An Examination of Microblog as News Source among University Students in Mainland China

By
Maria Muyang LI

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Supervisor:
Professor Louis Leung

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Abstract

Microblogging is increasingly extending its role from a chatting tool into an important part of people's life. It offers a platform on which users can share breaking news updates during emergencies. This research explored the gratifications university students obtained from microblog use, the content of the news university students most likely obtained from microblog, and how microblog networks affect the use of microblog as the first news source. Data were collected using a snowball sampling method of 461 university students in Mainland China. Uses and gratifications and information diffusion theoretical frameworks were used to analyze the data. The results show that students used microblog to seek the following gratifications including 'quick and convenient', 'information form', 'information quality,' 'interaction and feedbacks', and 'recognition needs.' Students liked to obtain breaking news and interesting news, rather than serious news about politics and military on microblog. The time spent and frequency on microblog was positively related to the use of microblog as the first news source. Besides, the microblog network, which indicated by the number of followings and number of followers a microbloggers had, was also positively related to the use of microblog as the first news source.

Key Words: Microblog; news source; uses and gratifications; information diffusion

Introduction and Objectives of the Project

Online social media are in some cases gradually replacing person-to-person social interaction and redefining the pattern in diffusion of information with millions of microblog users worldwide. Microblogs such as Twitter and Xinlang microblog (a Twitter equivalent in China), have recently generated much attention in many research fields due to its peculiar features, especially in enormous popularity and relatively high degree of freedom on information sharing. As more and more netizens got their account number in microblog, it has become a valuable media to spread information.

Today, Twitter has more than 100 million users worldwide and generates more than 65 million “tweets” per day (Reuters News, 2010; Twitter blog, 2010). It is interesting to note that Twitter usage in reporting and updating news peaks during prominent events, which has been observed by many reporters (Information Week, 2008). Similarity, with more than one hundred million registered users by the end of 2010 according to its latest financial report, Xinlang microblog has been the news channel as the first source of breaking news in China, such as Liu Xiaobo won Nobel Price and the high-rise fire in Shanghai.

Compared to traditional media, microblog allows a more instant and flexible form of communication. Microblog sites typically restrict the length of posted messages. However, these messages can be published and received via a wide variety of means, including the Web, text messaging, instant messaging, and other third-party applications. Such a flexible and broad-based architecture significantly lowers the threshold for participation and encourages users' frequent updates. Consequently, microblog is now widely adopted by the public to share and seek real-time information, especially during emergency events.

In Mainland China, more than 30.6% netizens are students, while the utilization of microblog among netizens is larger than 13.8% (27th China's Internet survey report, 2011). Since 87% microblog users are using Xinlang microblog (Xinlang Microblog Report, 2011), the group of students takes quite an important place in Xinlang microblog.

Therefore, this research will explore how university students in Mainland China adopt a specific microblog platform, Xinlang Microblog, as a news source, especially as the first news source, and how are news diffused in microblog.

Literature Review

After its launch in 2006, Twitter has become the largest and most well-known microblog platform. As such, Twitter becomes an ideal candidate site for research. Since Twitter has been blocked in Mainland China, Xinlang launched its microblog similar to Twitter in August 2009, which allows users to send up to 140-character text-based/ video / picture posts to a network of followers via a variety of means. By default, Xinlang microblog are public so that users can follow and read each other's posts without asking permission.

As a representative of microblog, most researchers are used to take Twitter as the object of study. Early studies about microblog have focused on understanding the prevalent usage and structural patterns of microblog. Akshay, Xiaodan, Tim, and Belle (2007) studied the topological and geographical properties of Twitter's social network, and summarized different user intentions of using Twitter, such as daily chatting and information sharing. Some are focusing on the social networking aspects (Krishnamurthy, 2008), which characterized distinct classes of Twitter users and their behaviors, including “broadcasters”

(e.g. online radio stations and media outlets), “acquaintances” (users who exhibit reciprocal relationships), and “miscreants” (e.g. spammers).

Recent studies have shifted the attention to some novel applications of microblog. For instance, Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, and Chowdury (2009) studied Twitter as a platform of online word of mouth branding. They analyzed more than ten thousand microblog posts containing branding information, and claimed that microblog could play an important role in designing marketing strategies and campaigns. In analyzing users’ posting activities and reading behaviors, Ehrlich and Shami (2010) and Zhang, Yan, Jane and Wu (2010) found that enterprise microblog could facilitate conversation and mutual assistance. Such user-to-user exchanges and collaborations via Twitter were also identified in a public setting (Honeycutt and Herring, 2009), in which the authors explored the potential of using Twitter as a collaboration tool. The rich textual data that are freely available from Twitter also attract interest from the text mining community. O’Connor, Balasubramanyan, Routledge, and Smith (2010) applied sentiment analysis technique to extract public opinions and attitudes from a large body of tweets. The results were compared with opinions derived from standard polling and survey data, which highlighted the promise of using Twitter as a substitute or supplement for traditional polling. Similar, but simpler, techniques were used by Jansen et al. (2009) to understand user opinion fluctuations towards a particular brand.

