chinese market (China Daily, 2011).

Another milestone in Weibo.com's history is the campaign against the abduction of children. The trigger of this nationwide campaign was that a university student went back to his village and saw a little boy who looked like the boy in an online missing persons report, and he posted this information online. With the help of net users, the police finally got the boy back to his parents ("Campaign against abduction on Weibo," n.d.). Then, Professor Yu Jianrong of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences initiated the campaign named *Take a Photo, Save a Child* on Weibo.com to encourage people to take pictures of children beggars who may have been trafficked or abducted (Wang, 2011), and many Weibo users retweeted his tweets. It was a fragmented and unprofessional activity at first, but the power of repost took it to a new level. This campaign became the hottest topic across the country at that moment both on and off line (Wang, 2011). Many celebrities retweeted the tweets about this campaign on Weibo.com and exerted their influence among followers to accelerate the progress of this campaign. The heat of the campaign also drew the attention of mainstream media, public security department, and the National People's Congress (NPC) delegates ("Campaign against abduction on Weibo," n.d.). But this campaign did not stop at words. Public pressure helped this campaign evolve into a campaign with real action – the police got abundant information from Weibo users and took action accordingly. In the first 13 days of this campaign, six abducted children were sent back to their parents by the police ("Campaign against abduction on Weibo," n.d.).

In the above, the first case shows that luxury brands are sensitive words in China in this unique period, and they can easily gather the attention of the public, while the second case demonstrates the power of microblogging which reveals that microblogging can be more than just an online talk.

Thus, a lot of enterprises regard microblogging as an attemptable channel to promote themselves. Fashion brands are not an exception: they have set out to explore this virgin area, especially the adventuresome brands like LV, Burberry, and Bvlgari. They use Weibo.com to reach their target audiences and potential audiences so as to build or reinforce the brand image as well as introduce new products. However, whether they reached their goals or not remains unknown. And, how do the audiences respond to the brands' posts about their products or the brands themselves? What can the brands do to improve their promotion on Weibo.com? In order to answer these questions, academic analysis is required. In this thesis, how fashion brands use microblogging to communicate with their audiences will be explored by both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Rationale for the study

The popularity of microblogging can be attributed to its efficiency in giving users what they want (Lee, 2011), which is closely related to uses and gratifications theory. According to uses and gratifications theory, each medium offers a unique blend of characteristics that distinguish its gratifications from other media (Katz, Blumer & Gurevitch, 1974). Early theories of mass communication viewed the mass media as having a uniform, irresistible, and immediate influence on individuals (e.g., hypodermic/bullet theory, agenda setting theory), whom they perceived as easily susceptible to influence and unable to form their own opinion

(McQuail & Windahl, 1993). However, uses and gratifications theory believes that audiences choose the kinds of media and the types of content based on their social and psychological needs (Ruggiero, 2000). Unlike the audiences in early mass media theories who are a homogenous, uncritical, and passive mass, the audiences in uses and gratifications theory are characterized as active, discerning, and motivated in their media use (Katz et al., 1974). The focus of uses and gratifications theory is on what people do with the media rather than the influence or impact of the media on the individual (Katz et al., 1974).

Uses and gratifications theory has a long history of being applied to study television (e.g., Bantz, 1982; Bryant & Zillmann, 1984; Dobos, 1992; Schramm, Lyle & Parker, 1961) and other traditional media (e.g., Armstrong & Rubin, 1989; Dimmick, Sikand & Patterson, 1994). With the rise of new media, some scholars (e.g., Park, Kee & Valenzuela, 2009; LaRose and Eastin, 2004) have started to employ uses and gratifications theory in social media study. LaRose and Eastin (2004) put forth that major uses and gratifications factors for social networking sites users are “socializing,” “entertainment,” “self-status seeking,” and “information” (p. 731). Park et al. (2009) discovered similar results, stating that the most prevalent factors of uses and gratifications in social media are information seeking, entertainment, social needs, and so on.

A key distinguishing feature of new media is interactivity, which describes the ability of users to provide content in response to a source or communication partner (Ha & James, 1998). Hence, users become an important part of and participants of new media communication process. It is necessary to take audiences’ perspective into consideration when conducting research in new media areas (Jenkins, 2002).

The prevalence of social media also affects the fashion industry. Though elitism keeps certain luxury brands from engaging in social media, some brands have started to explore connecting with target markets by social media (Gers, 2009). The adoption of new media makes fashion more accessible for common people (Gers, 2009). The seemingly ubiquitous existence of fashion nowadays brings up the debate about fashion again. Many scholars (Faludi, 1992; Friedan, 1974; Kilbourne, 1999; Scholz, 2010; Wolf, 1990) state that fashion represents women in a diverse and realistic way and it supports strong enterprising and independent women. The rejection of norms is a very important thread in third-wave feminism.² This rejection is clearly seen with sex and gender norms but it is also present in the rejection of standards or rules in sexuality, politics, ethics, language and writing, bodies, minds or consciousness, and desires (Scholz, 2010). As it can also be seen in the fashion world, breaking norms and changing the stereotypes are emphasized every now and then, from color assortment to lifestyle; for example, fashion tells red can go with green or a mom can be more than a housewife. Fashion brands often portray their muses as chic, sexy, independent, confident, knowledgeable, and smart (Rhodes & Zuloago, 2003). However, while some people regard the rise of fashion as offering a place of spiritual and cultural aspirations to modern women, some researchers (Faludi, 1992; Greer, 1971) consider fashion as anti-feminism for it reinforces another stereotype of women.

Despite the seeming relaxation and the new legitimation, there remains a continuing scepticism, even hostility, towards fashion within certain strands of feminism (Bruzzi & Gibson, 2000). Faludi (1992) points out that “in fashion terms, the backlash arguments became: Women’s liberation has denied women the ‘right’ to feminine dressing” (p. 173).

² Third-wave feminism embraces diversity and change, focuses on changes in stereotypes of women and in media portrayal of women (Tong, 2009).

Individuality and identity crises are used as excuses to suppress women's free will in dressing, and the fashion world uses the "dressing-for-success" ideology as a cover to strengthen the importance of feminine dressing only to bring women back in time because a controllable and fragile consumer group guarantees profit (Faludi, 1992). Greer (1971) sets forth that "fired with hope, optimism and ambition, young women study the latest forms of the stereotype, set out in vogue, the stereotype is the Eternal Feminine" (p. 64). She further states that there are stringent limits to the variations on the stereotype, for nothing must interfere with her function as a sex object (Greer, 1971). Besides, McRobbie (1998) outlines the contribution of journalists, editors and stylists who are called the fashion insiders and have huge influence in promoting fashion brands in conventional ways. She blames the "celebratory" style of mainstream fashion journalism for helping to reinforce the "marginalised, trivial image of fashion" which "only serves to keep fashion journalism in the ghetto of femininity, while in almost every other sector of public life femininity and gender issues are increasingly coming to occupy the political centre stage" (McRobbie, 1998, p. 12). To sum up, whether fashion sets women free or constrains them is an intricate debate. The question whether fashion empowers or constrains Chinese women in new media era is investigated in this thesis.

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study is to explore how fashion brands use microblogging to promote themselves. In order to examine this problem, the Weibo accounts of Burberry, Louis Vuitton, and Bvlagri are chosen as the objectives. And the brands' tweets from the day they created the accounts to December, 31, 2012 comprise the whole population. The reason for selecting this timeframe is to obtain tweets as many as possible when considering the feasibility of this study in order to improve the validity of the research result.

Using uses and gratifications theory, this study focuses on the tweets of fashion brands while it also takes audiences' perspectives into consideration. The interactivity of microblogging makes it possible to have a glance of audiences' preference without actually getting in touch with the audiences. The number of followers reveals the popularity of the brand, and the number of retweets reveals the popularity of the tweet (Liu, 2012). Meanwhile, using the lens of feminist theory this study provides a more in-depth knowledge of fashion in China and its effects on Chinese women.

Both quantitative and qualitative content analyses are employed in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of microblogging branding. Quantitative analysis delineates how fashion brands use microblogging to connect with their audiences now, while qualitative approach helps obtain what the audiences really want. In short, it hopes to fill the gap between what the brands are doing and what the audiences need by comparing the quantitative and qualitative results, and this will help inform suggestions to better apply microblogging in fashion brands' marketing.

Overview of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters. Following this introductory chapter, chapter two is devoted to reviewing existing literature on topics that are related to this study. The second chapter is constituted of four parts. The first part gives a general epistemological foundation of this thesis. The second part provides the examination of past studies and researches on uses and gratifications theory and social media. Then the relationship between fashion and feminism is presented in the third part and finally it discusses the historical context and contemporary situation of Chinese women. Chapter three explains the specifics of the research design and

methodology. Chapter four reports the results and findings of the research. Chapter five presents the discussion of the findings and provides recommendations for brands to better use microblogging for branding. Lastly, chapter six discusses the limitations of this study and points out the direction for future research, and concludes the whole thesis.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a general description of the prevalence of microblogging, especially Weibo.com, as well as the cult of fashion in China. Using uses and gratifications theory and feminist theory as frameworks, this study mainly aims at exploring how fashion brands use microblogging to promote themselves while also investigating whether fashion constrains or empowers Chinese women. Lastly, this chapter outlined the rest of the chapters of this thesis. In the next chapter, a thorough literature review of relevant studies will be presented.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This literature review will provide the epistemological groundwork from the post-structural perspective, which helps understand the social and cultural connotation of social media. Then, uses and gratification theory will be presented as the theoretical support to explain the media influence on people in the context of social media prosperity. In order to better understand the relationship between women and fashion feminist theories will be elaborated, and a brief portrait of contemporary Chinese women will be given.

Post-structuralism and Sub-culture

The growing availability of technology, especially the prevalence of computers, mobile devices, and Internet, has increased the communication among different groups and their ability to satisfy each other's niche needs. The computer technologies make it possible to categorize people into ever more carefully defined niches, and the marketers provide customized products or services to each niche according to its own characteristics and preferences (Turow, 2008; Spurgeon, 2007). The change from monolithic and absolutist to individualistic and relativist in societal and cultural levels provokes many theorists to reconsider the existing epistemology that is trying to find the "universal truth." From the late 1960s, some scholars (Deleuze, 1968/1994; Derrida, 1962/1978; Foucault, 1965; Kristeva, 1977) began to expand on basic principles of contemporary intellectual thought, known as post-structuralism which emphasized that elements of culture must be viewed in terms of their relationship to a holistic and overarching system or structure.

Those theorists accepted that the meanings applied to signs were purely cultural and thus, in the final analysis, arbitrary. This arbitrary basis rendered all forms of sign-based

communication unstable and open to potential continuous change (Cairns, 2010). Cairn sums this up as the argument that semiotic meaning-construction, as seen in texts or images, is not only a question of the author or designer, but also of the public that interprets it. Structuralist theories assume that individuals are primarily determined by the society in which they live. The focus of structuralism is on the large-scale features of society such as the economy, political system, or dominant culture, and on how they shape individual and group behaviour. However, post-structuralist perspectives developed as a critique of structuralist approaches that failed to adequately theorise how individuals shape society. Post-structuralist approaches generally abandon the search for universal, original causes, or for any form of “objective reality” or an overriding logic of social change (Annandale & Clarke, 1996). Although post-structuralist theorists focus on human agency and social construction, rather than social determinism, they still admit that it is necessary to situate an issue in its specific cultural and social context to gain the authentic understanding of it. Therefore, there is scope for multiple interpretations of any given sign or combination of signs; given that signs are culturally understood, only a public with a shared cultural and social background could be expected to read messages in the same way. In that sense, understanding culture and subculture is the first step to study a specific issue.

Raymond Williams (1961) states that culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values, not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour. Culture can be simply understood as how we live nature. It is also the shared meanings we make and encounter in our everyday lives. Storey (2010) explains that culture is not something essential, embodied in particular “texts” like commodity or object, it is the practices and processes of making meanings with and from the “texts” we encounter in our everyday lives. Therefore, cultures are made from the production, circulation and consumption

of meanings, and to understand a culture is to interpret the world and to make it meaningful in similar ways. Storey (2010) also emphasizes that a person situated in a specific social context always confronts a “text” in its material existence as a result of particular conditions of production. But in the same way, a “text” is confronted by a person situated in a specific social context, who appropriates a culture, and produces in use the range of possible meanings the “text” can be made to bear – these cannot just be read off from the materiality of a “text,” or from the means or relations of its production (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980). From a Foucauldian perspective, representation always takes place in a discourse, which organises what can and cannot be said about a particular “text”, but this is not to deny that the world exists in all its materiality but to insist that it is made meaningful in discourse (Foucault, 1972 as cited in Storey, 2010, p. 6).

Early theorists used “majority” and “minority” to distinguish subculture from mainstream culture, stating that the majority passively accepted commercially provided styles and meanings, while the minority actively sought a different style and interpreted it in accordance with subversive values. However, Hebdige (1979) argues that a subculture is subversion to normalcy. He believes that subcultures can be perceived as negative due to their nature of criticism of the dominant societal standard. In Hebdige’s 1979 book, *Subculture: the Measuring of Style*, the assumption of subcultural study is that subcultures bring together like-minded individuals who feel neglected by societal standards and allow them to develop a sense of identity. In other words, an important factor for a subculture is forming a negative feeling about the main stream culture, which inevitably leads to the discussion about the collision between subculture and mass culture. However, this viewpoint has been questioned by other researchers. Based on Hebdige’s theory about subculture, Gelder (2007) puts forth that a subculture is a group of people within a culture that differentiates themselves from the larger culture to which they belong. Each of the

subcultures creates its own geography, a set of places or sites through which it gains cohesion and identity (Gelder, 2007), As Gelder (2007) points out,

every subculture – every social group, large or small, which can be considered as in some way subcultural – carries a set of narratives about itself, some of which are generated internally while others, usually more visible and pervasive, are developed and deployed in and by the society around it (p. 2).

While Dick Hebdige (1979) casts modern subcultures in opposition to the banalities of mass cultural forms, Gelder (2007) pits subcultural identity against the conformist pressures of mass society and massification as well as a structural refusal of one of mass society's prevailing symptoms. In other words, subcultures "worlds" and their nonconformity or non-normativity must always be understood in social terms.

Living in this largely diversified world, the members of the new various cultures inevitably have different ways of viewing the world and, thus different ways of reading messages. In this diverse and often conflicting context, it was seen as impossible for authors to totally control the interpretation of their own work. Any signs they employed, no matter how layered and reinforced, were seen as open to alternative interpretations from a public that no longer shared a single, common, cultural background (Cairn, 2010). In this scenario in which individual signs can be interpreted freely, and people are seen ever more as individuals, it follows that the syntagmatic relationships created in semiotic messages could become diverse and more subjective (Cairn, 2010). The universally accepted set of rules or genres are broken into pieces. Although co-existing with standard formats that still tend to predominate today, "what these new strategies and techniques intended to do was shake the public out of its complacency on the one

hand whilst, on the other, create a new form of dialogue which did not seem transparently manipulative or dishonest” (Cairn, 2010, p. 48). Both the unpredictability of message construction and the diversity of nuances through message construction are closely linked to the notion of social media. Thus, it requires detailed study into the niches and subcultures in social media to better explore how social media work on people and how people respond to it.

Social Media and Uses and Gratifications Theory

Social media seem to have become the inevitable trend for the development of media industry. The reason for this is deeply rooted in the character of media institutions. According to McQuail (1987), the media institution is engaged in the production, reproduction and distribution of knowledge in the widest sense of sets of symbols which have meaningful reference to experience in the social world, and media have “a mediating role between objective social reality and personal experience” (p. 52). The nature of media’s mediating role determines that the traditional one-way and top-down communication model cannot last long. The intrinsic requirement connoted by media themselves is to realize an equal, flexible, and two-way communication between message sender and receiver, which was constrained by technology in the past. The leaps and bounds made in communication technology make it possible to bring to the fore a platform where people’s opinion can be expressed and their voice can be heard (Spurgeon, 2007; Chen, 2010; Jenkins, 2002).

