AN EXAMINATION OF CHINESE SOCIAL MEDIA PROFILES AND
TRAVEL INFORMATION SHARING

by

Ruiqing Fang

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Hospitality
Information Management

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ABSTRACT

The influence of social media has since been recognized by the travel industry and scholars alike as having a significant impact on consumer behavior. This study examined Chinese travelers and analyzed factors that would affect the amount and nature of social media travel information sharing behaviors. The data comprised five hundred and sixty social media extracted from two dominant social networks in China and had twenty one variables of interest.

Social media travel information engagement was measured based on amount of information shared by participants. Findings indicate that both demographic characters and social media involvement levels have a significant impact on travel information sharing on social media networks.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

With a constant increase of 5% in 2011 (World Tourism Organization, 2012), the tourism industry continues to be a powerful contributor to social and economic development worldwide. The World Tourism Organization estimates that in 2012, tourism arrivals will grow 3-4%.

With one-quarter of the world’s population, China has been widely recognized as one of the largest markets for tourist departures and one of the largest potential buying markets. The Chinese economy has maintained an increase in growth of over 6% for decades, since the 1980s. Also, a 400% increase in personal income from 2000 to 2011 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2012) has lead to a fast-rising middle class in China. Chinese travelers are recognized as big spenders by most destination countries and regions. According to a China Tourism Agency (Also known as “CTA”) report, the average per capita spending of Chinese tourists in France was 1,300 Euros ($1,875.6) in 2010, much higher than that of Americans (880 Euros or $1,269.7) or Japanese (850 Euros or $1,226.4).

Also in 2010, a survey conducted by Travelport(2010) pointed out that Chinese travelers were the most inclined to use social networking sites to research business travel, and the third most likely to do so for leisure travel. As a market that is formed
by 1.6 billion people, China’s market could have a significant impact on future travel business. Thus, an understanding of the intentions and behaviors of this important tourist group would be valuable for the travel industry. This study aims to find out about Chinese social media users’ online sharing behavior about their travel information, and to profile the tourist that has the highest possibility of sharing their travel experience.

Social media websites started to appear in China in 2005. This paper narrows its scope on two social media websites: Renren.com and QQ zone.com. These two websites, which are explained in more detail below, are recognized as the social media websites that have achieved tremendous success in China. Initially targeted at Chinese university students, Renren.com opened its door to public users in 2009. Thus, most Renren.com users are under the age of 35. Launched in 2002 by Tencent, QQ zone.com, which is part of an online communication tool named QQ, is more age diverse, and contains more data about middle-aged users as compared to Renren.com.

According to Vasalou, Jionson, and Courvoisier (2010), photographs were less important to early users as compared to intermediate and advanced users. As a user gets more involved with social media, there is a higher possibility that this user will share photos and create tags on a social media website. One study, which was done by Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfeld(2007), proved that personal characteristics and the demographic data of users have influence on social media online personal behaviors.

This paper will aim at defining the travel experience sharing behaviors of Chinese tourists on social media websites and developing a model that could help
tourism marketing agencies target travelers who have the highest possibility of sharing their travel experience on social media websites, which could help the agencies to build more efficient tourism marketing plans and increase their social media marketing influence.

Tourism

According to Goeldner and Ritchie (Tourism, tenth edition, 2006), tourism is defined by dictionary as the processes, activities, and outcomes arising from the relationships and the interactions among tourists, tourism suppliers, host governments, host communities, and surrounding environments that are involved in the attracting and hosting of visitors.

Types of Tourism

Tourism has expanded tremendous for decades due to the development of new transportation methods. Travel expenditure in United States of domestic and international travelers was about $777.2 billion in 2008 (Miller & Washington, 2009). There are numerous ways to categorize tourism based on different criteria. For the purpose of this study, a category defined by WTO was adopted: international tourism, internal tourism, domestic tourism, national tourism.

Importance of Tourism Industry

According to the newly released report from WTO in Jan 2012, international tourist arrivals grew by 4.4% in 2011 to a total 980 million, up from 939 million in 2010. UNWTO Secretary-General, Taleb Rifai said: “international tourism hit new
records in 2011 despite the challenging conditions. This sector directly responsible for 5\% of the world’s GDP, 6\% of total exports and employing one out of every 12 people in this overall economy situation.” Also WTTC forecasts that the world travel and tourism economy’s contribution to gross domestic product is expected to total 11.3 percent ($7.8 trillion) in 2015. (Goeldner & Ritchie, Tourism, tenth edition, 2006)

UNWTO forecasts international tourism will continue its growing trends in 2012 although at a slower rate. Arrivals are expected to increase by 3\% to 4\%, reaching the historical one billion mark by the end of the year. The stronger growth will be regained by Asia and the Pacific and Africa (4\% to 6\%). (UNWTO Confidence Index, 2012)

These figures show that tourism has grown to be an activity of worldwide importance and significance. For a number of countries, tourism is the largest commodity in international trade. In many others, it ranks among the top three industries. Tourism has grown rapidly to become a major social and economic force in the world. (Goeldner & Ritchie, Tourism, tenth edition, 2006)

*Inbound Chinese Tourism Market*

Inbound Chinese Tourism means tourists from all around the world travel to China as a destination. Travel within China has become much easier every year with tremendous investment in transportation such as railways and highways, constant improvement of economy, and increase of personal income. Improvement of tourism market management, rich history and eastern culture, and lots of famous attractions are also main factors that driving the increase of inbound tourism. In 2006 China
received 49.6 million international visitors, making it the fourth most-visited country in the world. (Wikipedia)

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<td>Germany</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>Malaysia</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>21.5</td>
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Table 1 - Top 10 tourist arrivals country

Table 1 shows that in 2009 China overtook Spain became the world third largest tourist arrival destination. World Tourism Organization forecasts that in 2012 the Asia pacific will continue its 5% growth at tourist arrivals.