Another important application of microblog that is of interest is its widespread adoption and use during mass crisis and emergency events. Though traditional and official communication channels remain in place, Web-based social media, such as search-term surveillance (Ginsberg, Mohebbi, Patel, Brammer, Smolinski, and Brilliant, 2009), microblog,

and online social networks have emerged as alternative forms of rapid dissemination of information (Brownstein, Freifeld, and Madoff, 2009). Microblog has been widely used for status updates and live news reports in emergency occasions such as Southern California wildfires in 2007 (Sutton, Palen, & Shklovski, 2008), Mumbai terrorists attack in 2008 (Caulfield & Karmali, 2008), H1N1 Flu outbreak in 2009 (Adam, 2009), Icelandic volcano eruption in 2010 (Shashank, 2010), and etc. Such emergency usages of microblog have received increasing attention from academic researchers. Hughes, Starbird, and Palen were among the first researchers who studied this phenomenon. In their studies, usage patterns of Twitter surrounding emergency events were observed and compared with regular use. It was noted that information propagation was more likely to happen in emergency occasions than in regular situations. Hughes and Palen (2009) and Starbird and Palen (2010) took advantage of the popularity of Twitter, and monitored incoming tweets for detecting crisis events such as earthquakes and epidemic outbreaks. These applications clearly indicate a role transition of microblog from a daily chatting tool into a valuable information sharing platform and news source provider during emergencies. As a republication of Twitter, the research about Xinlang microblog has many similarities with those of Twitter though the amount is much less.

However, the studies of microblog as a news source are mainly based on breaking news in emergency situation, while the phenomenon that microblog are becoming a news source has been little mentioned. In Mainland China, due to the severe censorship of traditional news media, some scholars have already realized that microblog will become an important news source in the future. However, most of the researches in this field are still proceeding

on a larger scope with relatively obscure boarder of both news provider and receiver, such as the study about the transmission characteristics of news on Xinlang microblog (Lv, 2010) and the effect of the news transmission on microblog in Mainland China.

This research focused on public news in microblog, especially those breaking news events happened in the general public sphere.

Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratifications Theory

As one of the most popular theory in mass communication research, Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) emphasis more about consumers and audience instead of the actual message itself by asking "what people do with media" rather than "what media does to people" (Katz, 1959). The key concept of UGT is that the choices people make when consuming media are motivated by their desire to fulfill certain cognitive and affective needs (Katz et al., 1974).

When adopting the U&G theory to analyze blog and microblog, much research in user intention detection has focused on understanding why we use such media and what satisfaction they can bring. One research conducted by Nardi in 2004 about the users of blog describes the different motivation for "why we blog". The research finds that people use blogs as a channel to share experiences, exchange opinions and give their comments. They also discovered that blog users may have different attitude toward different social groups in reality based on their belonging of virtual communities. According to another research by Lento, Welser, and Gu (2006), the comments a blogger received from other people online

and the relationship he or she has with other bloggers may influence the activity in the real world. Users who are invited by people with whom they share pre-existing social relationships tend to stay longer and active in the network. Moreover, certain communities were found to have a greater retention rate due to existence of such relationships. Mutual awareness in a social network has been found effective in discovering communities.

The former study have showed that there many factors may influence users behavior online. Besides, there are interactions between online and offline behaviors among bloggers. Yet the motivations for “why we microblog” have been little researched, and the relation between microblog usage and microblog U&G has been little concerned. Therefore, research questions and hypothesis in this study addressed the relationship between microblog uses and gratification and microblog usage.

RQ_1: What are the gratifications university students acquired with microblog use?

H_1: Amount of microblog usage (in terms of time and frequency of use) is positively related to the intention of regarding microblog as the first news source.

H_2: The more students find microblog gratifying, the more they will regard microblog as the first news source.

$H_{3.1}$: The more students find microblog gratifying, the more time they will spend in microblog.

$H_{3.2}$: The more students find microblog gratifying, the more often they will use microblog.

Information diffusion

Information diffusion through online social networks has recently become an active research topic. In blogging communities, Adar and Adamic (2005) analyzed the internal link structure of blogspace to track the flow of information among blog entries. A diffusion tree were built to visualize the likely routes of transmission for a specific diffusion. Such diffusion patterns were also prevalent among microblogs. Lerman and Ghosh (2010) studied the diffusion of news stories on Twitter, which was compared with the diffusion occurred on Digg in terms of the diffusion rate and scope. It was noticed that the diffusion on Twitter generally maintained a consistent rate and could penetrate farther than on other websites. Jiang and Scott (2010) studied Twitter users' interaction behaviors. One important finding of the study was that the majority of the interactions were one-way rather than reciprocal. This finding was also supported in a recent study (Starbird et al. 2010), which claimed that news stories were firstly distributed from media outlets and traditional service organizations, then spread into the population.

In microblog, the information diffusion is largely based on the microblog network, which indicated by the number of microbloggers a user follows and the followers a user has. In reality, the microblog network may affect the microblog usage and the uses and gratification of microblog use. Besides, along with the microblog network, the device users used to browse microblog, the content users like to obtain from microblog and microblog usage may also relative to the use of microblog as the first news source. Therefore, some research questions and hypothesis in this section can be highlighted.

$RQ_{2.1}$: What kind of news content (for instance, culture/entertainment news, social news, daily life/health news, etc.) people prefer to consume in microblog compare to traditional news sources.

$RQ_{2.2}$: What kind of news form (for instance, short message, picture, video, etc.) people prefer to consume in microblog compare to traditional news sources.

RQ_3: How can the demographics of microblog users (education level, gender and age), microblog network (indicated by the number of microbloggers a user follows and the followers a user has), the devices a user use (desktop computer, laptop, mobile phone, tablet computer, etc.) to browse microblog, predict the use of microblog as the first news source?

RQ_4: How can the demographics of microblog users and microblog network, the device a user use to log on microblog, frequently used news media (for instance, television, newspaper, news website, etc.) predict the time spend and frequency of microblog use?

$H_{4.1}$: The more users find microblog gratifying, the more microbloggers they will follow.