Jenkins (2006) names the coexistence of different types of media and its related phenomena as convergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways. Jenkins (2006) argues, “In the world of media

convergence, every important story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms” (p.3). Some scholars (Hu, 2004; Jenkins, 2006; Shao, 2009) describe this convergence as a flow of content across multiple media platforms as a cooperation between multiple media industries leading to migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want. This convergence represents “a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (Jenkins, 2006, p.3). It is time to change the long-standing stereotype of regarding media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, instead, it might be necessary to see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules. This convergence occurs not only “within the brains of individual consumers”, but also “through the consumers’ social interaction with others” (Jenkins, 2006, p.3). Jenkins (2006) concludes as such:

Convergence represents a paradigm shift – a move from medium-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture (p. 243).

This kind of interaction can also be seen as a game between consumers and media professionals, or say, a game between collective intelligence and authority. It is game theory in media field that “conflict and cooperation between intelligent rational decision-makers” (Myerson, 1991, p. 1) become conflict and cooperation between media and their consumers. The term collective intelligence, coined by French cybertheorist Pierre Lévy, well depicts the phenomenon that none of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put

the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills (Jenkins, 2006). It is the combined forces of technology and human nature that make collective intelligence realised. And, this is the foundation and starting point of social media. Zappavigna (2012) argues that the “social web is about using the internet to enact relationships rather than simply share information, although the two functions are clearly interconnected” (p.2). The real value of this new form of online communication hides behind the information people use to bond and maintain the relationships. This “user-generated content” is the centre of social web which marks it as a different incarnation of the internet from web 1.0. Another important property of the social web is how it responds to time. Social web is a real-time web, which means users have almost immediate access to what is being said in their social networks at any given moment. The primary function of social media is sharing experience of the everyday within this real-time paradigm (Zappavigna, 2012).

All those characteristics and uncertainties make “new media” a popular topic and they are considered the future of media industry, while traditional media such as newspaper, TV, and magazine still remain in a significant position. According to Manovich (2001), the principles of new media can be described as numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding. These inherent features enable information to be communicated in a standard and easier way among new media, which give new media their own advantages over legacy media. As Shi (2009) says, new media can present information in multiple ways; new media changed the traditional one-way communication model into a mutual process involving significant amount of interactivity; new media also greatly improved promptness and mobility of media. However, Jenkins (2006) believes old media are not being displaced, rather, their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies. And, history helps us realize that old

media never die, and they do not even necessarily fade away. New technologies might come and go all the time, but “media persist as layers within an ever more complicated information and entertainment stratum” (Jenkins, 2006, p.14). Some scholars (Yu, 2010 & Lu, 2008) have pointed out that traditional media still have some strength over new media, one of which is the depth and width of content. Though new media might be able to give timely information of what is happening, traditional media remain to be the main source of in-depth report and analysis. Moreover, traditional media hold great amounts of resources that new media cannot match, the number of professionals being a major one. The competition reflects the pull and tug of these two media systems: “new ideas and alternative perspectives are more likely to emerge in the digital environment, but the mainstream media will be monitoring those channels, looking for content to co-opt and circulate” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 211). Grassroots media channels depend on the shared frame of reference created by the traditional intermediaries; much of the most successful “viral” content of the Web critiques or spoofs mainstream media. Broadcasting provides the common culture, and the Web offers more localized channels for responding to that culture (Jenkins, 2006). Therefore, traditional media will not die in the near future; rather, new media and traditional media will fight against each other as well as work with each other, and the audience will benefit from it. Social media open up new ways for collaboration and discussion. Their persistence, replicability, and accessibility help to shape the dynamics of social interaction online (Zappavigna, 2012).

Table 1: Pros and cons of social media

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase communication and interaction between brand and audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Credibility, liability and authenticity problems

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assists in building customer relationships and brand loyalty. • Reach a wider range of potential audience with a relatively lower cost comparing to traditional media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethical concerns, such as privacy issue and moral panic • Limited control over social media marketing campaign • Difficulty in measuring return on investment
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However, despite all the advantages that social media offer, some disadvantages also require special attention when applying social media to branding and marketing (see table 1). The table above addresses some of the concerns that are much-discussed when it comes to the application of social media.

The online world is often called virtual world, which to some extent reflects the credibility and authenticity concerns that exist among internet users. Many scholars have studied this notion of e-credibility. Page (2012) discusses the ethical implications of narratorial authenticity, stating that “the ambiguities of online representation lead us to a heightened awareness of how authenticity is played out across a spectrum from the apparently genuine to entirely fictional constructions” (p. 165). She takes the phenomenon of Facebook “rape” as an example and finally concludes that the effects of inauthenticity do not just stay online but have consequences on the “identities and interactions that people engage in their offline contexts” (p. 185). Haas and Wearden (2003), on the other hand, approach the online credibility problem from three factors that contribute to e-credibility problems, namely technological, social, and

psychological factors. Agreeing with Burbules's (2001) general point that "Web paradoxes" (p. 441) are not about information, but about ethics, they put forth that "e-credibility may be as much about experience as it is about information" (Haas & Wearden, 2003, p. 183).

Another prolonged discussion regarding social media marketing is about the effect control. The prevailing opinion (Gilpin, 2010; Hennig-Thurau, Maltohouse, Friege, Gensler, Lobschat, Rangaswamy & Skiera, 2010; Kietzmann, 2011) suggests that in the chaotic social media environment much meaningless information is generated that perturbs the relationship between the audience and the companies, and only a few negative or unintentionally negative comments can destroy the company's reputation.

As for Weibo.com, the limitations gradually emerge alongside its development. The limit of 140 words confines the depth of information (Wu, 2011). Meanwhile, when the number of fans becomes the criterion of evaluating the value of an account, posting information that attracts others outweighs the quality of the message itself (Wu, 2011). Therefore, repetition of information is unavoidable.

However, the advantages of social media appear to outweigh the disadvantages, and these disadvantages are not exclusive to social media. Many of the problems, such as credibility, less of control over the audience, difficulty in measuring ROI exist in traditional media communication as well. It is the new heterogeneous social media environment that zooms in on these problems. The prevalence of social media proves that social media achieve the users' gratification. Therefore, the disadvantages of social media should not be the obstruction of social media adoption, instead, they should encourage the hasty discovery of solutions and methods to

minimize these disadvantages and thus further increasing the benefit. This thesis focuses on the strengths of social media and takes the limitations into consideration when offering suggestions.

Uses and gratification theory provides a useful framework for this study. Uses and gratifications theory (U&G) is an approach that can be traced back to the early 1940's when scholars wanted to know why listeners listened to certain music on the radio or soap operas (Katz, Blumler et al. 1974). Originally seen as an alternative method to media effects and not a part of media effects research (McCleod & Becker, 1974), it was developed to study the gratifications that attracted and held audiences to the kinds of media and the types of content that satisfied their social and psychological needs (Ruggiero, 2000). In 1972, McQuail, Blumler, and Brown put forward the "media person interactions" model to classify media gratifications into four categories: 1) diversion: escape from routines or problems; 2) personal relationship: substituting the media for companionship; 3) personal identity: seeking media to reinforce an individual's values; 4) surveillance: seeking information to help an individual accomplish something. Subsequently, the typologies of consumer gratifications was developed into 5 categories taken from the social and psychological functions by Katz, Gurevitch and Haas (1973). They believe that cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative, and tension release are important in deciding consumers' media use. The importance of U&G is that it is part of a broader trend which is more concerned with what people do with media allowing for a variety of responses and interpretations, rather than being concerned with what media do to people (Rubin, 1993). Basically, it focuses on the explanations for audience members' motivations and associated behaviors. Psychologist Herta Herzog (1944) coined the term gratifications to depict the specific dimensions of usage satisfaction of radio audiences. Following Herzog's study, mass communication theorists applied the U&G perspective in the context of various mass media such

as television and electronic bulletins. For example, Rubin (1994) found that certain kinds of television programs have been shown to be related to various human needs, including information acquisition, escape, emotional release, companionship, reality exploration, and value reinforcement. The U&G research has been quite fruitful in understanding consumers' motivations and concerns for using various media such as radio, TV, and electronic bulletins (Eighmey & McCord 1998). A basic assumption of U&G theory is that users are actively involved in media usage and interact highly with the communication media, as Robin (1993) puts it those that explore uses and gratifications theory believe that media audiences are variably active communicators. In electronic age, information receivers proactively search for the kind of media that will not only meet a given need but enhance knowledge, social interactions and diversion (Karz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). Since the interactive nature of the Web requires high consumer involvement, the application of uses and gratification theory to improve our understanding of e-consumer behavior seems legitimate (Eighmey & McCord, 1998; Korgaonkar & Wolin, 1999). Therefore, this theory especially fits for social media study. The blossom of social media well proves that these new tools can satisfy people's needs to entertain, socialize, seek information and present themselves. This positive interaction between users and media help accelerate the evolution of media and their communication patterns.

It is being said that the emergence of new media enables the audience to be an active part of the broadcasting process instead of simply being a receiver (Flew, 2002). The technology of new media makes it possible for an individual to be a medium, which is also known as "We Media". The use of blog, Twitter, YouTube, or MSN helps We Media to be a widespread phenomenon. The content on We Media is more entertaining and closer to people's daily life because senders are also receivers in this unique scenario and they tend to share and spread the

information and value that they themselves agree on (Zhou, 2011). We Media is a way for us to begin to understand how ordinary citizens, empowered by digital technologies that connect knowledge throughout the globe, are contributing to and participating in their own truths, their own kind of news (Bowman & Willis, 2003). The new media, especially social media, do challenge the traditional model of communication which brings changes not only to the interaction between media and audiences but also the interaction or competition among media. However, the pattern of social media communication remains uncertain and thus requires more academic study.

Feminism and Fashion

Women have been identified as “the other race” viewed as inferior to men for a long time. In The Bible, the story of Adam’s rib explains how woman is created. Divided from man, made of that very thing which is missing in him, the Biblical woman will be wife, daughter, or sister, or all those things at once, while she rarely has a name. From a Freudian perspective, the inferiority of women is biological and comes from women themselves (Kristeva, 1977). Freud used penis envy theory to elaborate the sexual difference, and according to him this innate difference makes women wish they were men which also predefines women’s identity. However, from the nineteenth century, women have gradually waken up from the fake identity that was imposed on them by the patriarchal society. First-wave feminism was focused on gaining political power for women, particularly the suffrage, while second-wave feminism primarily concentrated on legal and social equality for women, such as discrimination. From the late twentieth century, some feminists began to explore the issues overlooked by second-wave feminism, which is known as third-wave feminism. Third-wave feminism is largely concerned with perceived failures of the second-wave and the backlash against initiatives and movements

created by the second wave (LeGates, 1996). Unlike the early feminists who tried to release women from Victorian culture which did not permit women to accept or gratify their basic human needs, the successors after 1960s are more enthusiastic in exploring the identity crisis that modern women are facing. Nevertheless, the identity problem of women has not been solved yet. It is still under heated discussion in academia.

The search for identity is not new, instead, there have been identity crises in almost every generation, but it is for man. The identity crises for man exist at all the crucial turning points in human history, and the search for identity of the young man has always been one of the major themes in America (Friedan, 1974). Friedan (1974) points out that the identity crisis in women is ignored because in terms of the old conventions and the new feminine mystique “women are not expected to grow up to find out who they are, to choose their human identity” (p. 71). However, the central problem for women is indeed a problem of identity, as stated by Friedan (1974). Women are suffering because the culture “does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfill their potentialities as human beings, a need which is not solely defined by their sexual role” (Friedan, 1974, p. 69). She identifies the lack of private image as the heart of women’s problems. The identity crisis women are facing leads them to rely on the hyper-beautified and hyper-sexualized female enigmas that mass media perpetuate. Friedan (1974) argued further, “Public images that defy reason and have very little to do with women themselves have had the power to shape too much of their lives” (p.68). Such belief provokes the debate about the function of fashion in women’s life – whether it empowers women or the contrary.

Some scholars (Paglia, 1992; Steele, 1996) deem that fashion helps women find pleasure in their bodies and in doing so reclaim their social status as the more powerful gender in their

culture. Such a claim is supported by Angelica Cheung (2011), Editor-in-Chief of Chinese *Vogue*, who believes that fashion presented in individual woman as garments can be seen as a language that they use to express their identity of themselves and their thoughts, and the meaning can be conveyed by clothing or accessories. In other words, clothing as a presentation of fashion can create or even enhance a particular meaning which shows the connection with identity. Steele (1996, 1997 & 2001) approaches this claim by examining the details of clothing. In many of her books (Steele, 1996, 1997 & 2001), she uses lots of details, such as specific features of clothes, selective fashion collections and so on, to illustrate that fashion is a world of diversity and freedom. As for those elements which are seen as the evidence that the ultimate goal of fashion is to constrain women, Steele (1996) attributes them to fetishism because they are not in the mainstream, and this only proves the inclusivity of fashion. However, Steele fails to see the bigger picture of fashion and the profound meaning conveyed in those exterior representations.

Williams & Germov (1999) denounce the notion that fashion liberates women by questioning the existence of fashion. They argue that fashion lay too much pressure on modern women to conform to an ideal image which clearly has a structural basis. And, this structural basis is perpetuated by various social institutions and material interests such as the media, fashion, and cosmetics industries. Williams & Germov (1999) also maintain that “these structural factors have clear antecedents in the historical development of patriarchy, particularly as represented in various forms of social regulation of the female body” (p. 207). This statement touches on the roots of fashion, and it already includes media and fashion as a part of the patriarchal institutions. Wolf (1991) also blames the fashion industry and its supporting structures for their “contribution” to gender inequality. To sum up, Williams & Germov (1999) and Wolf (1991) claim that fashion is designed to constraint women in order to keep the

traditional patriarchal system, but in a covert way. This viewpoint is very commonly shared by those (Faludi, 1992; Greer, 1971; McRobbie, 1998) who critique fashion.

Fashion became a popular topic in women's study only recently, and it received a great amount of attention because the feminist movements hit a bottleneck. In the book *Backlash: The undeclared war against American women* (1992), Faludi identifies some of the key arguments in feminist theory supported by abundant examples of a widespread backlash against women. The investigation and evaluation of interpretations of fashion are presented from various approaches. She points out that the backlash has pervaded popular culture and is especially overt in the fashion industry. Faludi(1992) approaches the problem through a popular cultural perspective, stating that media and advertisers had settled on a line that served to neutralize and commercialize feminism at the same time. The mass media present women in a way that they seem now no longer seeking new rights – just new lifestyles; women want self-gratification, not self-determination – the sort of fulfillment best serviced at a shopping mall (Faludi, 1992). She (1992) maintains that examining and acknowledging gender differences can open an enlightening discourse on power relations, but more often than not it is used to justify the status quo which inevitably leads to justifying male cultural superiority. As argued by Friedan (1974):

When a culture has erected barrier after barrier against women as separate selves; when a culture has erected legal, political, social, economic and educational barriers to women's own acceptance of maturity – even after most of those barriers are down it is still easier for a women to seek the sanctuary of the home. It is easier to live through her husband and children than to make a road of her own in the world...Freedom is a frightening thing. It is frightening to grow up finally and be free of passive dependence. Why should a woman bother to be

anything more than a wife and mother if all the forces of her culture tell her she doesn't have to, will be better off not to, grow up? (p. 195)

Besides studying how social institutions constrain women, Faludi also examined the consumers. She (1992) maintains that the fashion industry imposes specific designs, ideas, and codes of dress on women, portraying them as a submissive consumer group to the so-called "fashion elites." Exploring the issue between women and fashion by a hegemonic approach, Faludi believes that the fashion world also operates in a hierarchical way that designers dictate customers' need. The whole fashion industry markets their products as self-image enhancers for women and as strategies for expanding women's opportunities, both in career and personal life. In fashion terms, the backlash argument is that women's liberation has denied women the "right" to feminine dressing and those "over" tailored look hurts women's femininity psychologically (Faludi, 1992). It is said that the business suite cause women's identity crisis.