Outbound Chinese Tourism Market

CTA (China Tourism Academy) reports continue strong growth in domestic travel and outbound travel in the first three quarters in 2011. Figure 1 shown that number of Chinese outbound tourists is following a strong development trends. Number of outbound tourists from developed countries like German is slightly declining partly because the world overall economy and the unstable situation in some countries.
As described before, the rising middle class income and the desire to see the rest of the world will continue make China one of the most significant outbound market for the world in this and the coming decade. The Chinese government is gradually losing the control on foreign travel.

Mainland Chinese are currently able to take organized leisure tours to over 100 countries that have "Approved Destination Status". By 2020 China is projected to produce 100 million outbound trips going to every corner of the globe, making it the largest producer of tourists in the world, by far. (Wikipedia)


Figure 1-International Tourist Departures by Country (2002-2009)

*Chinese Tourists*

Chinese tourists also recognized by most destination countries as big spenders, which make them a desired market. According to CTA, more than a quarter of
Chinese outbound tourists (26.85 percent) say shopping takes up the largest share of their expenditure.

In 2011, Chinese travelers were expected to spend a record high of $55 billion on their overseas trips, boosted partly by an appreciating Chinese currency, the CTA said. Global Blue Group has recently published a report said that Chinese shoppers has been the biggest spenders in France for years.

Chinese travelers spent 650 million Euros ($937.8 million) on duty-free shopping in France in 2010, accounting for 22 percent of the total of such spending by foreigners in France, it said.

**Social Media**

Social media has recently caught more attention in the hospitality industry than before. The huge influence of social media has been accepted by the industry. One reason for the growing importance of online forums is that younger customers, often called “Generation Y,” constantly rely on chat rooms, texting, and video messaging—thereby rapidly passing along their opinions and experiences (Pantelidis, 2010). More and more outbound tourists are from this generation. Also, based on past research (Tapscott, 2008), this young generation has a huge influence on their parents’ travel destination choices. The tourism industry needs to establish their knowledge about this generation’s online behavior and remain in touch with social media websites.
Definition of Social Media

Any kind of platform used to build online communities, where users from various part of the globe can come across and connect with each other, is known as social software (Balas, 2006). According to Baker and Green (2005), social software is considered to be a fast growing phenomenon and one of the most representative form of interaction that provide the common person a voice. Social software is changing the way information gets reported online. Almost anyone with an inclination to write and with an access to Internet connection can potentially get his or her message across (Pantelidis, 2010).

With the rise of social media and online forums of various types, word of mouth has transcended the traditional format and has become a critical element in many consumers’ patronage decision (Pantelidis, 2010). The practice of passing a marketing message through online media has become known as “word of mouse” (Helm 2000; Gelb and Sundaram 2002; Riedl, Konstan, and Vrooman 2002; Henning-Thurau et al. 2004).

According to Kaplan and Haenlein there are six different types of social media: collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), blogs and microblogs (e.g., Twitter), content communities (e.g., YouTube), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft), and virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life). Technologies include: blogs, picture-sharing, blogs, wall-postings, email, instant messaging, music-sharing, crowd sourcing and voice over IP, to name a few. Many of these social media services can be integrated via social network aggregation platforms.
Renren.com

Social network services (SNS) are among the most popular sites on the Internet today. They are also among the most persuasive (Fogg & Iizawa, 2008). Built in 2005, Renren.com is the biggest social media network in China, with 30 million active users monthly. The users cover all age groups. Renren.com has an average of 4.3 billion updates and interactions every single day.

The Renren Network, formerly known as the Xiaonei Network, is similar to Facebook and is very popular among Chinese college students. Xiaonei was started in December 2005 by University of Delaware graduate Wang Xing, and Tsinghua University graduates Wang Huiwen, Lai Binqiang, and Tang Yang. Xiaonei.com was acquired by Oak Pacific Interactive (OPI), a Chinese Internet consortium that created a similar college social network called 5Q. In August 2009, Xiaonei officially changed its name to Renren, as well as its domain to www.renren.com. This name change from “inside the school” (Xiaonei校内) to “everybody” (renren人人) reflected Oak Pacific’s expansion aspirations: to no longer be a network dedicated to students, but to be the biggest Chinese social network website, which is spread throughout society.

Renren is a typical SNS, with a variety of functions with its own characteristics. Renren Network’s main functions are: Profile, Friends, Applications and Games, Points and Levels, Photograph Sharing, Status, Music, and Friends Recently Visited.

As Xiaonei caters mainly to college students, the key information used to make one’s identity effective is college, high school, middle school, and hometown. At
present, 32,000 universities and colleges, 56,000 high schools, and 85,000 companies in China, and 1,500 universities in 29 other countries are available on Xiaonei’s confirmation system. The social networks for each of these specified colleges, schools, and companies have been established. In the additional section of personal profiles, users can also enter information about their contact information, hobbies, favorite music, movies, the clubs they joined, and so on. To personalize the profile, Xiaonei has also developed functions to edit the profile music and background (Wikipedia).

Renren users earn “points” for various activities, such as logging in regularly, posting updates, and receiving comments and replies from contacts. As users earn points, their “level” on the website increases, and at certain levels users gain extra privileges, such as access to additional emoticons, skins for their profile, and the ability to view other user’s profiles without the others’ knowledge.

**QQ zone.com**

Built in 2001, Tencent QQ, generally referred to as QQ, is the most popular free messaging computer in mainland China. As of September 30th, 2011, there were 711.7 million active user accounts on QQ, possibly making it the world’s second largest online community. In February 2011, QQ.com ranked 10th overall in the Alexa Internet rankings just behind Twitter, ranked 9th.