$H_{4.2}$: The more users find microblog gratifying, the more microblog followers they will have.

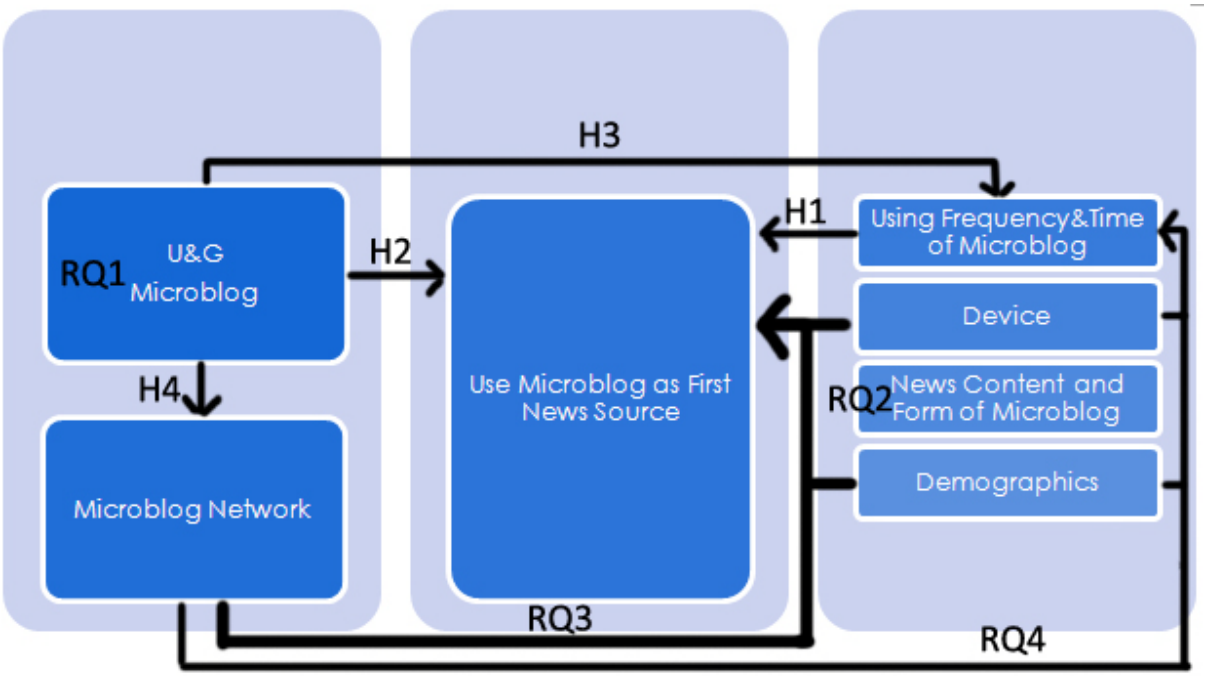
Methodology

Data collection and sampling

Qualitative survey: Focus Group

Three online focus groups were conducted on university students from mainland China in

order to assess motivation items in microblogging. Questions about microblog usage,



microblog uses and gratification and microblog network were asked to the 15 university students.

Quantitative survey: Online questionnaires

Questionnaire data for the study were collected by online questionnaire, which was in Chinese, on www.sojump.com, with a snowball sampling of 461 Mainland China students who were aged 15 and above. The questionnaire was piloted before the online survey which from 7 April through 25 April 2011. Among the respondents, 59.9 % were aged 21-23, and 79.8% of them were undergraduate students. Within the sample, 305 out of 461 respondents were or now current users of Sina's microblog, which named Xinlang Weibo.

Measures

Microblog usage. Respondents were firstly asked whether they used Xinlang Weibo or not. Based on the answer, they were asked about their time spend and frequency of Weibo, the

device they mostly used when browse Weibo, the number of people they followed on Xinlang Weibo, and the followers they have. Over 66% of the respondents had used or now current users of Xinlang Weibo. A 4-point scale was used to measure the Weibo use with frequency, '1' = 'less than once everyday', '2' = '1-4 times everyday', '3' = '5-9 times everyday' and '4' = 'more than 10 times everyday'. For time spend on Weibo, a 5-point scale was used with '1' = 'less than 15 minutes everyday', '2' = '15-30 minutes everyday', '3' = '31-60 minutes everyday', '4' = '61-90 minutes everyday', and '5' = 'more than 90 minutes everyday'. The amount of microbloggers the user follows was measures by a 5-point scale with '1' = 'less than 10', '2' = '10-50', '3' = '51-100', '4' = '101-150', '5' = 'more than 150'. In terms of the number of followers on Xinlang Weibo, a 6-point scale was used with '1' = 'less than 50', '2' = '50-150', '3' = '151-200', '4' = '201-250', '5' = '251-300', and '6' = 'more than 300'. Table 1 shows that frequency of Xinlang Weibo of use in Xinlang Weibo per day is quite high (with a mean score of 3.15, indicating that the users will browse Xinlang Weibo about 5 to 9 times everyday), and the average time spend on Weibo using is more than 30 minutes every day (mean=3.39). The mean of the number of following and followers on Xinlang Weibo were 51-100 (mean = 3.05) and 50-151 (mean = 2.21) respectively.

Respondents were asked about the devices they most frequently used to browse Xinlang Weibo. A multiple response question was used with '1' = 'desktop computer', '2' = 'laptop computer', '3' = 'mobile phone', '4' = 'tablet computer', '5' = 'others'. According to Table 1, most of the users were likely to use laptop to browse Xinlang Weibo (mean = .79), the second popular device to log on Xinlang Weibo is mobile phone (mean = .68) while the desktop computer only take the third place (mean = .40).