Faludi (1992) argues that the fashion industry promoted the 'dressed for success' code when feminist movements sent women out to the job market; the same fashion industry propagates feminine attire to save women from dressing like men and regain their femininity after a severe decrease in professional suites sales – personal insecurity is the great motivator to shop and profit is all the industry cares about. And, after the "dress for success" code lost its magic on modern women, fashion industry brings a new topic to the central stage – turning back the clock on women's body. Reversing the aging process is an ancient and famously doomed quest, and it is regarded as a vital part of staying feminine. The fashion industry calls for a "return to femininity" as if it were a revival of natural womanhood – a flowering of all those innate female qualities supposedly suppressed in the feminist waves (Faludi, 1992). However, the "feminine" traits the industry celebrated most were grossly unnatural, and achieved with

increasingly harsh, unhealthy, and punitive measures. The “real women” image set by the fashion industry “aggravates women’s low self-esteem and high anxiety about a feminine appearance” which has always served the industry well (Faludi, 1992, p. 202). The “feminine appearance” problem may seem the “most superficial of the cultural institutions participating in the backlash, but its impact on women was, in many respects, the most intimately destructive – to both female bodies and minds” (Faludi, 1992, p. 203).

Williams & Germov (1999) also share a similar point when they explore how women deal with the thin ideal. They wonder why so few women resist the thin ideal, making it so pervasive. They believe that women are not conceived of as passive recipients of the dominant ideal discourse, but rather ‘it is women themselves who practise those disciplines on and against their own bodies... this self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy... a woman becomes a body designed to please or excite’ (p. 207). Orbach (1987) explores the current social requirements for women’s pursuit of the thin ideal. When thinness is considered as a symbol of self-control and self-negation which is defined as central attributes of desirable femininity, fat on the other hand ultimately becomes a symbol of the reprehensible woman. Neglecting to exercise the perpetual self-control and maintaining the ideally feminine, slim body, implies that they do not care about men’s approval and are thereby being socially rebellious when women are expected to be decorative for men’s judgement and approval (Orbach, 1987). Wolf (1990) pinpoints that the obsession with women’s thinness is not really about beauty; it is about their willingness to allow others, particularly men, to tell them what they can and cannot have.

The fashion industry reinforces the representation of women’s problems as purely personal ills, unrelated to social pressures and curable only to the degree that the individual women succeeded in fitting the “universal standard” (Faludi, 1992). It can be achieved in many

ways, including physically changing herself, purchasing latest designer's cloths, and so on.

Faludi (1992) maintains that "the beautiful backlash woman is controlled in both senses of the word, her physique has been domesticated, her appearance tamed and manicured as the grounds of a gentleman's estate" (p. 204).

Faludi believes that fashion plays an important role in popular culture that constrains modern women in many aspects. She uses a number of examples to depict a market that is made up of too-powerful designers and obedient consumers. She lays emphasis on a trickle-down model that fashion is passed from upper class to lower class, while neglects bottom-up impact that has huge influence on today's fashion world. It is understandable considering the context at that time when traditional media, which are more of one-way communication, remain the main channel to bring fashion to the public.

Friedan (1974) suggests women to escape this trap by exercising their human freedom and capture their sense of self, which mean women must refuse to be nameless, depersonalized, manipulated, and live their own lives according to a self-chosen purpose. Unfortunately, Friedan did not indicate how to exercise women's human freedom and capture their sense of self in today's scenario that what discussed above has been blended in people's daily life and become ubiquitous.

So, the question here is whether it is still true that consumers play a submissive role in fashion world in the ever-changing times? Or, is the role of the consumer changing because of the new communication technology? Do social media help women become involved in the rule setting processes of fashion, instead of being passive receivers? One thing that should be noted is

that most studies about women are based on western cultures, so how about Chinese women, with different cultural background and different history?

Chinese Women

To better understand Chinese women and their contemporary situation, it is essential to address the opposing concepts of family that historically coexisted – matriarchy and patriarchy. The coexistence of matriarchy and patriarchy gave rise to the misconception that Chinese women might enjoy a relatively higher status compared to women of other cultures.

Different than the western story of creation from the outset, it is a female character, Queen Goddess Nvva, who creates man in Chinese legend instead of the male character, God, who creates man in the west (Kristeva, 1977). It is worth noting that the Queen Goddess is not attributed with the creation of the universe, a role reserved for a Chinese God. Many heroines such as Mu Guiying or Hua Mulan are remembered by generations for their eminent performance in battle. But it does not mean that Chinese women are entitled more freedom because all the honors they have received are based on the premise that they are a submissive daughter, a virtuous wife and a loving mother in the first place. Those women's successes are unexpected outcomes of compelling choices instead of their own wills: Mu Guiying comes forward because her husband is missing and no other brothers can fulfill the emperor's order (Mei, 2011); Mulan joins the army for her father because she is a filial daughter who does not want her aged father to suffer (Su, 2012). And, the ends of the stories are similar – the women return to their original roles of good daughter, wife, and mother. The compliment only goes to those who are an impeccable mother, wife, or daughter first, and are forced by circumstance to sacrifice their proper submissive position, preserving the family's reputation. Above all, those

achievements only represent a few peak moments in their life instead of normalcy. Women's own wills are overlooked in those well-known stories, and this is the pattern that can be applied to almost all the honored women in Chinese history (Li, 1997). Despite the veneration of women throughout Chinese history, it is the patriarchal order that truly underpins the Chinese social and cultural system, and women are only venerated when they fully fit in this institution (Kristeva, 1977). Therefore, only fulfilling the feminine role the society imposes on her as a good daughter, wife and mother is not enough for Chinese women. The institutions require her to be ready to sacrifice herself for her father, husband, and son and to serve the country just as how men are required to. This paradoxical dichotomy adds to the already high demands on Chinese women and leave Chinese women under double pressure and confused which creates the perfect excuse for men to blame the failures in their world on women, an ancient tradition in China, which still exists today (Li, 1997).

Influenced by the western feminist movements, China also experienced three waves of feminism from the nineteenth century to date. First-wave feminism happened in late Qing period and called for women's liberation from traditional roles and Neo-Confucian gender segregation, and the second and third-wave feminism, which re-examines women's roles during the communist revolution and other reform movements, campaigns for more detailed women's rights by questioning whether women's equality has been fully achieved, such as asking for real equality instead of sameness or women's equality in sex (Barlow, 2004; Croll, 1978; Meng, 1993).

In the Chinese bourgeois revolution in the beginning of the century, elements of national liberation, socialist ideology, and the emancipation of women were indissolubly linked because to combat feudalism is first of all to combat the Confucian family and morality (Kristeva, 1977).

Later on, Chinese Communist Party regards the liberation of women as an important part of its revolution, and greatly encourages and supports women to fight against traditional family constraint and to be independent. Mao asserts that “the pressures of family and society, the old Confucian morality, and various anachronistic social customs are diametrically opposed to individual freedom and the right of women to decide their own fate” (Kristeva, 1977, p. 109). Although to be a working woman became an unstoppable trend in China afterwards, there is one important issue in the ideological area that has not been fully addressed by prior women’s emancipation movements – individualism. Those liberation movements emancipated women from shackles of family and gave women the right to be educated and to work, but what women themselves really want is neglected. The absence of individual free will from all three Chinese feminist movements stems from the very origin of the movements: the fight against feudalism sought the break of patriarchal system; the goals of the communist revolutions were presented on every societal level. The well-being of women was never on the central stage in any of the Chinese feminist movements, on the contrary, it is an afterthought that happens to serve the main theme (Lin, 2005). The lack of a specific movement with clear goals that called for real respect for women as individuals is at the root of every problem that appears in every detail of women’s life. And, it still leaves women in the disadvantaged position that they have been in for thousands of years. The only change for women through these movements would be that the restriction on women transferred from overt to covert. Kristeva (1977) concludes this phenomenon as such:

This avoidance of individualism – ‘wretched consciousness’ – may be, a voluntarist, if not dogmatic, position. Or does it derive rather from Chinese socio-symbolic structure where precocious socialization, particularities or communication and an intimate connection between relationships of production

and those of reproduction may permit a considerable number of people to go beyond humanism, beyond individualism, beyond idealism (p. 111)?

Chinese women came into contact with the concept of fashion, which is accepted throughout the world nowadays, after the government carried out the reform and opening-up policies³ of 1976. Before then, the only “fashion” on the Chinese mainland was the military uniform. Young or old, man or woman, everyone wanted a uniform which ensured that they could receive admiration from others. Fashion is often considered ideological. It is a part of the process in which social groups establish, sustain, and reproduce positions of power, relations of dominance, and subservience (Barnard, 1996). However, it is also materialistic especially when luxury brands are involved. The government of The People’s Republic of China (PRC) changed a longstanding Chinese hierarchy while the reform and opening-up policies brought along the upstarts and new nobility who desperately need something to demonstrate their status, just as all cultures take great care to mark different social worth or statuses clearly (Barnard, 1996). Fashion may reflect, that is, the sort of economic organization that one lives in, as well as one’s status within that economy (Bruzzi & Gibson, 2000). Roach and Eicher (1979) point out that “adorning oneself can reflect connections with the system of production characteristic of the particular economy within which one lives” (p. 13). And, once the classes below the leisure classes had started to wear what the leisure classes were wearing, they had to find something new to redefine their differences (Veblen, 1959). Similarly, Simmel (1971) argues that “the real seat of fashion is found among the upper class” (p. 324). Hence, the fashion and luxury goods significantly satisfy the rich and elites. In addition, the flourishing economy in China greatly

³ The Chinese reform and opening-up policies, which were the combination of socialism and capitalism, lay emphasis on economy (Grivoyannis, 2012; Lin, 2012 & Gong, 2012). The policies were based on elements of a free-market economy, foreign investment, and export-oriented growth (Grivoyannis, 2012).

changed Chinese consumption concepts, turning the Chinese consumers from conservative and passive into progressive and active. A celebration of life unfolding at a breathtaking pace -- that is China today. After decades of doing without, the floodgates are opening and there is an urgent dash to make up for lost time with newfound wealth (Chadha & Husband, 2006). Yang (2009) points out that Chinese fashion industry is not mature yet, and unlike trying to brand themselves through various events and charities in western countries, luxury brands mostly focus on promoting their products to Chinese consumers. Their financial strengths allow them to pre-set everything and their powerful media campaigns gradually mold Chinese consumers into the image they set (Yang, 2009). But recently with the propagating of women liberation notions by fashion media, some Chinese women claim that being able to pursue fashion and satisfy themselves with luxury good indicates that they are independent, both economically and mentally. This raises the query, does fashion mark the liberation of women or is it a well-decorated trap?

There are very few studies analyzing the role of microblogging in boosting Chinese Fashion industry in the context of its contemporary situation. As such, this thesis will be a good exploration in this area. Feminism would be an important part in the thesis because women are vital audiences for both fashion brands and Weibo.com (Chadha & Husband, 2006; Sina IT, 2011). Women comprise a significant portion of Chinese fashion brand consumers whether they are celebrities, tai-tais (literally means “wife” in Chinese, but locals use it to refer to the rich ladies with seemingly bottomless bank account at their disposal), mistresses, corporate climbers, office ladies, or trendy teens (Chadha & Husband, 2006). Moreover, Chinese women are documented as being more active online than are men. It is reported that 65% of active users of Weibo.com are women and they are more likely to disseminate events and products (Credit

Suisse, 2012). Hence, it will be useful to analyze this topic using a feminist lens. Meanwhile, considering the communication characteristics, process, and influence of microblogging, uses and gratifications theory will provide a useful framework for this study.

Research Questions

It has been summarized above that in the study of western feminism some scholars (Friedan, 1974; Kilbourne, 1999; Scholz, 2010; Wolf, 1990) state that fashion brings emancipation for women, while others (Faludi, 1992; Greer, 1971) believe that fashion confines women to another stereotype and the so-called emancipation is just a mirage. A similar debate exists in China. Considering that there are few feminist studies regarding fashion and social media in China, the following research questions have been posed:

RQ 1: Does fashion appear to emancipate Chinese women or constrain Chinese women within a specific image created by the industry?

RQ 2: How do fashion brands use microblogging to promote themselves?

Chapter Summary

This literature review has presented the epistemological foundation for this study from the post-structural perspective which emphasized that elements of culture must be viewed in terms of their relationship to a holistic and overarching system or structure. Then, an in-depth examination of social media and uses and gratifications theory explained that the popularity of social media is due to its ability to satisfy the audience's needs for communication. Moreover, this chapter delved into the discussion about women and fashion, and narrowed down the problem to women's identity which is particularly true for Chinese women. It is pertinent to

review Chinese women's identity problems from both historical and contemporary perspectives in order to find out whether fashion emancipates or indentures Chinese women.

The following chapter will discuss the research design in details, including justifications of research method selection, sampling technique, data collection process, and coding procedure.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Research Design

This chapter focuses on the methodological selection made for this study of the fashion brands' adoption of Weibo.com in China. Both quantitative and qualitative content analysis are employed in order to explore how fashion brands use microblogging to promote themselves as well as to gain a more in-depth knowledge of whether fashion empowers or constrains Chinese women. The justification of the choice of research method will be elaborated and the research design will be presented step-by-step, starting from sampling methods to coding procedure.

Research Method

Content analysis is chosen as the research method because the focus of this study is Weibo.com which is a microblogging platform. Though Weibo.com has other features in order to improve user experience, for instant attaching pictures and videos to tweets, Weibo.com is primarily known as a microblogging tool and its distinctive characteristic is the limited 140 words text message. Content analysis is known as a key method for the analysis of messages (Berger, 2011). According to Krippendorff (2004), content analysis is used as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use. Thus, any pictures, videos, or emoticons are not in the realm of this study. The investigation for this study only concentrates on the text message.

According to Berelson (1954), content analysis is “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (p. 18). However, Selltitz et al. (1959) state that concerns over quantification in content analysis tends to emphasize “the procedures of analysis,” rather than the “character of the data available” (p.336). Other proponents (Hansen et al.,1998; Smiths, 1975, Wright, 1986) of content analysis suggest to

use both quantitative and qualitative analysis. And, Wright (1986) gives a definition of content analysis in his book *Mass communication: A sociological perspective*:

Content analysis is a research technique for the systematic classification and description of communication content according to certain usually predetermined categories. It may involve quantitative or qualitative, or both. (p. 125)

In content analysis, researchers examine artifacts of social communication. Holsti (1968) maintains that content analysis is “any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages” (p. 608). Content analysis is regarded as a “careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings” (Berg & Latin, 2008; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Neuendorf, 2002 as cited in Berg, 2009).

Berger (2011) maintains that “one of the main advantages of content analysis is that it is unobtrusive” (p. 213). Unlike other research methods, for instance, interview, the researcher does not intrude on what is being studied and thus does not affect the outcome of the research. In addition, content analysis enables the researcher to deal with “current events, topic of present-day interest”, and content analysis uses material that is “relatively easy to obtain and work with” (Berger, 2011, p. 213).

1. Quantitative Content Analysis

In order to answer the research question, whether fashion constrains or empowers Chinese women, this study uses quantitative content analysis to help understand the nature of the use of Weibo.com by fashion brands. Berelson (1966) puts forth that originating in positivistic assumptions about objectivity, quantitative content analysis provides a way of obtaining data to

measure the frequency and variety of messages, and that it has been used to relate messages to the source's intent. Quantitative content analysis has been used as a method to determine the objective content of messages of written and electronic documents by collecting quantitative data about predefined and usually precoded categories or variables (McCormack, 1982). Starosta summarizes (1984) that:

Content analysis translates frequency of occurrence of certain symbols into summary judgments and comparisons of content of the discourse... whatever "means" will presumably take up space and/or time; hence, the greater that space and/or time, the greater the meaning's significance (p.185).

Therefore, using quantitative content analysis to translate the frequency of occurrence of predetermined symbols will expose a pattern of how fashion brands use Weibo.com. The interpretation of the statistics will show the key values that the brands are trying to deliver to their followers, which will ultimately answer the research question whether fashion constrains or empowers Chinese women in the contemporary Chinese context.

2. Ethnographic Content Analysis

The literature review revealed that there was limited understanding of how fashion brands use microblogging to reinforce branding and gain insight into audience reactions and attitudes. The qualitative approach is more suitable for shedding light in this regard considering that reducing text into numbers, as prescribed with the quantitative techniques, is often criticized for missing syntactical and semantic information embedded in the text (Weber, 1990). Hunt (1991) maintains that qualitative methods are primarily concerned with in-depth study of human phenomena in order to understand their nature and the meanings they have for the individuals

involved. Qualitative content analysis has been defined as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p. 1278), and “an approach of empirical, methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytic rules and step by step models, without rash quantification” (Mayring, 2000, p.5). These definitions of qualitative content analysis illustrate that qualitative content analysis presents an integrated view of data and their specific contexts.