QQ zone.com as a part of the QQ service, offers a social media platform for QQ account users to build their online profiles, share pictures, update their status, and other functions, in order to connect with their QQ friends. Launched four years earlier than Renren.com, QQ zone.com involves more age groups.
Purpose of the Study

According to a meta-analysis study that was done in 2010 by author, which analyzed all research about social media that were published in top 30 research journals from 2000 to 2010, most of researches were focusing on general topic instead of specific topic. As shown in Table 2, consumer online behavior was studied by many researchers.

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Table 2-Social media research subject trends
Social media users’ behavior was well documented by many studies (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Fogg & Iizawa, 2008). So is a culture’s influence on people’s outbound travel behavior, in other research. But there are very few articles that have been published on the linkage between Chinese users’ social media behavior and their travel experiences. The number of Chinese people that have registered on social networks has increased 407% in two years. The influence of social media cannot be ignored by the tourism industry. This article aims to investigate how travel/trip information is shared on Chinese social media platforms, explore relationships between demographic characteristics and the amount of travel/trip information sharing on Chinese social media platforms, and examine the relationship between social media engagement and the nature of trip/travel information sharing on Chinese social media platforms.

RQ 1: What are the key demographic characteristics that predict trip/travel information sharing among Chinese social media users?

RQ 2: Does trip/travel information sharing vary based on the level of social media engagement among Chinese social media users?

RQ 3: What are the non-demographic factors that influence the nature of trip/travel information sharing?
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ellison and Boyd (2008) documented the definition and history of social media in their study thoroughly. They identified three characteristics of social media networks: they allow users to “(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.”

A good deal of research has been done in the social media network area. Much of it focused on the motivations and activities of social media users.

Joinson (2008) identified that social media users created content and value through five main uses: (1) posting photographs, (2) playing games, (3) quizzes, (4) applications and (5) updating their status. They involved others or became involved by others with nine uses: (1) viewing photographs, (2) being tagged in photographs, (3) tagging photographs, (4) discovering applications because their friends had added them, (5) organizing and joining events, (6) receiving a friend request, (7) seeing what people had put as their status, (8) using advanced search to look for specific types of people and (9) joining groups. This study also further proved that uses pertaining to
photographs and status updates led users to visit Facebook more often, while applications increased the time users spent on the site. (Vasalou et al., 2010)

Vasalou, Joinson, and Cournoisier also proved in their study (2010) that early users, as compared to advanced users, reported higher importance ratings for games and applications. They also found that photographs were less important to early users than to intermediate and advanced users (Vasalou et al., 2010). The longer users were on Facebook, the less important games and applications became, and photographs gained importance instead.

Hargittai (2007) claims in his study that social network site users’ choices are related to their ethnicity and race. While users’ cultural affiliation may mobilize them towards or against a particular service, even when different cultural groups adopt the same social network site, their motivations, uses, and time investment in the site cannot be assumed to be universal.

A study that was done by B.J. Fogg and Daisuke Iizawa in 2008 titled “Online Persuasion in Facebook and Mixi: A Cross-Cultural Comparison,” also proved that users’ social media behaviors can be influenced by culture. This study compared two different popular social networking websites: Facebook in the United States (US) and Mixi in Japan. Through comparison, the study found that some social networking functions that are provided by the service provider reflect the cultural difference and thus, the online behavior differences of users in two different countries. This study proved that people’s social media behavior will have a strong connection with their
cultural differences. The Asian social media users’ behavior tends to be influenced by their collectivism and interdependence.

Also, Vogt and Knapman (2007) found five key motivations that lead people to use social media websites: the need for personal achievement or recognition, the need to be individual or creative, the need for friendship or belonging, the need to discover, explore or have new experiences, and finally the need for sex and relationships. Kelly (2008) found that the need for recognition and attention from friends was an important factor, as well as information seeking regarding their interests. A recent study (Vasalou et al., 2010) indicates that social searching is the dominant motivation for using Facebook across all countries that were measured in this research.

Several studies studied user online behavior and proved that profile users are more likely to connect with their peers or people they meet in social events offline.

Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2006) studied 1440 first year students at Michigan State University about their Facebook usage. The study found that users anticipate that their profiles will be searched or viewed by peers, not outsiders or strangers. Users tended to use Facebook to connect with people they met offline, either by virtue of prior friendship, common classes, or having met at a social event, rather than building new relationships online. This study also concluded that “users from this particular community are primarily using Facebook to increase their awareness of those in their offline community.” Users reported in this study that they felt Facebook profiles represented them accurately and positively.
Another study done by Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2008) further clarified that groups that shared obvious offline connections, like friends and acquaintances, were more likely to be seen as an audience over those who were either not connected offline or those who were not peers (such as faculty).

Jansen et al. (2011) studied social media marketing. In this study, Jansen indicated that social media can be a powerful tool for online marketing. He found out that being connected and being engaged with multiple or particular SNSs created a difference in information seeking and sharing behavior. This study clarified that people might trust their social network more than sponsored information gathering practices on these social networking platforms themselves, which has implications for advertising and information dissemination via social networking.

Tapscott (2008) also analyzed teenagers’ social media information searching behavior. Tapscott (2008) found that teenagers are turning to their friends for online shopping advice. While teenagers do not directly spend a lot of money online yet, they spend a lot of time on the Internet consulting about products. Also, according to the data, people age 21 and under influence 81% of their families’ apparel purchases and 52% of their car choices.

A recent study (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2007), addressed signaling theory. After studying the type of information that can be placed in profiles, this study suggested that profile elements act as signals that may prove something about the identity of the user. This study also proved that there is a strong correlation between user characteristics and the number of friends. This study found that undergraduate
members have more friends than any other groups in the network. Females have slightly more friends than males do.