Getting news from microblog and other media. Respondents were asked the frequency of getting news from 4 channels include both new media and traditional media regardless the use of Xinlang Weibo. A 5-point scale with '1' = 'never getting news from this media', '2' = 'getting news 1-2 times every week', '3' = '3-4 times every week', '4' = '5-6 times every week' and '5'='more than once everyday' was used. The mean of each item is: Internet: 4.55, mobile phone: 3.37, TV and radio: 2.36, news paper and magazine: 2.20. See Table 1.

(* Insert Table 1 about here *)

Types of news consumed on Weibo. Xinlang Weibo users were also asked about what kind of content they read on both Weibo and traditional media. The classification of the news content was based on the results from the focus group, which included 10 items including: social news, politics and military news, financial news, technology news, sports news, culture and entertainment news, daily life and health news, local news, professional news, and others. The answers were not exclusive in both Weibo and traditional media, for users may choose to obtain more than one kind of news from both media.

Use microblog as the first news source. Degree in considering Xinlang Weibo as the first news source by the respondents was measured by a scale, which offered six popular news events based on the result of the focus group. In this scale, 9 news channels were given with '1' = 'SMS', '2' = 'Xinlang Weibo', '3' = 'News websites', '4' = 'Online BBS and other websites', '5' = 'Television/ Radio', '6' = 'News paper/Magazine', '6' = 'News paper/Magazine', '7' = 'Told by other people', '8' = 'Other channels', and '9' = 'I don't know about this news event'. Respondents were asked for each popular news event which was the channel they first obtained the news among the 9 channels. The Cronbach's Alpha of this scale is .96.

By recoding the variable of getting news from Xinlang Weibo into 1, and others into 0, which means the respondents will get 1 point each for news event only when they choose the Weibo as the first news channel, then the gross of this scale will indicates the degree of regarding Weibo as the first news source. Under this circumstances, the mean of the scale comes out as 2.09, which means the respondents get at least 2 out of six news events from Weibo at the first time.

Gratifications of microblog usage. Three focus groups consisted of 15 university students in Mainland China were conducted. The topics of the focus group were concentrated on the use of microblog, the current situation of getting news from microblog, the uses and gratification of microblog usage and some demographic information. The similar gratifications were combined and divided into five dimensions, while the minority ones were excluded.

Base on the result of the focus group, the questionnaires were made and sent on internet. A pilot research was carried out both online and offline in order to refine the questionnaire. Three offline and five online testees were invited to respond to the trial version of questionnaire and gave their suggestions about the ambiguous and inaccurate items.

There were 19 gratification statements in five dimensions in the final version of the online questionnaire. A five-point Likert scale was used (‘1’ = ‘strongly disagree’, ‘5’ = ‘strongly agree’).

Demographic. Personal data including education level, gender and age were asked.

Findings

Gratifications university students acquired when getting news from microblog

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation of each of the 19 items of U&G of microblog. A total of five dimensions were identified. The first dimension was 'Quick and Convenient', which showed how university students who considered Weibo as a news source were motivated by the specific attributes related to quick and convenient of Weibo news. The reliability of the three items was acceptable, with Cronbach's alpha at .75

The second dimension was 'Information Form' (alpha = .78). The factor consisted of four statements stating that university students liked to use Weibo as news source due to the scope in coverage and large quantity of microblog news. The advantages of multi-form and rich in detail and were also key motivations which affected microblog as a news source.

The third dimension was 'Information Quality' (alpha = .80), indicating that some university students considered Weibo as news source because it can meet their demands of getting interesting information and accurate news reporting.

'Interaction and Feedbacks' was the fourth dimension, which showed a relatively persuasive reliability with Cronbach's alpha at .82. The items in this factors showed that university students chose Weibo as news source mainly because they liked its function in communicating with other users when reading the news. Due to this function, users can quickly get the public opinion about a specific news event in a short time.

The last dimension was 'Recognition Needs' (alpha = .74) consisted of three statements which articulated how university students hoped to being concerned by the public and publicize their opinions.

In conclusion, the five factors reveal that university students who use microblog as news source mainly concern about the attributes of efficiency and convenience, which are vital for news report. Multi-form is a relatively unique attribute of microblog news. Users can get picture, video, audio, and weblink apart from literal description of a news event. Another important factor Weibo supplies is to enable its users to communicate with each other when browsing the news, so they can get the public opinion from the feedbacks of a news event much easier than traditional ways. Besides, news on Weibo has more entertainment properties than that in traditional media, which can generate huge attraction on young students and that can offer them excellent topics when talking to peers. However, Weibo users in university consider news on Weibo has low credibility: the item got the lowest score among 19 statements in the scale. It is quite consistent with the current situation, indicating that with the rampant of rumors on Weibo, it can scarcely meet users' demands of getting the truth.

(* Insert Table 2 about here *)

Types of news in Weibo and traditional source

Respondents were asked which type of news content they used to consume from Weibo and traditional news source. Ten types of news content were given include: Culture and Entertainment News, Social News, Daily Life/Health News, Profession News, Local News, Politics and Military News, Other News, Technology News, Sports News, and Financial News.

The statistics shows that the most popular type of news on Weibo is culture and entertainment news, more than 90% Weibo users in universities claimed that they will read such kind of news from Weibo. The second type of news people paid much attention on

Weibo is social news. More than 65% users were used to read social news on Weibo in their daily life. The third type of news is about daily life and health. Results show that about 60% university students who use Weibo were likely to obtain such type of news from microblog. Profession news appears to be the fourth kind of news that more people obtain it from Weibo other than traditional media. Approximately 31% users will browse news about their professional specialty.