Thus, ethnographic content analysis was chosen to gain a deeper understanding of how fashion brands use microblogging to communicate with their audiences, while quantitative content analysis provides us an outline of the manifest components and patterns of fashion brands' tweets. In general, ethnography refers to the description of people and their culture (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979). Ethnographic content analysis emphasizes the importance of situating people in their culture and describing humans engaging in meaningful behaviors (Altheide, 1987). The main purpose of ethnographic content analysis is to capture definitions, meanings, processes and types which can be listed numerically and interpreted and analyzed qualitatively (Altheide, 1987). The distinctive characteristic of ethnographic content analysis is “the reflexive and highly interactive nature of the investigator, concepts, data collection and analysis” (Altheide, 1996, p. 16). One of the prominent benefits of ethnographic content analysis is that though the research is guided by categories, other concepts are expected to emerge throughout the research process, including an orientation towards constant discovery and constant comparison of relevant situations, settings, meanings and contextual nuances (Altheide, 1987). Altheide (1987) also maintains that ethnographic content analysis is oriented toward concept development, data collection and emergent data analysis. As

mentioned above, ethnographic content analysis relies on the belief that the researcher should be immersed within the examined culture, and that the perspective that is offered is a result of cultural experiences. This methodological emphasis leads to a comprehensive result of the study unlike the quantitative approach which focuses on data and cuts the link between data and its context. But still, ethnographic content analysis leaves room to include quantitative data, which serves to complement the central narrative elements to the research and analysis (Labre & Walsh-Childers, 2003). Ethnographic content analysis combines the key values of a systematic, analytical approach with openness and flexibility (Altheide, 1996, p. 17). In ethnographic content analysis, data are often coded conceptually so that one item may be relevant for several purposes. Therefore, while items and topics can still be counted and put in emergent categories, ethnographic content analysis also provides good descriptive information (Altheide, 1987).

Most of the audience studies and theories pertinent to feminism and fashion are from western perspectives while the focus of this study is Chinese women who have their own distinctive historical and cultural background. In this case, the ethnographic lens is a necessity to obtain an appropriate understanding of the content.

Sampling

Weibo.com is the focus of this study considering that it is the first portal website to provide a microblogging product in China and that it comprises over 57% of total Chinese microblogging users and 87% of the all microblogging activity in China, according to Meihua.com (2011), a Chinese website specialized in providing independent information and data on media industry and market. Many fashion brands (e.g., Chanel, Prada, LV, Versace, Bvlgari, Burberry, and so on) have started their exploration of how to use microblogging to assist

them in communicating with audiences more efficiently. Though traditional media (e.g., magazines, television commercials) remain the main channel, some vanguards have set out to explore the microblogging area. In this study, three brands were selected. The criteria included: 1) the brands must be luxury brands carrying women's fashion; 2) the brands must be popular in China and worldwide and have entered Chinese market; 3) the brands must be active users of Weibo.com.

Based on the criteria listed above, Burberry, Bvlgari, and Louis Vuitton (LV) were chosen for examinations. This selection is based on three factors. First, Burberry, LV, and Bvlgari all carry women's fashion, though Bvlgari is a jewelry brand. Second, all of the three brands are well-known fashion and luxury brands which are very popular among Chinese consumers. Burberry, LV, and Bvlgari are listed as the most popular word luxury brands in China, according to a ranking list by World Brand Organization and US-China Economic Trade and Investment General Chamber of Commerce (2010). A similar result is shown in a report called *Prestige 100: China* by L2 Think Tank (2011). Moreover, LV and Burberry are considered one of the top 15 luxury fashion brands (Forbes, 2011), and Bvlgari is listed as one of the top jewelry brands (Forbes, 2007). The most important reason for choosing these three brands is that they are exploring the use of Weibo.com to promote their brands more than other brands. As seen in Table 2, this eagerness is reflected by the large number of posts as compared with other brands.

Table 2: The Number of Tweets of Major Fashion Brands

Brand	Tweets (by the end of 2012)
Burberry	1619

LV	462
Bvlgari	515
Versace	420
Dior	400
Ferragamo	398
Chanel	277
Prada	41

Both quantitative and qualitative content analysis of Burberry, LV and Bvlgari's tweets, from their first tweet on Weibo.com to the last tweet on Dec, 31, 2012 were conducted. The sample size is around 2500. According to Berger (2011), the sample size for quantitative analysis should be as big as possible in order to improve the liability, but it is also necessary to consider the possibility of the study. This study is meant to look at all the tweets by these three brands. However, considering the time frame of this study and that the brands' accounts still tweet continuously, this study focuses on the brands' tweets from the beginning to the end of 2012 so that the researcher can not only collect sufficient data for the study but also have enough time to process and analyze data. Simply speaking, the reason for selecting this timeframe is to obtain tweets, as many as possible, considering the feasibility of this study in order to improve the validity of the research result.

In order to produce a reliable and valid sample from the population size for quantitative analysis, a population ranging from 1,000 to 10,000 required a sample of 10% (Neuman, 2011). Therefore, 10% of a population of 2500 equals a sample size of around 250.

A systematic random method was applied to sampling. Random sampling gives every unit in the population an equal and known probability of being selected because each is drawn from the population independently of the others (Budd, Thorp & Donohew, 1967). In this sense, random does not mean haphazard, nor does it mean scooping up those objects that can be accessed most conveniently. Randomness refers to chance occurrence, and “nothing but pure chance must determine the drawing of units of the universe into the sample” (Budd, Thorp & Donohew, 1967, p. 17). Neuman(2011) states that “random samples yield samples most likely to truly represent the entire population” (p. 312). For the sampling to be systematic an interval was determined based on the division of the population by the sample size ($2500/250$) which equals a sampling interval of 10. In order to collect the sample randomly, a number was chosen without method as the random start (Neuman, 2011). That chosen number was 3. The value of the interval was added to the randomly selected number to generate data for the quantitative content analysis. For example, in 1619 tweets of Burberry, the selected tweets for analysis were 3, 13, 23, 33, and so on (see Table 3).

Table 3: Sampling Illustration for Quantitative Content Analysis

Population size = 2500
Sample size = 250
Interval = population/sample = $2500/250= 10$
Random number = 3

As for gathering samples for qualitative content analysis, purposive sampling was employed. Purposive sampling which is a non-random sampling strategy that researchers use to locate all possible cases of a highly specific and difficult-to-reach population (Neuman, 2011).

The tweets of the three brands that have been retweeted the most and least were chosen to study. To be more specific, the top 3 and bottom 3 retweeted posts of Burberry, Louis Vuitton, and Bvlagri constitute the corpus of qualitative content analysis. The qualitative content analysis in this study not only provides insights into how the brands promote themselves but also reflects the audience's attitudes towards the brands' tweets without actually contacting them, providing insights into branding better by microblogging. The study chose four ways to measure audience's attitude towards the tweets on Weibo.com, namely "Like" (the thumb-up symbol), "Retweet" ("轉發" in Chinese), "Favorite" ("收藏" in Chinese), and "Comment" ("評論" in Chinese) (see Appendix D). However, none of "Like", "Favorite", or "Comment" will automatically broadcast the users attitude toward the tweet. In other words, if a user clicks "Like" or "Comment" or "Favorite" of a tweet, his or her followers can only see this tweet when they proactively enter his or her main page, otherwise they cannot see it at all. However, if a user clicks "Retweet", this tweet will show up in his or her followers' main page and they will likely view the tweet since it is present at their main access point. The key concept of web 2.0 and social media is connection and interactivity (Zappavigna, 2012), and the function of "Retweet" on Weibo.com represents this concept well. Through one follower's retweet, the brand's one tweet can spread exponentially. Encouraging the followers to retweet the brand's tweets enables a brand to reach more audiences with a relatively lower cost.

During the sample collection process, it was decided that, if there were tweets with the same number of retweets listed in the top 3 or bottom 3, all of them would be collected as samples until it reached the sample size of 3. For example, there were 4 tweets of Burberry that were retweeted only once. Then, all of them were taken as samples, and because it exceeded the sample size of 3, and sampling of bottom 3 tweets of Burberry's tweets was discontinued.

Data Collection

Berger (2011) mentions, one of the advantages of content analysis is that “it uses material that is relatively easy to obtain and work with” (p. 213). All the data for this study is available online. Once a user has an account on Weibo.com, they have access to a large amount of the information on Weibo.com. Submitting “Burberry”, “Louis Vuitton”, and “Bvlgari” in the website’s search engine yields the official Weibo accounts of these brands.

The order of data collection is based on the number of followers of each brand. Burberry had 510,322 followers, LV had 406,940 followers, Bvlgari had 174,490 followers (these numbers of followers were collected on Dec, 31, 2012, and they change over time). Therefore, the order to collect the samples was Burberry, LV, then Bvlgari. The tweets were sampled chronologically according to the collection procedure of each brand. The number of followers was arbitrarily selected to decide the order of data collection. The number of followers is one of the most important factors in determining an account’s influence in microblogging world (Liu, 2012). The followers are those who can see the brands’ tweets in real time, and those followers’ retweeting will likely influence more people whether or not they follow the brands. The followers and their likelihood of retweeting are the key components to expand the influence of the tweets and the brands themselves (Liu, 2012).

The researcher started sampling with the 3rd tweet of Burberry, then 13th, 23th, and so on, according to the strategy stated earlier. A total of 257 samples were gathered for quantitative analysis, including 161 tweets from Burberry, 45 tweets from LV, and 51 tweets from Bvlgari.

The researcher then went through all of the tweets of each brand from their first tweet to the last one on Dec, 31, 2012 to select the top 3 and bottom 3 retweeted tweets. Each brand has

three tweets that were listed as the most retweeted tweets, while the number of bottom 3 tweeted tweets varies among these brands. Burberry has 6 tweets which were only retweeted once. LV and Bvlgari each had 4 of the least retweeted tweets, hence, a total of 26 tweets from Burberry, LV, and Bvlgari were collected for qualitative analysis.

Coding

After transcribing and translating for further analysis, the researcher went through the data several times to obtain a general understanding of the information and to help develop more specific sub-themes thereafter (Creswell, 2009, Labre & Walsh-Childers, 2003 & Neuman, 2011).

In order to determine the frequency and occurrence of different topics presented in the tweets, 12 categories were constructed to account for each topic. The categories are identified as follows: products, fashion week, celebrities, brand's designer(s), events, traditional advertising campaign, traditional media, interaction with followers, festivals or holidays, brand's history or knowledge, music, others. Under the category of events there are four items, namely brand's events, related fashion events (not hosted by the brand), brand-sponsored events, and non-profit events. These 4 sub-categories will be helpful in the analysis of how microblogging is used by fashion brands. This coding process was carried out manually using Microsoft Excel.

Where quantitative data analysis was used to categorize tweets, qualitative method was utilized in order to account for the audience's preference in tweets in their own cultural context. Understanding the brands' communication strategies vis-à-vis the audience's needs is achieved by comparing the results of quantitative and qualitative analysis.

The coding categories for qualitative analysis were developed to identify the major thematic units of the tweets. The thematic units for coding are pertinent to consider the main purpose of the tweets. Bovee (1992) defines advertising as “the non-personal communication of information usually paid for and usually persuasive in nature about products, services or ideas by identified sponsors through the various media” (p. 7). All the tweets collected as samples fit the definition of advertising presented above. For example, in Bvlgari’s tweet “The exhibition of 125 Years of Italian Jewels by Bvlgari at Aurora Art Museum,” followers can clearly identify that the tweet is from Bvlgari, and the tweet is aiming at persuading people to see the exhibition. Thus, the tweet is an advertisement for the exhibition, and it is also an advertisement to reinforce the brand’s image by mentioning how superior, elegant, and luxury the exhibition is. More details will be discussed in the following chapter. Therefore, all the collected tweets can be viewed as advertising, which means the ultimate purpose of all the tweets is to persuade the audience to purchase products. But the first step in persuading the audience is to fuel their desire for the products or the brand itself. Therefore all the messages share a common theme to communicate desirable elements of the brand(s). Since all the tweets share a common main theme, distinguishing characteristics needed to be revealed. Six sub-themes became apparent after repeated reading of the tweets: 1) luxurious, 2) glamorous, 3) caring, 4) free, 5) art and 6) interactive. Every selected tweet was titled by its first few words. Every tweet were assigned a number and a working title so that it is easier to analysis, and the order is the top 3 and bottom 3 tweets of Burberry, the top 3 and bottom 3 tweets of LV, then the top 3 and bottom 3 tweets of Bvlgari (see Appendix E). In the final analysis of this ethnographic content analysis, uses and gratifications theory is the central lens to determine if the audience gets the information they need from the brands’ tweets. This coding process was carried out via NVivo 10.0.

Chapter summary

This chapter has discussed the selection of methodological approaches used in this study as well as presented an explanation for why those methods were chosen. The use of a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis was justified as the most suitable method for this study. While quantitative content analysis provides the general and manifest outline of how the brands use microblogging, qualitative analysis provides a more in-depth knowledge about how fashion brands use microblogging to convey their brand value to the audiences.

This chapter also presented the sampling technique, data collection process and coding procedure that were used to conceptualize the categories and themes that serve the purpose of this study. Using feminist theory and uses and gratifications theory, the next chapter will analyze and discuss the research results and provide answers to the research questions posed for this study.

Chapter Four: Research Results and Analysis

This chapter presents the results of the quantitative and qualitative content analysis, respectively. With the review of research questions, an attempt is made answer those questions, drawing on the research results.

Result of Quantitative Content Analysis

1. Overall results

The twelve categories that were extracted from the samples are: Product, Fashion week/show, Celebrity, Brand's designer, Event/Project, Traditional advertising, Traditional media, Interaction with followers, Festivals/Holidays, Brand's history/knowledge, Music, and Others. These categories exhaustively reflect the literal topics of all tweets in the data set. The Product category indicates that the tweet discussed or promoted a specific product, such as bags or shoes. The Fashion week/show category is for tweets referring, specifically, to fashion week events. A tweet in the Celebrity category mentions a movie star, super model, or a similar famous person. The Brand's designer category is reserved for tweets that directly mention the designers. The Event/Project category is for any event or project that the brand is sponsoring other than events related to fashion week. A tweet falls into the Traditional advertising category when it mentions TV commercials, magazine spreads or other advertising on traditional media. Traditional media is the category for tweets that mention the media itself, for example a tweet about Vogue magazine. The Interaction with followers category covers tweets where the brand is directly soliciting response from the entire follower group or directly interacts with a specific follower. The Festivals/Holiday category is for tweets about festivals and holiday. Tweets are categorized under Music when they contain reference to music or musicians. Others is the

category for tweets that do not fit in the above categories. These tweets are usually small talk including topics like weather. For example, one of the tweets in this category is “what a beautiful day in London” from Burberry.

Observing the collected data, we can see that the 12 categories form three groups based on their percentage of tweet occurrence. Product, Celebrity, and Event/Project are each near the 40 percent mark (see Figure 1), making them the most popular categories among all the twelve categories. Fashion week/show and Traditional advertising are each between 10 and 20 percent, which means they are often talked about by the brands. The rest of the seven categories (Brand’s designer, Traditional media, Interaction with followers, Festivals/Holidays, Brand’s history/knowledge, Music, and Others) each occur less than 10 percent which makes these topics the minority among all the tweets.

The prevailing topics covered in fashion brands’ tweets are about products, celebrities, and events or projects. Among all the tweets that were collected as samples, 49.00% of them mentioned the brands’ products, making it the leading category among all the twelve categories. Celebrities, who are considered an important component of fashion brands’ public relation strategy, appeared in 41.63% of all the samples. Finally, Event/Project constitutes 36.96% of all tweets from the brands. Product, Celebrity, and Event/Project contain most of the information conveyed in the tweets. It appears that selling products and making profit remain the ultimate goals for fashion brands, though the approaches used to reach the goal are varied.