These studies indicate that social media is a tool with high impact potential for online marketing. Knowing about ways to influence social media users and to affect a target user profile could be essential for further marketing. The meta-analysis study that was done earlier by the author shows that there are still very limited documents combining social media marketing with a specific part of the hospitality industry. Therefore, the author decided to take a narrow scope and different direction in studying the hidden connection between social media travel information sharing and tourism destination marketing.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Research Questions

Three research questions are identified in this study, as following:

RQ 1: What are the key demographic characteristics that predict trip/travel information sharing among Chinese social media users?

RQ 2: Does trip/travel information sharing vary based on the level of social media engagement among Chinese social media users?

RQ 3: What are the non-demographic factors that influence the nature of trip/travel information sharing?

Vasalou et al. (2010) did a study to identify the motivations of different levels of social media users in 2010. Early users were found to be more engaged with games and applications than advanced users. Photograph sharing was found to be more important to advanced users rather than to early users. This study gave foundation to expect that there will be a relationship between social media engagement level and travel information sharing.
Research Design

An exploratory study was adopted to achieve the goal of this research. An exploratory study is particularly valuable when an area is first investigated (McMillan, 2006). An exploratory study usually contains statistics, such as frequencies or percentages, and averages. Often graphs and other visual images of the results are used (McMillan, 2008).

The researcher will examine profiles on each of the social media websites to collect data on the variables that were developed based on the research objectives. The current travel information sharing situation on Chinese social media networks will be described by this study. Relationships will then be analyzed to address the factors that influence social media information sharing.

Sampling Frame and Data Collection Method

A convenient sample is used in this study. Because social media profile information is sensitive, the researcher would not be able to access the profile information without the user permission. Only investigator’s social network friends were asked to join this study to give permission to collect data on their profiles. Since most of the users on Renren.com are under age 30, profiles that over age 30 were purposely collected on QQzone.com in order to reach diverse demographic background. A consent inform letter will be sent out to all friends on investigator’s social network through two websites to explain this study. With the permission from
friends, all the information that related to research variables will be collected anonymously without any possibility to address anybody in particular.

The research variables are shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Variable</th>
<th>Attributes or Levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>&lt;20, 20-25, 26-30, 31-35, 35-40, 40-45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male, Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (Li et al., 2011)</td>
<td>High school, tertiary education, undergraduate, postgraduate, missing value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Born In</td>
<td>Eastern, Middle, Western</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation (Vasalou et al., 2010)</td>
<td>University students, working full-time, working part-time, other (retired, unemployed, not working), missing value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status (Li et al., 2011)</td>
<td>Married, Unmarried, Missing Value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Location</td>
<td>Eastern, Middle, Western</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Music</td>
<td>Rock, Soft, Pop, Rap</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Media Involvement Variable</th>
<th>Attributes or Levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Friends (Vasalou et al., 2010)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User Level</td>
<td>1-54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Device used to log into social media website</td>
<td>Mobile device, laptop</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Travel Information Sharing Variable</th>
<th>Attributes or Levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Table 3- Variables Used In the Study.

These measurement variables were developed with several research professionals in the areas of hospitality and statistics. Also, cross-material validity was used in order to strengthen validity. According to the meta-analysis study that was done earlier by the author, some of the variables used in this study were identified to be the most popular variables among social media research.
Variable Definitions

User level: A continuous number assigned to the user by the social media website, based on the user’s online activities and engagement level. A higher number indicates a relatively higher engagement level. In this sample set, the user level ranges from 1 to 54.

Device used to log in: A function that is offered by these two social media websites. A sign is shown every time the user logs into his or her account to indicate the device used to log in.

The nature of the pictures: For this variable, two categories were created with research professionals: symbolic attraction and non-symbolic attraction. The symbolic attraction category includes pictures of famous destination attractions that can be easily recognized or recalled by other people who see these pictures. The non-symbolic attraction category contains pictures that do not belong to the symbolic attraction category. (For example, a picture of Empire Building is a symbolic attraction picture, while a picture of a cat on the street is a non-symbolic attraction picture.)

Device used to upload picture: The social media website will identify the device used to upload a picture onto a user profile.

Travel sharing engagement: This variable was created by manipulating the number of times of sharing variable and the number of pictures shared variable. Travel sharing engagement is calculated by dividing the number of pictures
shared with the number of times of sharing. This variable gave the investigator a good idea about how many travel pictures were shared per time, which is a good indicator of the user engagement level.

**Data Analysis**

The data will first be cleaned and visualized using SPSS. A $t$-test and an analysis of variance (ANOVA) will be used to examine the relationships between variables.
Chapter 4

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

As described before in the methodology section, a convenience sample was used in this study. Coding and observation were used as data collecting methods. All of the data was kept in such a way that no personal information can be identified from the dataset or the research.

This method generated 560 participants, which ensured that all age groups were covered. The participants were Renren.com and QQzone.com users who are over the age of 18. Unlike the university sample that took part in most of the previous studies, both university students and full-time workers were part of the sample.

Descriptive Results

Table 4 shows the composite of sample. 71.5% of the sample profiles were collected from Renren.com. Samples from QQzone.com accounted for 28.5% of the data. Figure 2 represents the percentage visually in bar chart.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Social Media Networks</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Renren.com</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>71.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QQzone.com</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4-Number of profiles from Two Different Networks.