A chi-square test was run to see whether there is significant different between obtain such ten types of news from Weibo and traditional media. The result of chi-square test shows very large and statistically significant values for all types of news except Culture and Entertainment News, which indicated the hypothesis that Weibo is equal to traditional media as a news source should be rejected. According to the statistics, the percentage of people who chose to consume Social News ($\chi^2 = 33.78$, $p < .001$), Daily Life/Health News ($\chi^2 = 24.66$, $p < .001$), Profession News ($\chi^2 = 38.70$, $p < .001$), Local News ($\chi^2 = 46.85$, $p < .001$), Politics and Military News ($\chi^2 = 54.00$, $p < .001$), Technology News ($\chi^2 = 55.57$, $p < .001$), Sports News ($\chi^2 = 96.36$, $p < .001$), Financial News ($\chi^2 = 37.83$, $p < .001$), and Other News ($\chi^2 = 61.64$, $p < .001$) on Weibo is quite different from the percentage of people who consume such kind of news on traditional media. Therefore, it must be concluded that for most types of news content, Weibo plays a quite different role as a news source compared to other media.

(* Insert Table 4 about here *)

For the news on Weibo, the most common form is short message (Mean=.88), which can not exceeding 140 Chinese characters. The second popular form of Weibo news is

picture, about 83% Weibo news will appear in the form of picture within or without short message. The mean of video, web link and other forms are .55, .42 and .08 respectively.

Hypotheses testing

To test H_1, a bivariate correlation was run. Results show that the time spent on Weibo ($r = .38$, $p < .01$) and frequency of use ($r = .35$, $p < .01$) have significant association with the intention of use Weibo as the first news source. The result is reasonable since people who spend more time on microblog, he or she will automatically has more chances to get news from this platform, hence microblog was considered as the first news source. Therefore, H_1 is supported.

Bivariate correlations were run to prove H_2. In the first factor of 'Quick and convenient' ($r = .32$, $p < .01$), all three items, which are 'Speedy' ($r = .34$, $p < .01$), 'Convenient' ($r = .27$, $p < .01$) and 'Easy to search' ($r = .20$, $p < .01$), are all significant relate to the use of microblog as the first news source.

The second factor 'Information Form' ($r = .29$, $p < .01$) is about the form of news on microblog, consisted of four items which are 'Large quantity' ($r = .31$, $p < .01$), 'Coverage' ($r = .24$, $p < .01$), 'Multi-form' ($r = .20$, $p < .01$) and 'Rich in detail' ($r = .16$, $p < .01$), all are significant relate to the use of microblog as the first news source.

Then comes the factor of 'Interaction and Feedbacks' ($r = .20$, $p < .01$), which has significant relation with the use of microblog as the first news source based on the result. Among the four items in this factor, 'Quality of the feedbacks' ($r = .12$, $p < .01$), 'Feedbacks fast' ($r = .14$, $p < .05$) and 'Exchange views' ($r = .14$, $p < .05$) are all have significant correlation at .01 level, while the item 'Get public opinion' ($r = .15$, $p < .05$) has significant

correlation at .05 level.

The 'Information Quality' is the forth factor in microblog U&G scale (r = .18, $p < .01$), include five items: 'Useful'(r = .19, $p < .01$), 'Interesting'(r = .16, $p < .01$), 'Credibility'(r = .07, $p < .05$), 'Concise'(r = .14, $p < .05$), 'Follow-up reports'(r = .12, $p < .05$). As the result shows, this factor is largely significant relate to the behavior of use Weibo as the first news source, though the item 'Credibility' has no significant relate to the behavior.

The last factor is the 'Recognition Needs' (r = .14, $p < .05$). In this factor, only one out of three items has significant correlation with the behavior of consider microblog as the first news source, which is 'Get things to talk' (r = .22, $p < .01$).

Since four out of five factors have significant correlation with the specific behavior we mentioned above, H_2 is then largely supported. See Table 3.

Both $H_{3.1}$ and $H_{3.2}$ are partially supported according to the result of Bivariate correlations. In $H_{3.1}$, 3 out of 5 items have significant correlation with the microblog using time. They are 'Quick and Convenient' (r = .34, $p < .01$), 'Information Form' (r = .17, $p < .01$) and 'Interaction and Feedbacks' (r = .13, $p < .05$).

While in $H_{3.2}$, only 2 out of 5 items have significant correlation with the microblog using frequency, in which the factor 'Interaction and Feedbacks' has been excluded. The correlation level for 'Quick and Convenient' and 'Information Form' are .40 and .20 respectively. See Table 3.

The test of $H_{4.1}$ and $H_{4.2}$ also based on the result of Bivariate correlations. In $H_{4.1}$, the data shows that there are positive relations between the quantity of users' following on microblog and the U&G of microblog use. 'Quick and Convenient' (r = .20, $p < .01$) and

'Recognition Needs' (r = .19, $p < .01$) are the two most important factors that relate to the number of followings on microblog, since most items in these two factors have significant correlation with the quantity of users' following. Because all the five factors are positive related to the followings' amount, $H_{4.1}$ is fully supported at this extend. See Table 3.

$H_{4.2}$ is also fully supported due to all the five factors have significant correlation with the followers' number on microblog. Same as $H_{4.1}$, the 'Quick and Convenient' (r = .19, $p < .01$) and 'Recognition Needs' (r = .24, $p < .01$) are also the two most important factors that relate to the number of followers on microblog. See Table 3.

Predicting the use of microblog as the first news source.