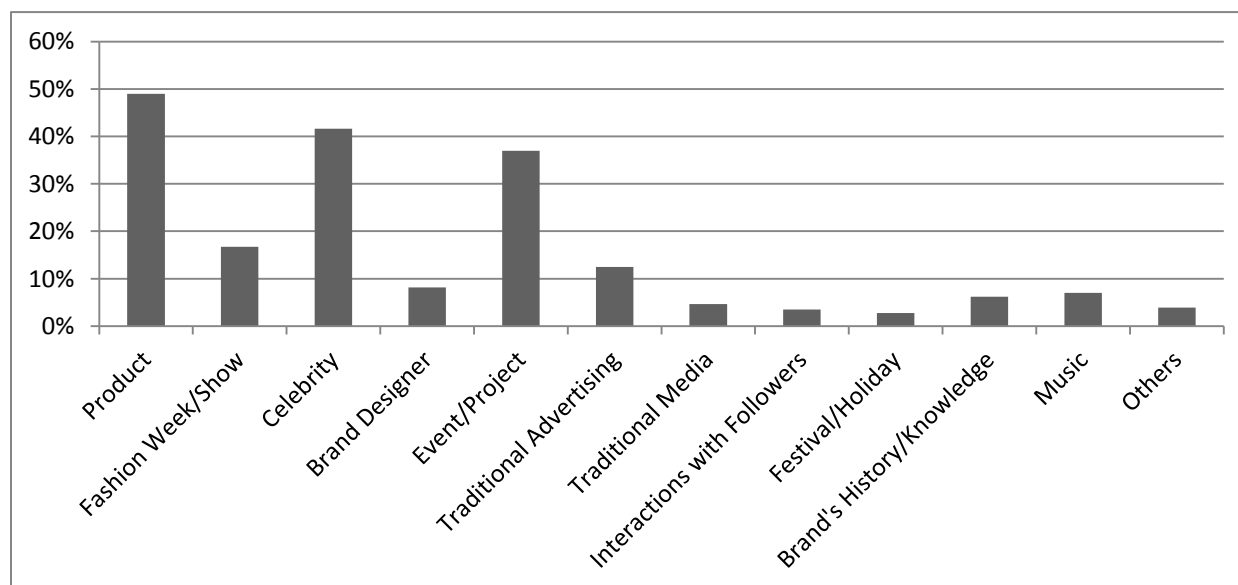
The next two most popular topics in the tweets are Fashion week/show and Traditional advertising. Though the tweet occurrence of these two topics were not as frequent as the Product, Celebrity, and Event/Project categories, fashion weeks or shows and traditional advertising still

take an important part of fashion brands' tweets. 16.73% of the selected tweets are pertinent to fashion weeks or fashion shows which are often used by the brands to introduce their latest collections to the world. The relatively lower percentage of tweets pertinent to fashion weeks or shows may primarily be due to the timeframe of fashion weeks. A fashion week is a fashion industry event which happens twice a year and allows fashion designers, brands or houses to display their latest collections in runway shows and buyers and the media to take a look at the latest trends. The most prominent fashion shows take place in New York, London, Milan, and Paris. The timeframe of fashion weeks directly affect the frequency of fashion weeks or shows as a topic in fashion brands' tweets. Traditional advertising was present in 12.45% of the tweets. The traditional advertising campaign has been regarded as a major way for fashion brands to promote themselves (Ma & Luo, 2011). Every detail of a fashion brand's traditional advertising campaign, from the celebrity to the photographer or director, can be utilized to improve the brand's awareness and reputation among audiences (Ma & Luo, 2011). These advertising campaigns are usually published through traditional media, for example television or magazines. The prevalence of new media encourages some fashion brands to expand their advertising channels. Thus, the information derived from fashion brands' traditional advertising campaigns can also be seen via new media, in particular, the microblogging platform.

The collected tweets also touched other topics. 8.17% of the tweets mentioned the brands' designers, while music and brand's history or knowledge shared similar percentages, 7% and 6.22% respectively. Other minorities are Traditional media (4.67%), Interaction with followers (3.5%), Festivals/Holidays (2.72%), and Others (3.89%). These categories are not closely related to the brand's products or the brand itself. Compared to those tweets with manifest products information, the tweets covering these minor categories can be viewed as soft advertising which

is an advertisement or campaign that employs more subtle, casual, or consumer-friendly information (Kardes, 1988). Soft advertising works on the customers in a gentle and benign way. Therefore, soft advertising lays emphasis on customer relationship rather than direct persuasion, though sometimes it contains sales information. Kardes (1988) concludes that a soft sell with an implied conclusion can often be more persuasive compared to overt sell. Soft sell is often used by fashion brands. Instead of directly introducing their products to the audiences, fashion brands sometimes tweet about other information in their tweets, such as music to show the brand positioning or interacting with followers to build a friendly brand image. In this sense, those fashion brands use the seemingly irrelevant message to build or maintain the customer favourability.

Figure 1: Percentages of each category of all collected tweets



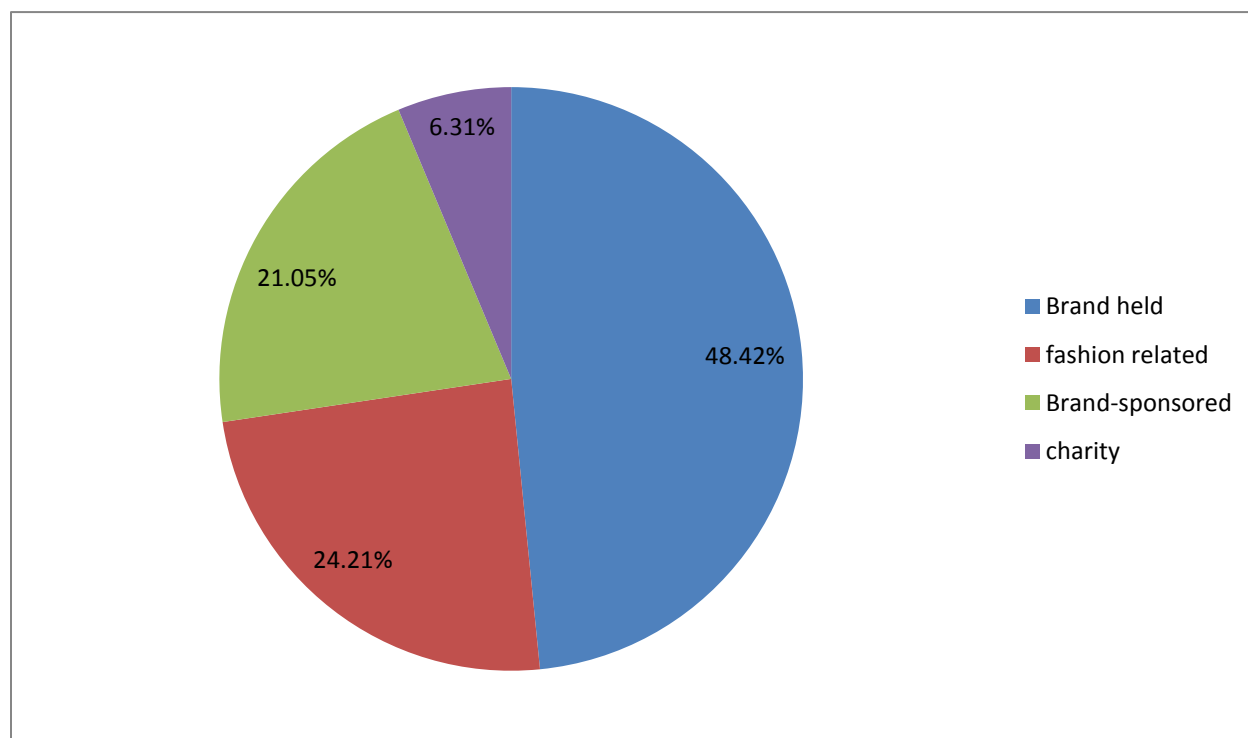
Celebrity is a significant part of fashion brands' tweets. Fashion brands use celebrities' fame to increase their reputation among the public, and they select specific movie stars, musicians, artists, models and so on whose images are aligned with the brand's image in order to

build or reinforce the brand's image in the audiences' heart. Though there are various kinds of celebrities typically mentioned by fashion brands, the celebrity models are distinct from the other celebrities, such as movie stars, musicians, or writers. Models are usually tall and skinny girls, and as stated in chapter two, the thin ideal appears in backlash against women in order to keep women under men's judgement and approval, which is a form of obedience to patriarchy (Orbach, 1983; Williams & Germov, 1999; Wolf, 1990). In the discussion about thinness and women's wellbeing, fashion industry has been questioned on account of the long-standing prevalence of skinny models in the industry. Though the debate of skinny models in fashion industry and their influence on everyday women has been ongoing for almost three decades, most fashion brands still use 0-size models to present their collections. In this study, among 107 tweets that mentioned celebrities, 28 of them were about models taking 26.17% of celebrity-related tweets and 10.89% of all the samples.

Throughout all the samples, 95 tweets indicate events or projects that are related to the brand. All the events or projects were divided into four sub-categories: brand's events/projects, fashion events/projects (not held by the brand), brand-sponsored events/projects, and charity events/projects. Four sub-categories were developed in order to better illustrate the details of fashion brands' communication method. Nearly half of the tweets were related to the brand's own events or projects (48.42%), for example the opening ceremony of the brand's new store or exhibition of brand's classic collections. "Related fashion events or projects" refers to those fashion events or project that are held by other organizations or companies. The red carpet of Cannes film festival or Fashion Night Out held by Vogue magazine can exemplify this sub-category well. 23 tweets were listed in this sub-category taking up 24.21% of all the samples that mention events or projects (see Figure 2), which slightly outnumbered the brand-sponsored

events or projects. The sub-category of Brand-sponsored events or projects, which added to 21.05% of the Events/projects category, implies the events or projects that has no direct relationship to fashion but clearly identified as sponsored by the specific fashion brands. Those events or projects are usually out of fashion world, such as sports, but they can reflect the fashion brands' market position or brand value. Louis Vuitton Cup, for instance, as the America's Cup Challenger Series has been held since 1983 ("Louis Vuitton Cup", n.d.). Yacht racing is considered a high-end sport and it represents the pursuit for adventure which matches LV's brand value of travel, adventure, and challenge. Therefore, though this event is not closely related to fashion, Louis Vuitton has sponsored it for almost three decades. Lastly, in the category of events/projects only 6.31% of the tweets were about charity events.

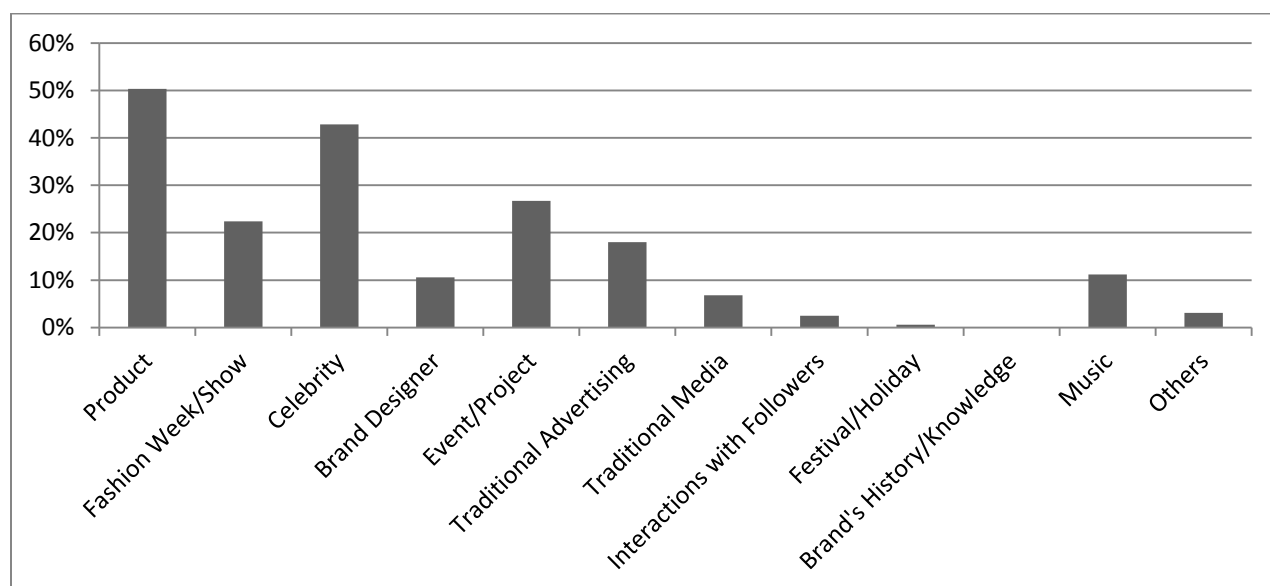
Figure 2: Composition of "Events/Projects" category



2. Results of individual brand

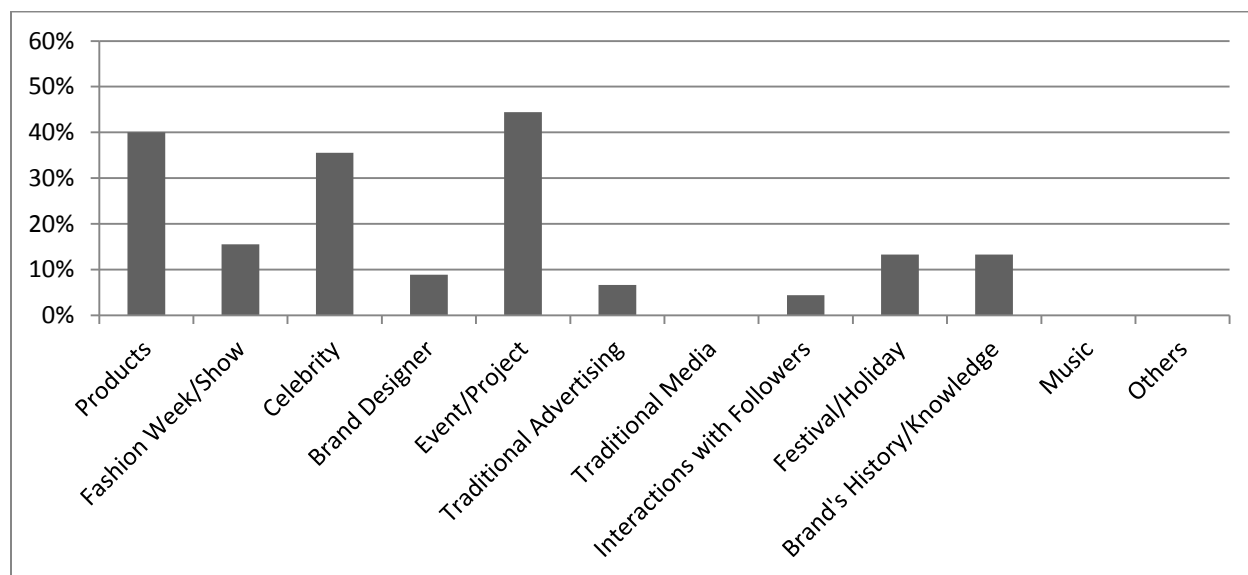
Though the three brands all share the overall results stated above, the percentages of each category in individual brand seem to fluctuate. As for Burberry, Product (50.3%) and Celebrity (42.85%) rank the most mentioned topics among all the categories, followed by Event/Project (26.7%), Fashion week/show (22.36%), and Traditional advertising (18%). The frequency of mentioning brand's designer(s) and music almost equals, 10.56% and 11.18% separately (see Figure 3). The information regarding traditional media (6.83%), interactions with followers (2.48%), and the other kinds of information that can not fit in the categories above (3.1%) only appeared in several tweets. Interestingly, even though Burberry has the most tweet numbers among the three brands, no tweet contains information about the brand's history or knowledge of their products, and only 1 tweet mentioned the festivals or holidays (0.62%) of all the collected Burberry tweets (see Figure 3). Based on the data, Burberry appears to be more enthusiastic in introducing their products, their work in fashion weeks or shows, the celebrities who wear their collections. Another feature of Burberry's tweets is the use of traditional branding information on microblog, for example promoting their traditional advertising campaign on Weibo.com and using the prestige of traditional media to imply the authoritative and high-end image of the brand. Moreover, the designer, Christopher Baily, and music are important components in the brand-building process, because the percentages of these two categories are the highest compared to the other two brands.