Figure 2-Bar Chart of Number of Profiles from Two Different Networks
Demographic variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Variables</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Renren.com</th>
<th>Qzone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>51.8%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>93.3%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>82.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>High School or less</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tertiary Education</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>71.8%</td>
<td>42.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University Student</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Full Time Worker</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>78.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part Time Worker</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>83.8%</td>
<td>91.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Island</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current locations</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>60.2%</td>
<td>81.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Western</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Island</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>23.30</td>
<td>38.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5-Demographic Data Across Two Website

The data collection form was organized into three parts. The first part collected general demographic information, as shown below in Table 5. From Renren.com, 51.8% of the sample is male and 48% is female, while from Qzone.com, the percentage of female is higher than that of male. The majority of the samples from Renren.com have undergraduate degrees. From QQzone.com, tertiary education and undergraduate equally contain 40% of the profiles. Most of the users in this dataset
were from the middle part of China. The age mean from Renren.com is 23.30, while that from QQzone.com is 38.08. This indicates that reaching a more diverse age background by including QQzone.com was accomplished. Because of the age difference of the samples from these two different websites, 93% of the sample from Renren.com is unmarried and most of the participants from QQzone.com are married. More than 50% of the participants from Renren.com are undergraduate students, while most of the QQzone.com participants are full-time workers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Skewness</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>27.53</td>
<td>24.00</td>
<td>8.67</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6-Age- Descriptive Statistics (N=560)

As Table 6 shows, the age variable ranks from 20 to 55. The mean of the overall age data is 28, with a standard deviation of 8.7. The median age is 24, which indicates that even though the effort to include diverse age data was accomplished, the majority of the sample is younger than 25.
Figure 3-Gender Present by Bar Chart (N=560)

Figure 3 is a bar chart that represents the gender difference of all of the 560 profiles. The number of profiles is equally divided into two gender groups (male=49.8%, female=50.2%).

Figure 4-Bar Chart of Education (N=560)
In the overall sample, slightly less than three-fourths (72%) of the participants were college/university educated or higher. The four categories of degrees that were captured in the study are shown in Figure 4. Income level was not collected in this study, because it is impossible to capture this from social media profiles, and it is also highly correlated with education at 0.9 level.

Figure 5-Bar Chart of Regions of China (N=560)

The regional data shows in Figure 5 recorded regions where the participants were born in. The sample is not evenly distributed among the four different groups. Most of the participants in this study were from the middle part of China.
In Figure 6, participants’ current geographic location was also recorded in this study to measure the relationship between location and travel information sharing. The middle area of China contains the largest number of participants, and the eastern area is second. In China, the eastern area is the most developed region, and it generates a large amount of outbound and inbound tourists. The western and island areas were excluded from analysis during the data process procedure because less than 1% of the data fell into these two categories.
As to the overall sample shown in Figure 7, most of the participants are unmarried (70%), and the percentage of married participants is 26%. Since only one participant is divorced, this category was not included in the analysis.
As shown in Figure 8, together, university students (40%) and full-time workers (48%) accounted for almost 90% of the sample. The other three categories: retired, part-time workers, and unemployed each accounted for 2-6% of the participants.

**Social Media Involvement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Skewness</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Friends</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>310.27</td>
<td>256.00</td>
<td>217.04</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>5.19</td>
<td>1150.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User Level</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>18.41</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>9.85</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>54.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7-Descriptive Statistics of Number of Friends and User Level.
The number of friends has been considered one of the major indicators of social media involvement in many previous studies. In Table 7, even though the mean of the variable is 310, the standard deviation is 256, which means 68% of the data fell between 50 and 570. The fact that the number of friends is a wide range provides a good indicator to measure the travel information sharing behavior of different levels of users. Most of the users that participated in this research have around 200 friends.

Figure 9-Distribution Curve of User Level (N=560)

The user level is a continuous number that these two Chinese social media platforms give to users based on their activity level. Table 7 shows that the mean of
the user level in this sample is 18. With a standard deviation of 9.8, 98% of the participants have user levels less than 45, as presented in Figure 9. Only 1.5% of the user levels in this sample are higher than 50. Level 14, with a 10% valid percentage, is the most common level for the participants in the sample.

![Figure 10 - Device Used to Log Into Social Media Platform](image)

As smart phones and tablets are very common now in China, this study also recorded the device that participants used to log into their account, in order to measure the relationship between the log in device and the amount of information shared. The log in device is identified by the social media platform as a function when the user is online. As indicated in Figure 10, More than 60% of the users frequently used a laptop to log in to their account, and 35% of the participants tended to use smart phones or
tablets to log in to the social media websites, especially after 2010. The difference between the two groups is expected to get smaller as the number of smart phone users increase.

_Social Media Travel Information Engagement_

This set of variables captures different aspects of the travel information sharing habits of Chinese social media users.

![Graph showing intentions to share travel information](image.png)

**Figure 11-Intentions to Share Travel Information (N=560)**

As shown in Figure 11, 560 social network profiles were studied. 40% of the participants did not share any relevant travel information since they created their profile. Whereas 58% percent of users shared text or picture information about their travel experience on their accounts. 8 profiles were locked by their users as they don’t
want their pictures to be seen by any of their friends on social network. Even though more than 50% of participants shared travel information on social media profiles, a large number in the sample set, more than 40%, did not share information on social media.

Figure 12-Travel Information Sharing Method (0=No, 1= Yes)(N=331)

Travel Information Sharing Method variable captured the number of users who only shared their travel information through their status updates. Figure 12 indicates that among 331 users who shared travel information, 96% of them shared pictures and only 4% percent of them shared their status only, with no pictures. The 229 profiles that did not have any related travel information were counted as system missing in this variable.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No of Times Travel Albums Shared</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>328</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26.00</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>3.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8-Descriptive Results Albums Shared

Number of times that users shared travel albums is highlighted in the descriptive statistics as outlined in Table 8. In the frequency test, 90% of the users shared under 6 albums. There were two profiles that indicated that they shared more than 20 times was also there in the sample.