To answer research question three, regression analyses were run to see the demographics of microblog users (education level, gender and age), microblog network (indicated by the number of microbloggers a user follows and the followers a user has), the devices a user use (desktop computer, laptop, mobile phone, tablet computer, etc.) to browse microblog as predictors on the use of microblog as the first news source. Taken the use of microblog as the first news source as dependent variable, regression analysis results in Table 5 show that the use of microblog as the first news source motivated by microblog network, which consisted of the number of microbloggers a user followed ($\beta = .26$, $p < .001$) and the followers a user has ($\beta = .40$, $p < .001$), and the age of microblog user ($\beta = -.14$, $p < .01$). The results of regression analysis suggest that the use of microblog as the first news source is highly significant predicted by microblog network, and the age of users may also affect the behavior of obtain news from Weibo. However, no significant relationship

between users' education level, gender and the use of microblog as the first news source was found.

Predicting the time spend and frequency of microblog use.

□Taken blog use as dependent variable, regression analysis results in Table 5 show that the time spend of microblog use is largely motivated by the microbloggers a user follows (β = .39, $p < .001$) and the followers a user has (β = .26, $p < .001$),. Besides, gender (β = .19, $p < .001$) is also an important indicator of the time spend on microblog.

When it comes to the frequency of microblog use, regression results in Table 5 represented that the frequency is significantly predicted by the number of microbloggers a user follows (β = .35, $p < .001$) and the amount of followers a user has (β = .18, $p < .01$). Other two significant predictors were the gender of users (β = .18, $p < .001$) and the use of laptop computer to browse microblog (β = .12, $p < .05$).

(* Insert Table 5 about here *)

Conclusions and discussion

With the popular of Twitter, Xinlang Weibo and many other similar websites, microblog has been a hot topic for social science research. This exploratory research uses Xinlang Weibo as an example, focus on university students in mainland China, try to explore the behavior of using microblog as the first news source and its correlation with uses and gratification of microblog, microblog demographics, microblog usage and microblog network.

Firstly, people get many satisfactions from microblog using, they are 'Quick and

Convenient', 'Information Form', 'Interaction and Feedbacks', 'Information Quality' and 'Recognition Needs' in order. University students in mainland China are most satisfied with the factor of 'Quick and Convenient' and least satisfied with the factor of 'Recognition Needs'. Among the indicators for these factors, 'speedy' and 'convenient', which are the two main indicators out of three for the factor of 'Quick and Convenient', get the first and second highest score among all the satisfaction statements. 'Credibility', a indicator for 'Information Quality', get the lowest score. As two main indicators for the factor of 'Recognition Needs', 'Being concerned' and 'publicize my opinion' get the second and third lowest score in microblog uses and gratification. Based on the results above, we can conclude that though microblog has both attributes of news media and social media, its functions as news media can meet more demands of users compare to its functions as social media.

Secondly, the using time and frequency of microblog is positive related to the use of microblog as the first news source. Besides, the microblog network, which indicated by the number of following and followers a user has on microblog, is also positive related to the use of microblog as the first news source. These findings reveals that the social media attribute of microblog makes people spend more time on it, browse the website more frequently compare to other media, which also increase the possibility of getting news from microblog automatically.

Thirdly, according to the data, people who use microblog as the first news source feel quite satisfied with the speediness and convenience, multi-formed information and the ease of getting public feedbacks, which are quite crucial to news, especially for breaking news. However, the accuracy and the credibility of news on microblog can not meet users'

demands. In fact, the using frequency of microblog has a significant negative relation with the satisfaction about credibility of news on microblog, which means, the more people use microblog, the more they may feel unsatisfied with the credibility of the news on it. That may because there are many rumors on microblog which are hard to refute.

Along with the word limit, one of microblog's features, these characteristics make people like to obtain breaking news and interesting news, rather than serious news about politics and military on microblog. While in some important news events, people who get news at first time on microblog will choose other news media such as newspaper and TV instead of microblog for more details and follow-up reports. The shift of users from microblog to other news media during the process of getting news is supported by the result of statistics. In all the six important news events listed on questionnaire, the average percentage of getting follow-up report from microblog (24.40%) is much lower than those of getting the first time report from microblog (34.75%). In such cases, microblog is a kind of supplement of other news media, which mainly offers topics or starting points to news events.

Finally, based on the result of regression analysis, microblog network is one of the most significant predictors of the use of microblog as the first news sources, which is also motivated by the age of the users. The amount of microbloggers a user follows and the followers a user has are significant predictors of the time spend and frequency of microblog use. Besides, the gender of the users may also affect the using time and frequency of microblog.

Although there are some interesting findings in this research, several limitations should

be recognized. Firstly, though there are 461 valid questionnaires, only 305 of the respondents claimed that they have used or now using microblog. This may because the scope of research target is too narrow: only the university students in mainland China who have used or now using Xinlang Weibo can be counted. For the data about microblog usage, use microblog as news media, microblog uses and gratification can be get only from those who use Xinlang Weibo, the base for most of the analysis is 305, which is a little low to get a high reliability.

The second limitation is that this research is only based on Xinlang Weibo. Though it is the largest and most popular microblog website in mainland China, the development speed of other microblogs, such as Tecent Weibo, Sohu Weibo and Netease Weibo, are really fast. During the research, some university students claimed that they don't have a Xinlang Weibo account but now are using microblog service supplied by other internet companies. They can not fill up the questionnaires as a microblog user. This may generates some negative influences on the representative of the research. Besides, some further researches can be done about the differences between different microblogs in mainland China.