Figure 3: Percentages of each category of Burberry's tweets



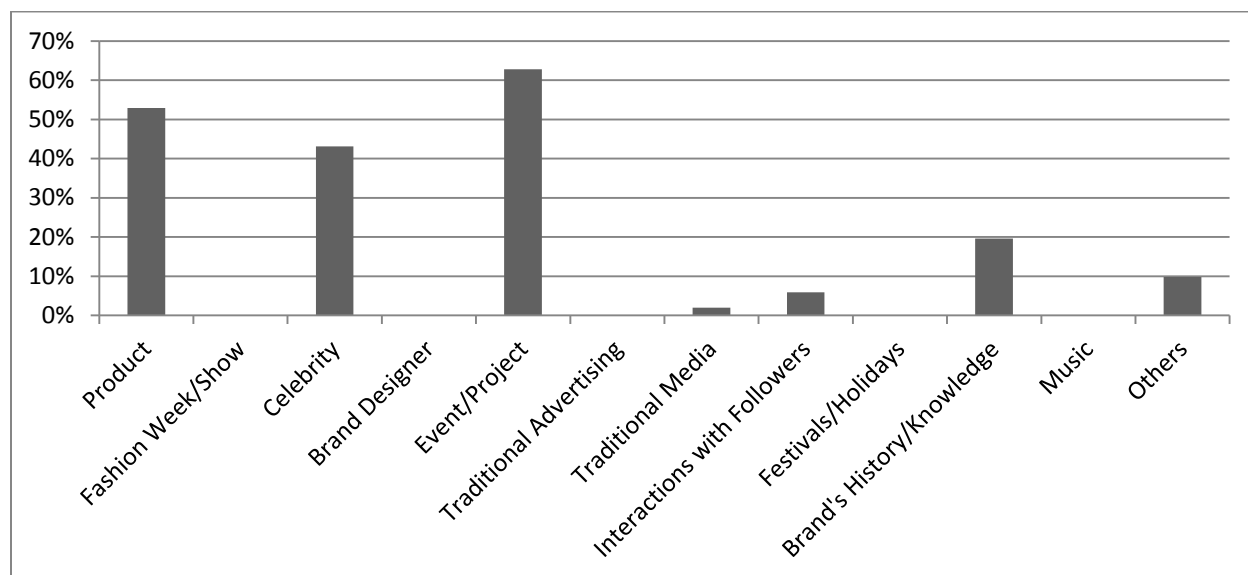
Louis Vuitton, on the other hand, uses less space for their products (40%), or the celebrities who wear their products (35.56%). The decrease is also seen in the percentage of message about traditional advertising (6.67%) and traditional media (0%). None of the tweets collected from LV include information regarding music or others. However, there is a notable increase in their tweets that contain the information about fashion events or projects (44.44%), holidays or festivals greetings (13.33%) as well as the brand's history or knowledge of the brand's products (13.33%). The other categories in LV's tweets share a similar percentage as the overall results: 15.55% for Fashion week/show, 8.89% for Designer, 4.44% for Interaction with followers (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Percentages of each category of LV's tweets



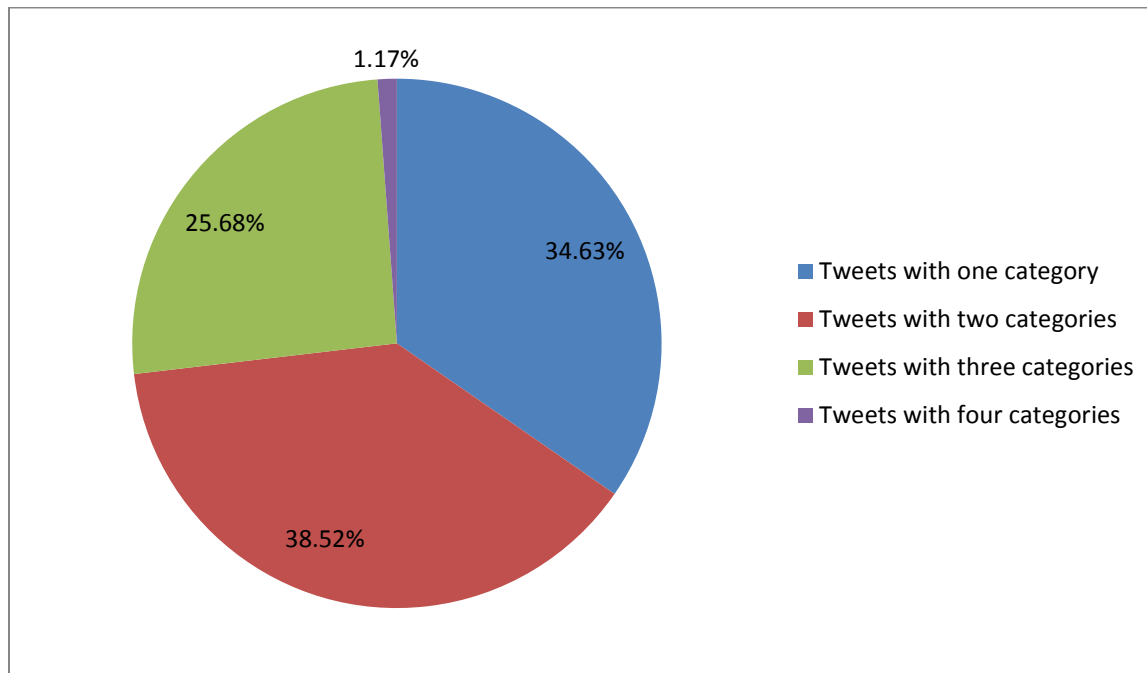
Bvlgari, however, promotes its products and the brand through a different approach compared to Burberry and LV. The events or projects (62.75%) that are related to the brand almost doubled its proportion in the entire sample, taking the highest percentage among the twelve categories. 52.94% of Bvlgari's tweets have messages about its products. Celebrity is another important element in Bvlgari's branding strategy on Weibo.com, appearing in 43.14% of the sample tweets. Meanwhile, Interactions with followers, Brand's history/knowledge of brand's products, and the category Others has relatively low occurrence rate, 5.88%, 19.61%, and 9.8% respectively, even though all of them outnumber in percentage when compared with the ones of Burberry and LV. Interestingly, in Bvlgari's tweet, traditional media (1.96%) is rarely mentioned (see Figure 5), and there is no information about fashion week/show perhaps mainly due to the fact that it is a jewelry brand. Moreover, the brand's designer and Bvlgari's advertising campaigns were not mentioned in Bvlgari's tweets. Neither does Bvlgari send or express any greetings during holidays or festivals.

Figure 5: Percentages of each category of Bvlgari's tweets



3. Result of communication pattern

The categories developed in this study are the topics that were conveyed in fashion brands' tweets. However, it does not mean that one tweet only contains one category. On the contrary, some categories tend to integrate well into a single tweet. In order to better understand how the fashion brands use microblogging to communicate with the audiences, the researcher also looked into the combination of categories among all sample tweets. After going through the data again, the researcher divided all the samples into four types, differentiated by the number of categories in the tweet. The results are as follows: 89 out of 257 tweets mentioned one category (34.63%) only; 99 tweets employed two categories (38.52%); 66 tweets included three different categories (25.68%); only 3 tweets mentioned four categories (1.17%); and no tweets contain more than four categories (see Figure 6). These results briefly demonstrate the pattern of how fashion brands spread the message of the brands to the audiences, which informs the analysis of how fashion brands communicate with their audiences thereafter.

Figure 6: Four Types of Tweets

Result of Qualitative Content Analysis

In order to evaluate the content of Burberry, LV, and Bvlgari's tweets, the thematic coding of the 23 selected tweets clearly demonstrated that the brand can deliver desirable elements to the audiences via the microblogging platform as discussed in the previous chapter. 9 tweets were listed as the top retweeted tweets of Burberry, LV, and Bvlgari, while 14 tweets were much less welcomed by the audiences. The desirable elements conveyed in the tweets are why consumers should choose the brand and purchase its products. However, whether the desirable elements conceived by fashion brands really cater to Chinese consumers' preference remains unknown. To address this matter, six sub-themes were abstracted from the latent meaning of the content: luxurious, glamorous, caring, free, art, and interactive. Though these sub-themes were present in both top 3 and bottom 3 tweets, the percentage distribution varied.

But before delving into the analysis, it is necessary to understand the brief background and general value of each brand.

Founded in the mid-19th century, Burberry still remains quintessentially British with outerwear at its core, and it is well known for using British celebrities in its advertising campaigns (Heritage, n.d.). After Christopher Baily took over as the Chief Creative Director position in 2009, the brand started to build its new image. Burberry gradually transferred from a conservative brand into a more creative and adventurous one, while the label “British” still remains and is reinforced. The creative and adventurous features of Burberry are conveyed through not only the collections but also their adoption of new media and technology and their project to help Britain’s emerging musicians (Valenti, 2012).

Louis Vuitton, a French fashion brand with a history of 159 years, grew from a trunk-maker into a world major fashion brand with all-round collections (Louis Vuitton, n.d.). Though the brand has gone through drastic change over the years, travel has always been the *raison d’être* of Louis Vuitton which gives rise to their core values of freedom and exploration (Louis Vuitton, n.d.).

Bulgari is renowned for its fine jewellery. The company has developed into a global and diversified luxury brand with a product and services portfolio of jewels, watches, accessories, fragrances, skincare, hotels and resorts featuring exceptional quality, an innovative style and impeccable service (“Company Overview”, n.d.). Bulgari is ethically committed to issues of human rights, universal civil liberties and fundamental freedoms. Bulgari launched the project *Save the Children* which endowed upon them a responsible and caring image.

Now with a general understanding of Burberry, LV, and Bvlgari's background and values, the desirable elements provided by these brands will be examined in depth.

Table 4: Allocation of top and bottom retweeted tweets

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Top retweeted tweets containing sub-theme	Bottom retweeted tweets containing sub-theme
The brand and its products provide the audiences desirable elements	Luxurious	2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9	12, 23
	Glamorous	6	10, 14, 21, 22, 23
	Caring	9	N/A
	Free	1, 4	13
	Art	7, 8	11, 20
	Interactive	2, 3, 4, 5, 8	15, 16, 17, 18, 19

All the tweets collected for qualitative analysis were numbered and assigned with a working title (see Appendix E). Table shows the allocation of top and bottom retweeted tweets, and each number in the table represents one tweet. Generally speaking, the theme Luxurious was found in 6 top retweeted tweets, which makes it a popular theme among fashion brands' followers, while Glamorous appears to be least welcomed. Five tweets that mentioned the sub-theme Glamorous were listed as the bottom retweeted tweets. Interestingly, 5 top retweeted tweets and 5 bottom retweeted tweets contain the theme Interactive (see Table 4). Detailed examination of each sub-theme is presented in the following.

1. Luxurious

Luxurious is a concept that is often used by high-end fashion brands to raise their status in order to create an exclusive image that attracts the elites to purchase as well as produce admiration among common people. 6 top retweeted tweets out of 9, or 66.67% of top retweeted tweets contained information that implied luxurious. For instance, in “Handbag from this season’s collection”, LV describes their handbag as “beyond your imagination” stating that the handbags are made of precious leather such as goatskin, ponyskin, ostrich leather, or crocodile leather (see Appendix F). However, only 14.29% of bottom retweeted tweets contained such information, for example, in tweet number 23, Bvlgari tweeted about the luxurious and precious jewellery and the high-end equipment they used to photograph these delicate pictures (see Figure 7). Such tweets appear to aim at showing the superior image of the brand.

The prominent percentage of this sub-theme seems to show that Chinese consumers value the luxurious and exclusive image of fashion brands. Many scholars have put forth that the perpetuation of the luxury culture is closely related with not only individuals’ desires (Berry, 1994; Twitchell, 2003; Kemp, 1998) but also social impression and symbolic status (Tsai, 2005; Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). The cult of pursuing luxury brands is rooted in the profound economic and social changes in China (Chadha & Husband, 2006). In China, “old way of defining who you are and your place in the world around you were systematically dismantled” (Chadha & Husband, 2006). The old nobility and nouveau elite are looking for new symbols to mark their social status, and western luxury brands cater to exactly that need.

2. Glamorous

11.11% of top retweeted tweets and 35.71% of bottom retweeted tweets imply glamour. Glamorous is how the fashion brands want their consumers to feel after purchasing their products

(see Figure 7). “Being glamorous” is one of the values that lie in the product itself conveyed through delicate design, rather than the brand’s culture.

To better understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to associate the sub-theme ‘Glamorous’ with the previous one Luxurious. Chinese women are more interested in how luxurious the fashion brands are and less about how glamorous those products look on them. This discovery resonates with Chadha & Husband’s statement (2006) that mainland China still remains on the stage of show off in the spread of luxury. The arrival of wealth to select segments of society causes people to trip over each other, trying to acquire the symbols of wealth and displaying them in the most conspicuous manner (Chadha & Husband, 2006). Rather than purchasing fashion and luxury products to please and satisfy themselves, Chinese women lay emphasis on displaying those products to show the others their social status (Chadha & Husband, 2006). In other words, they are more concerned about what other people think of them without paying enough attention to what they want for themselves.

3. *Caring*

Among all the selected tweets, only one tweet implied the caring nature of the brand. The tweet is “Save the children” by Bvlgari which is listed as one of the most retweeted tweets of all of Bvlgari’s tweets. In this tweet, Bvlgari briefly introduced its *Save the Children* project in which part of the profits raised through the sale of a specially designed ring were donated to the *Save the Children* charity. The tweet also told the audiences that Bvlgari has donated over \$20,000,000 and they invited top photographers to shoot celebrities with the ring in order to generate more attention to this project as well as to those children who live in poverty (see Appendix F).

Fashion brands have been a controversial topic for a long time. On one hand, they offer high quality products with meticulous design and manufacture as well as artist package and advertising. Every single product embodies the wisdom of the designers, the craftsmen, and even the marketing team and presents the brand's culture and value to the consumer (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2008). On the other hand, fashion brands are accused of marking their products at the price that are much higher than the products' actual value purely in the pursuit of forging an exclusive and luxurious image (Bi, 2012; J. Yang, 2012). In order to diminish such negative discussion about the brands and create a more comprehensive brand image, some fashion brands devote themselves into philanthropy. Donating some of the profit to charity helps fashion brands to build a caring image and to demonstrate their sense of social responsibility (Ouyang, 2009), implying that purchasing those products is not only an outward display but also an inward pursuit.

This kind of investment appears to be a necessity in exploring Chinese market. The gap between the poor and the rich is getting bigger with the development of economy. China has been changing from a country where everyone wore the same clothes and shared the same living standard into a country where the rich can afford a world class life style while the poor do not even have access to clean water. The majority people live a stressful life, suffering from the exorbitant housing price and ever-increasing living cost. This unbalanced economic situation leads to a prevalence of cynical and hostile attitudes towards the rich among Chinese young people, who are the majority of fashion brands' consumers and potential consumers. The Guo Meimei case mentioned in the introductory chapter illustrates this phenomenon. Joining charity events to show the caring side of the brand can gradually help release the tension between social

pressure and these luxury brands, which eventually will likely help to open up a bigger market in China.

4. *Free*

22.22% of top retweeted tweets promoted the notion of freedom, while one tweet including such information was listed as the least retweeted tweet (7.14%). For example, in qualitative sample number 4 with working title “Louis Vuitton Paris-Shanghai Express,” travel is alleged to set the body and mind free. The tweet also initiated a small interaction with the followers, encouraging them to share their travel experiences and feeling. And, 10 participants would be selected to have a LV travel book as gifts (see Appendix F). This tweet is LV’s most retweeted tweet.

Freedom is what Chinese women have been seeking in the last century. It has been discussed in Chapter 2 that the well-being of women was never on the central stage in any of the Chinese feminist movements because Chinese feminist movements were a part of social revolution (Lin, 2005). Therefore, the primary purpose of these movements were to serve the main theme of social revolution – fighting against Confucianism and Feudalism (Lin, 2005). However, these movements ignited the pursuit for freedom in the Chinese women’s heart. Some of the pioneers (e.g., Yinhe Li, Lan Yang) in this field have started to call for attention and respect for Chinese women’s inner desire and spiritual pursuit.