Figure 13-Explanation of Pictures (0 = No, 1 = Yes) (N = 325)
In Figure 13, within the group of 325 (58%) users who shared travel pictures in the sample, 80% of them wrote name of travel destination and their experience in the album. The fact that Chinese travelers like to explain their travel pictures offered a great potential for travel social media marketing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Photos of attractions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1262.00</td>
<td>86.75</td>
<td>162.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photos of restaurant</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>73.00</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>6.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photos of hotels</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photos of shopping</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photos of airlines</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9-Types of Travel Information Shared (N = 310)

Five categories of travel picture types were identified during the data collection procedure: attractions, restaurants, hotels, shopping, and airlines. The majority of the pictures (97%) about travel experiences that were shared were of attractions. As shown in Table 9, the second most popular type of travel pictures shared on these social media networks is restaurant and food pictures. Even though the restaurant and food category ranks second, it only contains 1.7% of the data. The third category, shopping, contains 0.3% of the total pictures shared. Hotels accounted for 0.2%.
But the results in table 10 proved that among 313 participants who shared travel pictures, 97% (304) of them used laptop to upload those pictures. Among Chinese travelers, even though smartphone now is very advanced on photo taking and storage, computer is still the most popular device to upload pictures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Pictures Uploaded from Device</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Smartphone</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer/Laptop</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>97.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10-Device Used to Upload Pictures

In Table 11, more than half (70%) of the pictures shared on the users’ profiles were of symbolic attractions. Non-symbolic attraction pictures accounted for 22% of the shared pictures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic Attraction</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>1262.00</td>
<td>85.4419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Symbolic Attraction</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>341.00</td>
<td>23.5419</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11-Content of Travel Pictures
Relationship Analysis

Research question 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Travel Sharing Engagement</strong></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>34.07</td>
<td>33.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>35.74</td>
<td>31.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Symbolic Picture Sharing</strong></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>51.71</td>
<td>70.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>70.80</td>
<td>90.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-Symbolic Picture Sharing</strong></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>16.30</td>
<td>23.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>21.44</td>
<td>26.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12-Amount and Content of Travel Information Presented in Means (standard deviations) and Gender Difference. (\(r=2.05, * p<.05\))

Research question 1 asked about the key demographic characteristics that related to travel information sharing. As shown in Figure 14, a statistically significant

Figure 14-ANOVA Output(N=550)

\(\textbf{Chi-Square} = 8.69, p=.003\)
relationship existed between gender and the intention to share travel information ($p < 0.01$). The results indicated that females tended to share travel information, while males tended not to. Comparing the differences within each gender group, Figure 14 shows that there was a larger difference in the female group when it comes to making decisions about whether or not to share travel information on their social media profiles.

But, as shown in Table 12, no significant relationship exists between gender and the amount of information shared, which means that among those participants who shared travel information, gender did not make a difference on how much information was shared.

Regarding the content of the travel information on the profiles, gender is significantly related with symbolic attraction pictures ($p < 0.05$). The analysis showed that females as compared to males reported higher numbers on symbolic attraction information sharing. No significant difference was reported between gender groups and non-symbolic pictures shared.
Figure 15- Bar Chart of ANOVA Output Between Education and Intention to Share Travel Information. \((\text{Chi-Square} = 9.97, \ p= .019)\)

Figure 16. Bar Chart of ANOVA Output Between Occupation and Intention to Share Travel Information \((\text{Chi-Square} = 10.13, \ p=.038)\)
As shown in Figures 15 and 16, both education and occupation reported a significant linear relationship ($p < 0.05$) with travel information sharing intention. But some of the sample category is too small, so that the assumptions of this analysis could be violated. Thus, these two significant relationships were not accepted by this study. But the author believes that with a better represented dataset, education and occupation could both have a significant relationship with travel information sharing intention.

No statistically significant relationship was found between the participants’ current locations and their intention to share travel information. As a convenience sample, the different geographic groups were not well represented by the data. A future study could examine this relationship with a better distributed dataset.

Research question 2 and 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Sample - User Levels</th>
<th>Travel Sharing Engagement</th>
<th>Symbolic Pictures Sharing</th>
<th>Non-Symbolic Pictures Sharing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Renren - User Levels</td>
<td>0.058</td>
<td>0.188**</td>
<td>0.207***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QQZone - User Levels</td>
<td>-0.043</td>
<td>-0.011</td>
<td>0.061</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13-Correlational Differences in Travel Information Sharing Across Networks. (** means the difference is significant at 0.01 level, *** means the data is significant at 0.001 level)

Research question 2 was set out to answer whether the trip/travel information sharing vary based on different social media engagement levels among Chinese users. Analysis with the overall data reported no significant relationship between user level
and travel information sharing. But when data was compared cross two websites, significant correlations were shown between user level and all related travel information sharing variables. Still no relationship was reported among data from QQzone.com. This result clarified that user level from Renren.com is good indicator for both amount and nature of travel information sharing. Participant with a higher user level was proved to be more engaged with travel information sharing compared to lower user level participants. However, the user level assigned by QQzone.com is not a good proof of travel information sharing. Travel industry should be careful if this factor is used as an indicator of travel information sharing.

Also, no relationship was found between user level and comments under travel pictures, which means the user level is not a strong indicator of user engagement with friends on social network.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Social Network</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Travel Sharing Engagement (t=0.193)</td>
<td>Renren</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>35.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>QQ</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>34.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic Pic Sharing (t=0.264)</td>
<td>Renren</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>63.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>QQ</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>60.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Symbolic Pic Sharing (t=2.54, * p&lt; .05)*</td>
<td>QQ</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>12.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Renren</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>21.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14-Differences in Amount and Nature of Travel Information Sharing Across Networks
Research question 3 aimed to capture the factors that influence the nature of travel information sharing. Comparing to travel information sharing data across networks, no significant differences were reported in either amount of information shard or amount of symbolic picture shared. In table 14, a statistically significant difference was evident in the amount of non-symbolic attraction pictures shared across the two social networks with Renren.com showing higher levels here compared to that of QQzone.com.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Device</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Handheld</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>19.93</td>
<td>9.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>356</td>
<td>17.49</td>
<td>10.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 15-Difference between user level and log in device (N=560)

As shown in Table 15, the study revealed a significant difference between log in device and user level. Participants who frequently used smart phones, PDAs, or iPads to log in to their accounts reported significantly higher user levels as defined by the individual social networks compared to participants who frequently log in with computers.
Chapter 5
RESULTS AND FINDINGS

China has been widely recognized as a valuable travel market, and large numbers of travelers leave its shores each year. Additionally, the number of social media users in China increase significantly every year. In order to examine the relationship between involvement level and travel, this study used a narrow focus to find out how travel information was shared by different levels of users on social media networks.