Last but not lease, the gender distribution showed in questionnaire may not exactly reflect the real sex ratio of university microblog users in mainland China. It is because the majority of users of the websites chosen as questionnaire issuing source are female. Though 86.6% respondents are female, in the analysis for research questions and hypothesis testing in this research, there is no significant difference in microblog using between different genders. Besides, further study which concerning the difference in microblog usage between male and female is still needed.

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Table 1: General findings for time spend and frequency of Weibo use, the average of the microbloggers a user follows and the followers a user has, the device they mostly used when browse Weibo, the average frequency of getting news from news media. (N=305)

Microblog Usage [a]	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**
1. Using Frequency	3.15	1.02
2. Using Time	3.39	1.37
Microblog Network [b]	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**
1. The Number of Microblogger a User Followed	3.05	1.20
2. The Microblog Followers a User Has	2.21	1.51
Devices [c]	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
1. Laptop Computer	242	79.3%
2. Mobile phone	206	67.5%
3. Desktop Computer	122	40.0%
4. Tablet Computer	23	7.5%
5. Other Devices	15	4.9%
Frequency of getting news from news media [d]	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**
1. Internet	4.55	0.96
2. Mobile Phone	3.37	1.71
3. TV/Radio	2.20	0.99
4. News paper/Mmagzine	2.36	1.25

Notes:

a. *How often does the user use Xinlang Weibo everyday was coded'1'='less than once everyday', '2'='1-4 times everyday', '3'='5-9 times everyday', '4'='more than 10 times everyday'.*
How much time does the user spend on Xinlang Weibo was coded '1'='less than 15 minutes everyday', '2'='15-30 minutes everyday', '3'='31-60 minutes everyday', '4'='61-90 minutes everyday', and '5'='more than 90 minutes everyday'.

b. *How many microbloggers does the user follow on Xinlang Weibo was coded '1'='less than 10', '2'='10-50', '3'='51-100', '4'='101-150', '5'='more than 150'. How many followers does the user have on Xinlang Weibo was coded '1'='less than 50', '2'='50-150', '3'='151-200', '4'='201-250', '5'='251-300'and '6'='more than 300'.*

c. *The most frequently used device to browse Xinlang Weibo was coded '1'='yes', '0'='no'.*

d. *The frequency of getting news from 4 channels was coded '1'='never getting news from this media', '2'='getting news 1-2 times every week', '3'='3-4 times every week', '4'='5-6 times every week' and '5'='more than once everyday' was used.*

Table 2: Uses and gratifications of microblog. (N=305)

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha
Quick and Convenient	**4.02**	**.71**	**.75**
Speedy	4.13	.28	
Convenient	4.23	.25	
Easy to search	3.70	.33	
Information Form	**3.82**	**.70**	**.78**
Large quantity	3.71	.22	
Coverage	3.89	.23	
Multi-form	4.05	.20	
Rich in detail	3.65	.25	
Information Quality	**3.38**	**.69**	**.80**
Useful	3.48	.19	
Interesting	3.91	.16	
Credibility	2.53	.19	
Concise	3.58	.19	
Follow-up reports	3.41	.19	
Interaction and Feedbacks	**3.79**	**.82**	**.82**
Quality	3.55	.26	
Feedbacks fast	3.76	.25	
Get public opinion	4.00	.22	
Exchange views	3.83	.23	
Recognition Needs	**3.31**	**.77**	**.74**
Being concerned	2.97	.32	
Publicize my opinion	3.15	.32	
Get things to talk	3.81	.30	
Total			**.91**

Table 3: Correlations among U&G, Microblog Usage, the Use of Microblog as the First News Source, and Microblog Network (N=305)

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
U&G of Microblog									
1. Quick and Convenient	.567**	.41**	.39**	.28**	.34**	.40**	.32**	.20**	.19**
2. Information Form		.63**	.54**	.44**	.17**	.20**	.29**	.17**	.16**
3. Information Quality			.61**	.55**	.08	.06	.18**	.11*	.12*
4. Interaction and Feedbacks				.56**	.13*	.10	.20**	.17*	.13*
5. Recognition Needs					.07	-.01	.14*	.19**	.24**
Microblog Usage									
6. Time						.72**	.38**	.39**	.39**
7. Frequency							.35**	.35**	.31**
8. Use Microblog as First News Source								.40**	.40**
Microblog Network									
9. No. of Microbloggers follows									.48**
10. No. of Followers									

Notes:
Scales used for U&G: 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree.
#p <= .1; *p <= .05; **p <= .01.

Table 4: Chi-square test for the type of content of news on microblog and traditional media (N=305)

	First News Source				χ^2
	Weibo		Traditional Media		
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Culture/Entertainment News					
Yes	277	90.8	223	73.1	2.41
No	28	9.2	82	26.9	
Social News					
Yes	199	65.2	243	79.7	33.78***
No	106	34.8	62	20.3	
Daily Life/Health News					
Yes	183	60.0	143	46.9	24.66***
No	122	30.0	162	53.1	
Profession News					
Yes	93	30.5	79	25.9	38.70***
No	212	69.5	226	74.1	
Local News					
Yes	84	27.5	161	52.8	46.85***
No	221	72.5	144	47.2	
Politics/Military News					
Yes	83	27.2	156	51.1	54.00***
No	222	72.8	149	48.9	
Other News					
Yes	80	26.2	49	16.1	61.64***
No	225	73.8	256	83.9	
Technology News					
Yes	70	23.0	88	28.9	55.57***
No	235	77.0	217	71.1	
Sports News					
Yes	62	20.3	101	33.1	96.36***
No	243	79.7	204	66.9	
Financial News					
Yes	39	12.8	65	21.3	37.83***
No	266	87.2	240	78.7	