5. *Art*

22.22% of top retweeted tweets were art related and 14.29% of bottom retweeted tweets were listed in this sub-theme (see Figure 7).

In “The exhibition of 125 Years of Italian Jewels by Bvlgari”, it is implied that some of the brand’s products have become classic Italian art and design masterpieces. Similarly, in “The exhibition of 125 Years of Italian Jewels by Bvlgari at Aurora Art Museum”, detailed information of the exhibition was provided with the implication that the brand consistently produces artistic products and this exhibition was more of an art exhibition than a product showcase (see Appendix F).

It has been a trend for years that the fashion brands launch cross-border cooperation. It usually appears to be the cooperation between fashion brands and art, such as Madonna worked with H&M creating a new collection named M by Madonna, Sofia Coppola designed her collection of handbags and shoes for Louis Vuitton, and German artist Anselm Reyle and Dior launched an accessory collection. Chong (2009) states that when art translates into fashion is it a crossover where “two different disciplines are jumbled to create something new, fresh, and very marketable” (p.69). Fashion is often considered ever-changing while art represent eternal beauty. Therefore, such cooperation between fashion brands and artists upgrades fashion brands’ image from ever-changing trend into a lasting beauty, and it caters the elite consumers (Zhou & Zhu, 2011; F. Li, 2010).

6. Interactive

Interestingly, the percentages of interactive information in both top and bottom retweeted tweets are relatively high compared to other sub-themes, 55.55% and 35.71% respectively (see Figure 7). However, a closer look at each tweet explains this result. The top retweeted tweets with interactive implications seem to aim at encouraging all of the brands’ followers to participate, while the bottom retweeted tweets appear to aim at a specific subset of followers. For

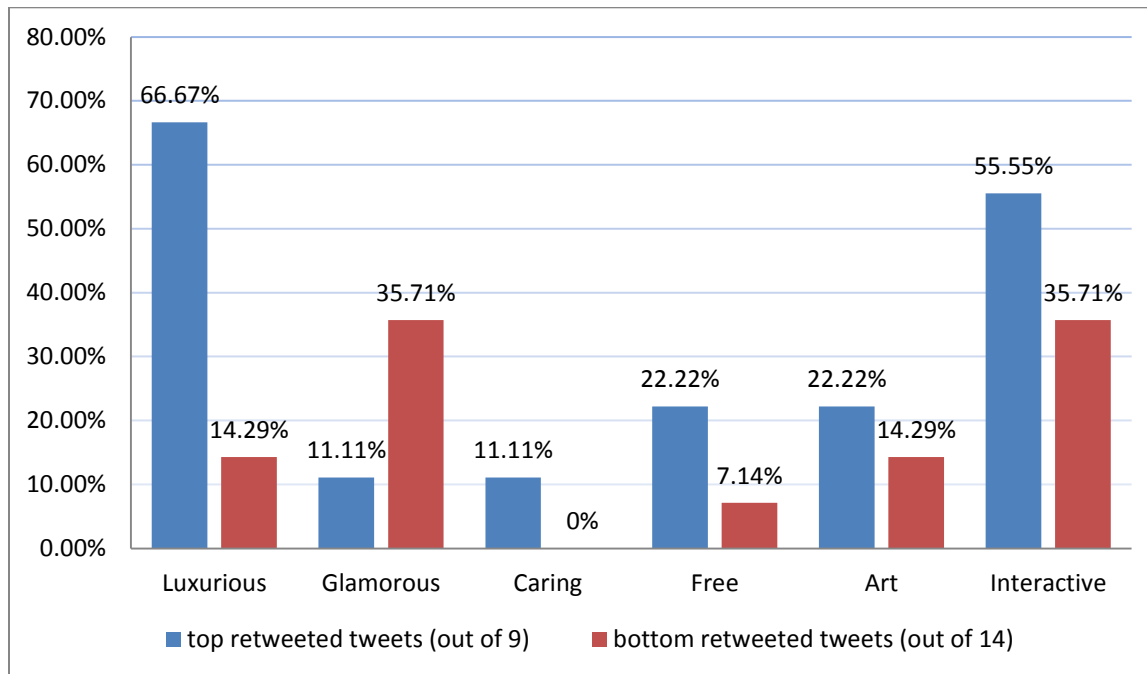
example, in “Christopher Bailey is going to answer the questions from the audiences”, Burberry implied that the Chief Creative Director Christopher Baily was going to directly answer those followers questions (see Appendix F). Similarly, in “The exhibition of 125 Years of Italian Jewels by Bvlgari”, Bvlgari encourages the followers to retweet this post and share it with friends, and Bvlgari would give away tickets to the exhibition to a few of those who took part in this activity. These tweets appear to try to initiate interactivity between the brand and all of its followers, and the followers could receive a small reward for participating. The goal of such tweets appears to not only encourage the followers to interact with the brand in order to increase their favourability with those followers, but also stimulate the followers to share the information with their circles expanding the reach of the brand immensely.

Whereas, in the least retweeted tweets, the interaction seemed to narrow down to a certain specific group of followers, which limited the reach of audience. Most of these tweets worked as notice to give out the names that won the gifts for participating in previous activities. For instance, in sample tweet “Thank you for participating in the activity on Weibo.com” LV listed the followers who shared their perception of travel in the activity initiated by LV on Weibo.com. Simple information and clearly indicated participants negated the need to widely spread this information because the tweets could not offer valuable information for the followers other than those who won the prize.

The interactions between fashion brands and their followers help the brands to build a consumer-friendly image without damaging the high-end position. Though some fashion brands still hold back about new media in the concern that new media might undermine their upscale brand image, several fashion brands have gained benefits from employing new media to interactions with the public. Such interaction cannot directly benefit the sales performance;

rather, it helps to establish a solid ground among common people and to cultivate potential consumers for the brand.

Figure 7: Percentage of top and bottom retweeted tweets containing sub-theme



Answers to Research Questions

In the following, answers to the research questions are presented, drawing from the results discussed earlier. The research questions that were posed at the end of literature review included:

RQ 1: Does fashion appear to emancipate Chinese women or constrain Chinese women within a specific image created by the industry?

RQ 2: How do fashion brands use microblogging to promote themselves?

- 1. Does fashion appear to emancipate Chinese women or constrain Chinese women within a specific image created by the industry?**

As presented above, the results of this study revealed that fashion brands used lot of space to promote their products to Chinese women. However, the percentage of it has not reached the dominant position (50%), it may be reasonable to consider that these fashion brands are primarily business companies, with the principal goal of selling products. A variety of topics were found to be covered by the fashion brand's tweets. These topics included different aspects of the brand, and most of them concentrated on the brand's intangible products for example brand equity which describes the value of famous brand name Therefore, within the scope of this thesis it is insufficient to claim that fashion brands mostly focus on promoting their products to Chinese consumers and impose their pre-set image on Chinese women through their massive propagation of the products, as L. Yang (2009) did. L. Yang (2009) claims that luxury brands bring their pre-set images for Chinese women despite who they are and what they want.

Furthermore, fashion models, considered as the main vehicle through which the fashion industry imposes the thin ideal on women (Orbach, 1987; Williams & Gernove, 1999; Wolf, 1990). However, in this study fashion models were found to be not a popular feature in the fashion brands' tweets. Among 107 tweets that mentioned celebrities, 28 of them were about models taking 26.17% of celebrity-related tweets and 10.89% of the total sample. The celebrities in various fields, who appeared in those brands' tweets, weakened the influence of the thin ideal conveyed by models.

The themes listed above that conveyed in fashion brands' tweets express positive attitudes and energy to Chinese consumers, such as glamorous, caring, and free. And, Chinese consumers echoed those messages by retweeting them. For instance, freedom, a concept that is extracted from "travel", is a key value in LV's image, and one of the most retweeted tweets is that LV encourages its followers to share their travelling experiences regarding the topic of *the*

Meaning of Travel. Fashion brands disseminate many different values and concepts that help to expand Chinese women's horizons and which can help make them more independent women (Cheung, 2011).

Moreover, the paradox among Chinese women can be seen in the results of the qualitative content analysis. On one hand, Chinese women confront the restrictions of society and cast off the constraining stereotypes such as being submissive to and dependent on the males in their family, favoring notions of freedom and independence. However, on the other hand, they also submit to the pressure of lavishing themselves with luxury in order to gain others' approval.

2. How do fashion brands use microblogging to promote themselves?

The primary method for fashion brands to promote themselves is to take advantage of the fame of celebrities and big fashion events to garner people's attention. They integrate their products in the topic of celebrities or fashion events in order to create a strong and highly desirable brand image for common people. However, they are not limited to these techniques. Fashion brands also interact with their followers and share with them the history and knowledge of the brands. And, the branding on microblogging is not isolated from the fashion brands' holistic marketing strategy. In addition to promoting the traditional advertising campaign, which refers to advertising campaigns through traditional media platform, on the microblogging platform, fashion brands further specify the form of traditional media on which they are running their campaign as a means of showing their status in the fashion world. In order to communicate those topics to the audiences fashion brands' usually combine several topics together in one tweet, though, often times, they also concentrate on one topic.

Besides the twelve topics mentioned above that are covered in fashion brands' tweets, abstract values that the brands endorse are conveyed in the tweets as well. Those positive concepts reflect the image that the brands are trying to build, and some of them really cater to the Chinese consumers' preference. The key point of promoting these themes in the tweets is to differentiate the brand's value from the competitor's as well as consider Chinese consumer's taste.

For those high-end fashion brands which have already reached global scale, their goal is more than selling products. Building an irreplaceable brand becomes increasingly important. Therefore, in their tweets fashion brands try to deliver positive values that are closely related to the brand image in order to increase the brand's intangible asset (such as brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand association, and perception of quality) which helps establish a competitive brand (Zhou & Zhu, 2011). Those abstract notions do not directly contribute to sales, rather, they gradually establish a distinctive image and build a legacy for the brand. This kind of marketing strategy is often aiming at gaining consumer favor in the long term and eventually reflects on sales performance (Zhou & Zhu, 2011).

Chapter Summary

To sum up, this chapter presented the results of the research together with the answers to the research questions posed at the end of the literature review chapter. The next chapter focuses on discussing findings of this thesis and offering some suggestions for fashion brands in using microblogging in order to promote themselves.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Recommendation

This chapter discusses the research results in order to shed further light on this study. The following topics are discussed: fashion and Chinese women; interaction; the microblogging audience and the collision and coexistence of old and new media. Recommendations are made for future application of microblogging in order to better promote fashion brands. These recommendations are based on the research results and discussion.

Fashion and Chinese Women

As already discussed in chapter 2, Chinese women have their own distinctive historical and cultural background. They have suffered from the double pressure of a longstanding patriarchal society as well as the lack of an independent feminist movement. The patriarchal society has essentially not been changed (Lin, 2005), and the well-being of women is still in a state of neglect due to the lack of a feminist movement that actually focuses on Chinese women themselves. Only since the last couple of decades have Chinese women started to assess how far they have really come since the promise of equality in the wake of the Communist revolution (Long, 2008). This belated awareness explains the quandary that faces the Chinese woman. On one hand, they want to cast off the constraints posed on them by the dominant social ideology. On the other hand, they yield to what the patriarchal society tells them to do due to the social pressure.

The “fashion” discussed in this thesis is primarily a western concept that was introduced to Chinese women after 1980s. Steele (1997) maintains that fashion can be considered ideological and the diversity and inclusivity of fashion make it a powerful tool for women to pursue freedom, while other scholars (Barnard, 1996; Bruzzi & Gibson, 2000; Roach and Eicher,

1979) argue that fashion is materialistic because fashion is a reflection of social groups or economic organization.

However, when it comes to discussing the function of fashion in society, it is necessary to consider the political climate that surrounds fashion and not only fashion in isolation. Fashion may be liberating for Chinese women. Angelica Cheung (2012), the Editor-in-Chief of Vogue China, addresses the different stages of fashion between western and eastern world, pointing out that China's opening up to the world is only three decades old which means Chinese women are starting from scratch when it comes to understanding fashion, and in this process fashion means the whole idea of being an independent woman. The historical background, the cultural differences, and the current situation all play a significant role in evaluating whether fashion empowers or constrains women. Chinese women have lived in a patriarchal society for thousands of years. Though several pseudo feminist movements happened in the last century, they were attachments to other major social revolutions, and women's rights have not really garnered wide attention. Thus, the influence of these movements is very limited. Jaschok & Miers (1994) conclude that only a small number of Chinese women were able to escape from the traditional constraints and made their own way against great odds. The vast majority remained firmly enmeshed in the patriarchal system and despite the fact that Chinese women are allowed to work, ensuring their economic independence, little respect is given to a Chinese women's opinion in matters of importance (Chow, 1991). Women were put on the position to fight against Confucian family and morality as required by social revolutions instead of unfeignedly seeking the freedom themselves (Croll, 1978). In other words, Chinese feminist movement is another requirement imposed on women, which eventually leads to the formal liberation represented in laws and regulations while individual freedom in the spiritual level is neglected (Kristeva, 1977).

As more and more fashion brands entered the Chinese market, they brought the notion of fashion to Chinese women. Though the primary aim is increasing sales, the influence of the marketing strategies goes beyond the scope of economic benefit. Despite the motivation behind the ideas propagated by fashion brands, the positive notions of philanthropy, freedom, and empowerment to make a difference in the world have the side effect of broadening the Chinese women's horizons, helping them look outside the family into a bigger world. Fashion brands also spread the idea that women should feel confident and comfortable with themselves. This kind of idea is essential for Chinese women whose confidence has been smashed into pieces by various patriarchal institutions (Ge & Jolly, 2001). Moreover, the notions promoted by fashion brands encourage Chinese women to pursue freedom and to think about their own desires and goals, ultimately enabling Chinese women to gain true independence, both economically and emotionally.

Using microblogging to receive fashion brands' information and interact with the fashion brands directly, Chinese women substitute the medium for companionship, and in the meantime the interaction between fashion brands and Chinese women reinforces Chinese women's values. In this way, the gratification received from using microblogging seems to strengthen the relationship between fashion brands and Chinese women.

Interaction

New media replaced the long-standing one-way communication model of mass media with a real-time, interactive platform (Jenkins, 2006). Shi (2009) also observed the interactive characteristics of new media. The interactivity of social media is its main strength (Shi, 2009) and has become highly valued by companies. For brands, the capacity to establish, maintain and

extend dialogic relations with consumers is invaluable (Spurgeon, 2007). Furthermore, the connection between the new media users makes it possible for the content to be distributed across potentially large-scale audiences (Page, 2012). Social media make it possible for users to stay connected with others, which satisfy the interactive nature of people. The immediate gratification of personal relationship from social media compared to traditional media attribute to the fast growth of social media. In social media world, people add their friends or colleagues in their accounts' circle, bringing the social connection in real life to online platforms and sharing information with each other. This kind of information sharing is similar to traditional interpersonal way, but taking the advantage of new technology more information can travel among more people within a shorter time (Page, 2010).

More specifically, the interaction on microblogging can be broadly divided into two stages: interaction between the brands and followers, and interaction among the followers. It is the second stage, interaction among the followers, that can expand the influence of a piece of information exponentially (Silverman, 2011). The brands usually initiate the interaction with their followers to deliver the information about the brands so that they can build a consumer-friendly image as well as increase brand awareness, and hopefully the activity reaches a wide spread audience through the afterwards interaction among followers in their own circles. Brands have the initiative to create and spread information in the first place which means they have control over the content of information and the channel and method to spread it, while in the second stage the audience takes over (Cakim, 2010; Micek & Whitlock, 2008; Page, 2012; Silverman, 2011). Hence, how to reach the second stage becomes crucial when it comes to minimizing the cost while maximizing the influence. In order to reach this goal, the initial interaction between brands and their audiences needs to be creative.

L'Occitane, a French skincare brand, demonstrated how to create second stage interactions among the audiences with their recent promotion of their Shea Butter Hand Cream. The audience was encouraged to participate in this activity by connecting their accounts with L'Occitane on Facebook. For doing this they earned a 10 ml free sample of the hand cream. Furthermore, if the brand's account reached 250,000 fans, L'Occitane would upgrade the free hand cream sample from 10 ml to 30 ml. This upgrade policy is directly aimed at encouraging the audiences to spread the word about this promotion and to persuade their friends to participate too so that they can all have a bigger gift. The goal is to reward the audience when they spread the information and provide them with motivation to share it within their own circles.