A behavior chain model was built by analyzing two website designs: Facebook and Mixi (Fogg & Eckles, 2007). The study indicated that social media design aims to create a sense of true commitment in all of the website users. The users are separated into three commitment levels: “Discovery,” “Superficial Involvement,” and “True Commitment.” Users at the true commitment level involve other friends by using the various functions on the social media websites. The behavior chain model provides a great foundation for social media user behavior research. But it does not offer details about other possible characteristics that influence information sharing, and at what level the involvement stage would affect information sharing, and especially travel information sharing.
This study specifically explored how travel information was shared on social media, based on a Chinese context. In particular, this study’s objectives were to examine how information sharing was influenced by different demographic characteristics, and the differences in sharing based on user levels. Unlike several previous studies that were done using questionnaires, this study collected data directly from the social media networks. As an exploratory study, the main focus of this research was not to test a hypothesis, but rather to describe the situation and draw specifics and explanations from the results.

**Demographics**

This research showed that age was not strongly related with the amount of travel information sharing. Many Chinese elderly users are very active on social media and use it as a way of connecting with their friends.

The Vasalou et al. (2010) study, which was done based on western context, reported no significant difference between geographic location and social media user behaviors. This study reported the same results with a different background, which bolsters their conclusions. The sharing behaviors of the participants who are in the middle part of China were revealed to be not much different when compared with that of the participants in the eastern part of China. But, the numbers of participants are not equal in these two groups. Therefore, a future study could generate a different result with a better distributed sample set. Also, based on observation, the group of people who study or work overseas shared a higher number of pictures (but not statistically
significant) on the social media networks than the other geographic groups did. This group of people usually has the time and economic ability to travel compared to the other groups, which makes this group an ideal target for destinations to start marketing to using social media.

This study proves that gender is highly related with social media behaviors. The female group has a higher tendency to share travel information on social media networks. This group is also easier to be influenced compared to the male group as shown in Figure 14, which makes women a good target for the hospitality industry. A strategy to motivate travelers to share travel information on social media networks should focus more on women.

**Engagement Levels**

The users who like to share their travel information through their status only proved to be a very small group among all of the participants. With most of the users sharing travel information through pictures and text, potential opportunities for travel destinations to market themselves on Chinese social media platforms were reported.

Photo sharing was more important to advanced users than to early users, as shown in this study and in Vasalou et al. (2010). This study also showed that users with a higher user level engaged more with travel picture sharing than early users did.

Each of the two social media websites has their own focus. QQzone.com is more dedicated to offering space for people to chat with their network friends online, while Renren.com is more focused on showing friends what the user is doing. Since
the design purposes are different between these two websites, the user levels are also based on different criteria. Renren.com’s user level proved to be a good indicator of travel information sharing engagement, since it was statistically significant with the travel engagement level. Hotels and restaurants that are interested in social media marketing can give out discounts or coupons based on this indicator. But QQzone.com’s user level is more related with the amount of time a user is active, rather than the level of travel information sharing engagement.

The analysis on user level also shows that participants who like to use mobile phones or iPads to log into their accounts have relatively higher user levels than those users who log in with a computer. The log in device is a good sign of social media engagement level. Travel destination marketers can expect Chinese travelers who constantly log into their social media accounts with mobile phones to be advanced users. Thus, Chinese travelers who frequently visit their social media accounts with smart phones during their trips are valuable targets for social media marketing. This result was proven to be the same with both Renren.com users and QQzone.com users. Hotels and restaurants should collect these guests’ information as a factor to build strategy. This information could be obtained from travel agencies, or by training frontline staff to collect this type of information.

Nowadays, many people like to use Smartphone to take pictures instead of carrying digital cameras around all the time, so the author originally expected that many pictures would be uploaded through Smartphone instead of laptops. But as
shown by the results, 97% of the pictures shared by the participants in the sample were uploaded through computers.

➢ The first reason could be that the cost of uploading a picture through a data plan during travel is still relatively high, as free Wi-Fi is still uncommon.

➢ Second, as reported in Table 18, the over 35 age group is still more comfortable with camera instead of Smartphone.

➢ Third, among the young generation, DSLR cameras are very popular. A DSLR camera was reported to be a good indicator of social media travel information sharing engagement level. More pictures were shared by DSLR users than non-users. Many of “Generation X” prefer to carry a DSLR camera to take travel pictures, even though they are not professional photographers. For DSLR users, taking pictures becomes a hobby and an important reason to travel. Because the DSLR users’ pictures were more professionally taken than those of non-users, their social network friends were more engaged with their pictures.

Many hotels and restaurants consider introducing products for travelers to upload pictures directly from their phones. This study actually shows the opposite need for Chinese travelers, especially among the younger generation. It would be better to offer free Internet connections to guests, if hotels want to encourage travelers to share pictures using their social media accounts.
Travel Picture Content

Tourism destination attractions have been proven to be the most popular places for Chinese travelers to take pictures. For Chinese travelers, standing in front of the attraction and taking pictures is a way of letting their friends know that they were there. Because of this reason, the majority of the shared pictures were of attractions.

This study’s examination of the content of the pictures proved the above results. More than 70% of the travel pictures shared on the social media user profiles were of symbolic attractions. Two of the social media website users had different information sharing habits. More non-symbolic attraction pictures were shared by Renren.com users. Because most of the users on Renren.com were under age 30, a conclusion can be drawn by this exploratory study that the younger generation shares more non-symbolic attraction pictures as compared with other age groups.

Also, instead of just uploading photos on their profiles, Chinese travelers like to comment about where they went and what they did to engage more with their friends.

Pictures of food and famous restaurants are the second most likely to be shared by Chinese travelers. The younger generation (“Generation Y”) especially enjoys uploading pictures of good restaurants or food stands to their profiles and recommending them to their friends. For example, one user uploaded a picture of a food stand and wrote, “This place has very nice food. You should go and try it if you decide to go there.” Then his friends put comments under the picture asking how to
get to the restaurant. The user then replied, and listed transportation choices to his friends. Similarly, another participant took a picture of a café and wrote, “This is the most famous café in this city. Everybody goes there when they are traveling.” For this group of social media users (ages 20-25), this is also a good way of showing their tastes. Since not enough restaurant pictures are shared on social media as shown in table 8, there is still much potential for operators to encourage travelers to take more pictures about the food and environment, such as putting free Wi-Fi in a restaurant, or using cartoon characters to differentiate a restaurant.

There is a huge opportunity for hotel operators to explore and increase the power of social media marketing. A very low number of pictures (0.3%) that were shared on the social media networks were about hotels. The hotel pictures that were uploaded were about creative hotel design or famous hotel brands. It is interesting that no pictures about places with nice service or comments about nice experiences in hotels or with helpful staff were shared in this sample. It turns out that an experience with good service is not a popular motivation for sharing travel information for Chinese travelers. Because there was not enough data in this area, this study could not provide further information about this situation. But, it could be a good research topic for future study.

When traveling internationally, Chinese travelers enjoy sharing pictures of airports and airline logos (0.07%).
The richness and reach trade off model, as shown in Figure 17, is a famous model used to describe that in traditional marketing methods, the richness of information decreases as more customers are reached. With the help of social media, the frontier in the figure is able to move up in the matrix, as indicated in Figure 18.
The richness of information could be kept at a relatively higher level by using social media marketing, as compared to other traditional marketing methods when the reach distance increases.

Thus, to motivate travelers to share more of their travel experiences on social media networks could increase the richness of destination information, while also increasing the reach distance. At this level, most travel marketing still uses traditional channels, such as newspapers, TV ads, and brochures. Social media marketing could avoid the disadvantage of decreased richness information in traditional marketing. Also, as proven in the previous study (Jansen, 2011), customers will trust more of the information coming from their peers and network friends rather than from companies, which indicates that social media marketing could be more powerful in terms of influencing customers as compared to other Internet marketing channels, such as online ads and company websites.

Even though social media marketing is powerful, it is not easy to accomplish. Below are several suggested ways for travel destination marketers and hotel and restaurant operators to motivate travelers to share more travel/trip pictures.

- As revealed in the study results, travelers who travel with DSLR cameras tend to take and share more pictures on their social media profiles. For promotions, hotels and restaurants could consider offering discounts and special offers to this target group. And, because this group of travelers prefers to take pictures of nicely styled environments, it’s important to
have the hotel or restaurant environment designed in a sweet and elegant style that fits the taste of the younger generation.

- Chinese travelers shared destination attraction pictures dominantly on their social media profiles. For hotels and restaurants to use this traveler sharing behavior, the operators could arrange some tours to attractions, or place signs inside the hotel or restaurant to motivate travelers to take pictures.

- As mentioned earlier, offering free Wi-Fi could be a very good idea to encourage customers to share hotel or restaurant pictures.

- Another good choice for a resort hotel or travel destination would be to offer apps that encourage the younger generation to play games, like treasure hunts, that ask the travelers to go to different places to take pictures and then share them on their social media profiles as a way to find the treasure. Not only would pictures and travel information be shared, but the travelers would have some great memories of a fun activity.

- Hotels could also offer promotions to in-house travelers to ask them to share their best pictures of the hotel during their stay to win a free night. These pictures could be posted on the different user profiles that were then linked to the hotel’s page.

There are many other ways to explore social media travel marketing. This study offered information about the current travel/trip information sharing situation on social media and user behaviors of travel information sharing on social media networks in China.
Chapter 6
LIMITATION AND FUTURE STUDY

Limitations

➢ A convenience sample set was used in this study. Some demographic groups were not well represented, thus limiting the conclusions of this study.

➢ The data collection method used in this study was coding and observation. Thus, the dataset could be influenced by the author’s background and other perspectives. But, as most of the variables collected were objective, this limitation is not a big influence on this study.

Future Studies

➢ Social media researchers could examine possible cross-cultural differences of travel information sharing.

➢ Future research could study the differences of travel information sharing as compared with leisure travelers and business travelers.

➢ Future studies could also collect information about how many negative pictures and how many positive pictures were shared by users of social media networks.
REFERENCES


*Social Network, 30*, 330-342.


Facebook. *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, 68, 719-728.
Appendix - one

IRB EXEMPT LETTER- one,

DATE: April 12, 2012
TO: Ruiqing Fang
FROM: University of Delaware IRB
STUDY TITLE: [323618-1] The social media sharing behavior of Chinese travelers
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE: April 12, 2012
REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 4

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research study. The University of Delaware IRB has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

We will put a copy of this correspondence on file in our office. Please remember to notify us if you make any substantial changes to the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Jody-Lynn Berg at (302) 831-1119 or jlberg@udel.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.