Hence, it appears to be more efficient when the audiences want to actively spread the information rather than only passively receive the information. In order to generate a large scale spread among audiences, brands need to offer them motivation or reward to do so.

The Microblogging Audiences

Although it is claimed that the ability of new media audiences to form niches makes it easier for brands to accurately reach the seemingly right audiences, it is still difficult for the brands to approach actual qualified buyers on social networking sites (Springer & Carson, 2012). On microblogging platforms, the true identity of the user is uncertain. The circles, groups, or forums formed on microblogging platforms are mostly based on the users' hobbies or interests, which hardly indicate the users' economic situation. Moreover, the followees⁴ have no control over the followers. In other words, those questions, such as who follows the brand or whether the user follows or unfollows the brand, are out of the brand's control. To summarize, the anonymity

⁴ According to Oxford Dictionaries (n.d.), followee means a person who is being tracked or followed on a social media website or application.

of microblogging platforms make it impossible to target and maintain audiences who can actually support the brands' sales. Therefore, microblogging may not be a primary platform to locate fashion brands' main consumers.

The Collision and Coexistence of Old and New Media

Despite the prevalence of new media nowadays, traditional media such as newspaper, TV, and magazine still maintain their significance in most companies' advertising strategies. Jenkins (2006) states that old media are not being displaced. This is due to the strengths that traditional media have. For instance, traditional media usually surpass new media in the depth and width of content and the amounts of resources (Lu, 2008; Yu, 2010). New media provide the users great amount of information, while traditional media concentrate on the depth and width of content (Yu, 2010; Lu, 2008). Though new media might be able to give timely information on what is happening, traditional media remain the main source of in-depth report and analysis. This difference in quantity and quality makes the traditional media more authoritative compared with new media. Therefore, the current situation for the brands is to take advantage of the coexistence of traditional media and new media.

When it comes to fashion brands, it is worth noting that traditional media, especially magazines and TV, play an important role in fashion brands' branding process (Sheridan, 2010): major fashion magazines such as VOGUE can turn an unknown brand into a must-have overnight by releasing an article. Many popular fashion brands, such as Micheal Kors, Alexander McQueen, or Marc Jacobs, successfully stepped on fashion stage with the help of American Vogue. Some fashion brands (e.g., CK, Guess) mushroomed in a short period of time because of their successful advertising campaign on traditional media. For instance, in the 1980s, Calvin

Klein premiered Brooke Shields' advertising campaign for the newly launched Calvin Klein Jeans label. The commercials including the line "You wanna know what comes between me and my Calvins? Nothing." became legendary and classic in advertising world. The groundbreaking imagery and sexual appeal burned the company name and image into the world's attention (Chen, 2010).

Recommendation

Based on the research results presented in the previous chapter and the discussion about the related topics, some suggestions are offered in the following:

1. Values that cater to Chinese women, such as "confidence" or "freedom" should be developed and promoted. When fashion brands enter the Chinese market, their strategies are usually in accordance with their strategies applied to European or American market, rendering them bland and lacking the necessary cultural sensitivity to Chinese consumers. The same happens on Weibo.com. Though it is necessary to keep the brands' image consistent, some adaptations are required in order to cater to a given culture.
2. Emphasis should be given on building a broad mass base. It is difficult to find the target audiences on microblogging. The followers only reflect that they are interested in fashion or the specific brand, which do not necessarily mean that they can afford the products in actuality. Therefore, instead of laboriously locating the target audience, fashion brands should use microblogging to establish their reputation among common people in order to cultivate potential consumers. In this sense,

- spreading more information regarding the brand's history or knowledge as well as brand-related events and celebrities would be helpful.
3. Connections should be made among microblogging and traditional media and advertising forms. Though legacy media are challenged by new media, their authority still remains. Considering this point, it is necessary for fashion brands to combine microblogging with traditional media and integrate the brands' advertising campaigns. Burberry does a good job of combining microblogging with traditional media and advertising introducing information regarding the brand's appearance in prestigious fashion magazines, utilizing the magazines' authority to demonstrate the Burberry's significant position in the fashion industry. In the meantime, the adoption of new media such as microblogging shows the "cutting-edge" side of the brand.
 4. Instead of conducting interaction, guiding the interaction is more important. Different from the mass communication age where the advertiser is the strong active message sender and the audience is the submissive passive receiver, new media creates an equal relationship between the advertiser (the message sender) and the audience (the receiver) in the communication process. Therefore, the attitude of the sender needs to change accordingly. To be more specific, instead of imposing the message on the audiences and pushing them to spread it, as was done in the mass media communication age, it is time for the brands to go backstage. The interaction can be compared to a game: all the brands need to do is give the audiences the driving force and suggest the path and rules, then hand back the initiative to the audiences and let them finish the rest of the game. Simply put, it is to make the audiences proactively want to participate in the interactive activity that is pre-set by the brand. However, it

does not mean that the brands have no control over the process. But it is important to make the audience feel they have a contribution to make the event a hot topic.

The final chapter highlights the limitations of this thesis as well as points out the direction for future research. Finally, the main findings of the study are summarized.

Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the research results in terms of fashion and Chinese women; interaction; the microblogging audience and the collision and coexistence of old and new media, expecting to shed further light on this study. Recommendations were made accordingly so that microblogging can be better employed by fashion brands to reach Chinese consumers.

In the following chapter, the limitation of this study will be pointed out, and the possibility of future study will be discussed. Finally, the conclusion of the whole thesis will be addressed to render a synopsis of the study.

Chapter Six: Limitations, Future Direction and Conclusion

This chapter first addresses the limitations of this thesis and makes suggestions for future research. Finally, the thesis is summarized and main findings are underscored.

Limitations

This thesis has a number of limitations which could be taken into consideration for future research. First, samples were collected only on Weibo.com. However, there are other major microblogging platforms in China as well such as Tencent, Sohu, or 163. Therefore, the samples of the study are not representative enough to generalize the findings of the study. In future research, more media types, especially traditional media, could be employed in order to study the relation between fashion and Chinese women.

Second, this study used the number of retweets to present the audiences' attitudes towards the tweets without actually getting in touch with the audiences to find out their opinions. Since this research only employed content analysis, the limitations of content analysis apply to this study. Berger (2011) maintains that content analysis cannot indicate the cause for the phenomenon. Hence, survey or interview could be conducted in future research in order to grasp the audiences' ideas.

Lastly, though I have tried my best to be as objective as possible when designing the research, collecting and analyzing the data as well as interpreting the findings, it is impossible to completely eliminate personal bias, and as a point of full disclosure it should be noted that the researcher is Chinese. Hopefully, the researchers' origin in the Chinese culture that was studied has added value to the discussion.

Future Direction

Despite the limitations mentioned above, to the best of my knowledge this study is the first research that investigated fashion brands' application of microblogging in China and related it to feminist study. Future study on microblogging communication models or the application of microblogging could obtain more generalizable results that could work in given contexts. This direction could possibly contribute to evolving existing communication models or even create new communication models that are more suitable to new media.

Another promising direction is to go deeper into Chinese feminist study. Not only did the feminist movement in China suffer from being an attachment to larger social revolutions, but also even the study of feminism in China suffers from this phenomenon. As stated in chapter 2, Chinese feminist movement never put the well-being of women on the central stage because this feminist movement is an afterthought to serve the main theme of major social revolutions (Lin, 2005). Moreover, women's issues in China have not yet garnered enough attention, and the study of Chinese women is quite limited, accordingly. The lack of systematic study of modern Chinese women hinders not only the wellbeing of Chinese women but also the better development of the society and the country. Thus, study of the relation between media and Chinese women in the economic and cultural transition periods would be of tremendous value.

Conclusion

Using feminist theory and uses and gratifications theory, this thesis investigated the cult of fashion brands in China and the application of microblogging. This study employed both quantitative and qualitative content analysis to examine the tweets of the fashion brands: Burberry, Louis Vuitton, and Bvlagri.

The research identified the most popular microblogging communication patterns employed by fashion brands. First, fashion brands cover various topics in their tweets ranging from the products, celebrities, fashion events, to music, art, and so on. Secondly, the primary method for fashion brands to promote themselves is to take advantage of the fame of celebrities and big fashion events to garner people's attention. They integrate their products in the topic of celebrities or fashion events in order to create a strong and highly desirable brand image for common people. Thirdly, though products, celebrities and fashion events are the most popular categories in fashion brands' Weibo.com promotion, other topics are also introduced quite often. Fashion brands also interact with their followers and share with them the history and knowledge of the brands in order to build a customer-friendly impression through microblogging. Lastly, the branding effort on microblogging platforms is not isolated from the fashion brands' holistic marketing strategy. Fashion brands' tweets, product-related or not, echo their brand image.

Moreover, the pattern of each tweet is not limited to one topic for one tweet. Sometimes, fashion brands focus on propagating one specific topic while most of the time they integrate several topics in one tweet to enrich the content.

It is worth noting that social media still have some limitations, ethical concerns for instance, as does Weibo.com. The worship for the number of followers has shown its negative effect on the quality of tweets. However, the advantages of these new media still outweigh the disadvantages, and the merits can be readily exploited while avoiding the demerits.

The research also analyzed the latent content of the fashion brands' tweets. In their tweets fashion brands try to deliver positive values that are closely related to the brand image in order to increase the brand's intangible assets (such as brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand association,

and perception of quality) which help establish a competitive brand (Zhou & Zhu, 2011). Those abstract notions do not directly contribute to sales, rather, they gradually establish a distinctive image and build a legacy for the brand. The values conveyed through the fashion brands tweets deliver positive energy to the audience and encourage Chinese women to pursue their inner desire for confidence and freedom. Based on the research findings, a conclusion was made that fashion appears to play a positive role in emancipating contemporary Chinese women. However, an interesting finding is that even though the fashion brands promote positive concepts that are closely related to their brands, only some of the themes are embraced by the audiences while the others appear to be less well received. To some extent this finding reflects that Chinese women confront the restrictions of society and cast off the constraining stereotypes such as being submissive to and dependent on the males in their family, favouring notions of freedom and independence. On the other hand, they also submit to the pressure of lavishing themselves with luxury in order to gain others' approval.

In addition to offering the above-mentioned insights, this thesis also provided some suggestions for fashion brands to adopt when employing microblogging in the future. However, considering the complex social and cultural situation of Chinese women and the early stage of social media, the relationship between Chinese women and social media requires further exploration.

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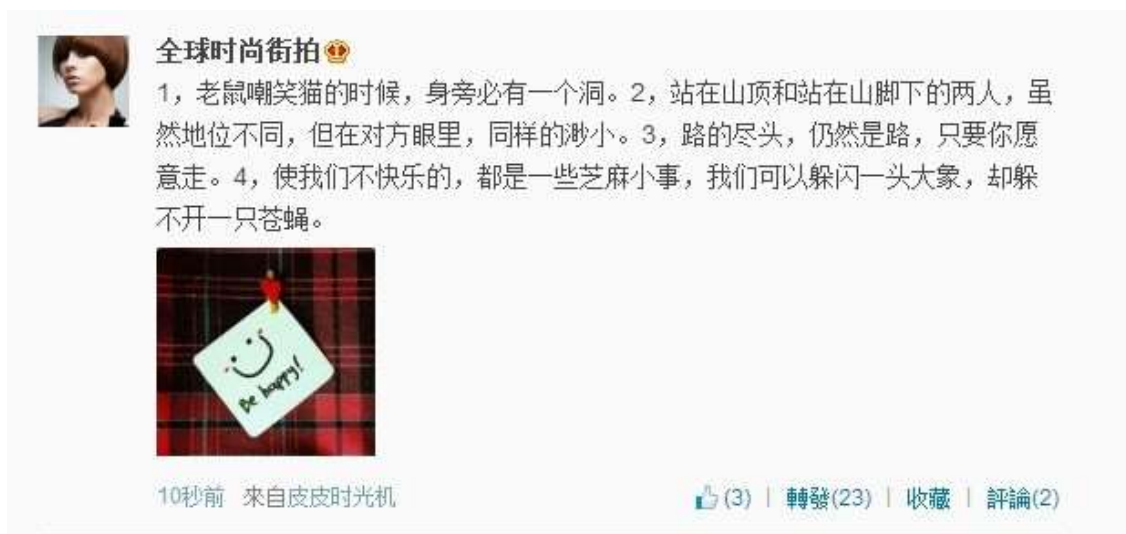
Appendix A

Layout of Weibo.com Post Section



Appendix B

Example of Post with Picture



Appendix C

Example of Post with Video

 **段子之精选** 🏆

【国外最搞笑、最酷宝宝广告超强集锦！想不笑都难】超逗搞笑宝宝广告，无敌了。你觉得呢？唉~~~怎么就没有这样个性的搞笑宝宝广告呢。


<http://t.cn/zY7qalR>



10秒前 来自皮皮时光机

👍 (2) | 轉發 (4) | 收藏 | 評論 (1)

Appendix D

 **luxixi5**

Silver wings, slowly fading out of sight

10秒前 来自iPhone客户端

👍 | 轉發 | 收藏 | 評論

Appendix E

Tweets Working Title

1. “The Thames”
2. “Burberry Beijing gala”
3. “Christopher Bailey is going to answer the questions from the audiences”
4. “Louis Vuitton Paris-Shanghai Express”
5. “2012/13 FW fashion show”

6. “Handbag from this season’s collection”
7. “The exhibition of 125 Years of Italian Jewels by Bvlgari”
8. “The exhibition of 125 Years of Italian Jewels by Bvlgari at Aurora Art Museum”
9. “Save the children”
10. “English actress and Burberry’s spokesperson Rosie Huntington-Whiteley”
11. “Burberry white tickets”
12. “Start to countdown”
13. “Listen to Elton John in the office”
14. “Work hard on style”
15. “Valentine’s Day”
16. “Thank you for join the discussion of the journey of Louis Vuitton”
17. “Thank you for join the discussion held by LV and Jiebang.com”
18. “Journeys Awards”
19. “Thank you for participating in the activity on Weibo.com”
20. “Chinese director and actors”
21. “The Serpenti collection”
22. “Bvlgari at Bazaar and Huayi Brother Media Charity Night”
23. “Bvlgari fine jewellery”

Appendix F

Examples of Tweets Containing Sub-themes

Sub-theme	No.	Working title	Content of tweet
Luxurious	6	Handbag from this season's collection"	This season's LV handbags are as always beyond your imagination. These handbags are made of precious leather such as goatskin, ponyskin, ostrich leather, or crocodile leather. The luxurious handbags will provide you with extraordinary experience.
Glamorous	21	"The Serpenti collection"	Tonight, super model Sui He wears diamond bracelet and ring from Bvlgari's Serpenti collection, together with a black dress. She looks modern and elegant. This outfit helped her attract a lot of attention.
Caring	9	"Save the children"	Bvlgari announces that part of the profits raised through the sale of a specially designed ring was donated to the <i>Save the Children</i> charity, and the total number of donation is over \$20,000,000. The latest photo shoot by Renowned photographer Fabrizio Ferri has released to the public. All the celebrities wore the ring in the photos and expressed the support and care for the children in poverty with their sincere face.
Free	4	"Louis Vuitton Paris-Shanghai Express"	Life is a travel, looking for self and freedom. During 7.12-7.31, if you follow Louis Vuitton and comment on "the Meaning of Travel" to share your experience and thoughts about travelling, you will have a chance to win a LV travel book as gift. We will select 10

			lucky participants.
Art	8	“The exhibition of 125 Years of Italian Jewels by Bvlgari at Aurora Art Museum”	The exhibition of 125 Years of Italian Jewels will be presented from 2012.2.17 to 2.12.4.17 at Aurora Art Museum in Shanghai. Over 600 pieces of Elizabeth Taylor’s private collection will be shown to the public for the first time. From now on to 2012.3.2, follow Bvlgari, retweet this tweet and @ three friends you would like to go to the exhibition together, you will have a chance to win two tickets to the exhibition. Bvlgari invites you to enjoy this once-in-a-life-time experience.
Interactive	3	“Christopher Bailey is going to answer the questions from the audiences”	Chief Creative Director of Burberry Christopher Baily is going to answer the questions we gathered from the followers regarding this show.