Notes:
* $p<.05$; ** $p<.01$; *** $p<.001$

Table 5: Regression Analyses of Demographics, Microblog Network, Most Frequently Used Device as Predictors on the Use of Microblog as the First News Source, the Time Spend on Microblog Use, and the Frequency of Microblog Use (N=305)

Predictors	Use of Microblog as the First News Source	Time Spend on Microblog Use	Frequency of Microblog Use
	β	β	β
Demographics			
Education Level	-0.05	0.03	0.07
Gender (M=1)	-0.001	0.19***	0.18***
Age	-0.14**	-0.03	-0.09
Microblog Network			
Followings	0.26***	0.39***	0.35***
Followers	0.40***	0.26***	0.18**
Device			
Laptop Computer (yes=1)	0.07	0.07	0.12*
R^2	0.24	0.25	0.21
Adjusted R^2	0.23	0.23	0.19

Notes:
*p <= .05; **p <= .01; ***p <= .001; N=305

“新浪微博與第一新聞源”調查問卷

尊敬的先生/女士：

您好！

香港中文大學“新浪微博與第一新聞源”專案正在進行一項有關將新浪微博（http://t.sina.com.cn）作為第一新聞來源的研究，其中“新聞”指公眾新聞，非公眾人士的個人資訊、動態不包含在內。**本次研究僅針對曾使用/正在使用新浪微博的內地在校大學生進行，如您不符合該資質請勿作答**。

您的回答對本研究非常重要，答案無所謂正確或錯誤，您只需按照您的真實情況和想法進行填答即可。另外，您填答的結果和您本人的任何資訊將被嚴格保密，請您放心。

非常感謝您的參與！

第一部分　微博使用情況

QA1　在您目前的日常生活中，您從以下媒介獲取新聞的頻率是？					
	1	2	3	4	5
A. 互聯網	不從這裡獲取新聞	1-2 次或以下/周	3－4 次/周	5－6 次/周	每天使用多次
B. 手機	不從這裡獲取新聞	1-2 次或以下/周	3－4 次/周	5－6 次/周	每天使用多次
C. 報紙/雜誌	不從這裡獲取新聞	1-2 次或以下/周	3－4 次/周	5－6 次/周	每天使用多次
D. 電視/廣播	不從這裡獲取新聞	1-2 次或以下/周	3－4 次/周	5－6 次/周	每天使用多次

QA2　您是否使用新浪微博？	
1. 是	2. 否【請跳至第四部分】

QA3　您平均每天流覽新浪微博的頻率是？(頁面更新/手動刷新一次，記做流覽一次)			
1. 平均不到 1 次	2. 1-4 次	3. 5-9 次	4. 10 次及以上

QA4　您平均每天流覽新浪微博的時間總計約為？				
1. 15 分鐘以下	2. 15-30 分鐘	3. 31-60 分鐘	4. 61-90 分鐘	5. 90 分鐘以上

QA5　您流覽新浪微博使用的終端設備是？【可多選】				
1. 臺式電腦	2. 筆記型電腦	3. 手機	4. 平板電腦	5. 其他

QA6	您在新浪微博上所關注人物/對象的數量約為？		
	1. 低於 10	2. 10-50	3. 51-100
	4. 101-150	5. 150 以上	

QA7	您在新浪微博上的粉絲數量約為？		
	1. 低於 50	2. 50-150	3. 151-200
	4. 201-250	5. 251-300	6. 300 以上

第二部分　新聞獲取偏好

QB1　在微博上，您常關注的新聞內容有哪些類型？【可多選】				
1. 社會	2. 政治/軍事	3. 地產財經	4. 科技	5. 體育
6. 文化娛樂	7. 生活/健康	8. 地區性新聞	9. 專業相關新聞	10. 其他

QB2　在電視、報紙、雜誌、廣播上，您常關注的新聞內容有哪些類型？【可多選】				
1. 社會	2. 政治/軍事	3. 地產財經	4. 科技	5. 體育
6. 文化娛樂	7. 生活/健康	8. 地區性新聞	9. 專業相關新聞	10. 其他

QB3　您從/微博上獲取的新聞，一般是以什麼形式出現的？【可多選】				
1. 微博客（短文字）	2. 圖片（含動態圖片，如 gif）	3. 視頻	4. 網頁連結	5. 其他

QB4　您**最先**從哪個管道獲知以下公共新聞事件？					
	1. 短信	2. 新浪微博	3. 門戶新聞網站	4. 論壇及其他非新聞類網站	
	5. 電視/廣播	6. 報紙雜誌	7. 他人告知	8. 其他	9. 不知道這件事
A. 2010 年上海 11•15 重大火災					
B. 2011 年日本 9.0 級地震					
C. 2011 兩會提案：個人所得稅起征點提高					
D. “我爸是李剛”事件					
E. 朗拉度多退役					
F. 大 S 汪小菲結婚					

QB5　在您從微博獲知某公共新聞事件後，會選擇哪些媒體**進一步瞭解事件**？【可多選】					
	1. 短信	2. 新浪微博	3. 門戶新聞網站	4. 論壇及其他非新聞類網站	
	5. 電視/廣播	6. 報紙雜誌	7. 他人告知	8. 其他	9. 未繼續關注該事
A. 2010 年上海 11•15 重大火災					
B. 2011 年日本 9.0 級地震					
C. 2011 兩會提案：個人所得稅起征點提高					
D. “我爸是李剛”事件					
E. 朗拉度多退役					
F. 大 S 汪小菲結婚					

第三部分　微博使用滿意度

QC　在微博上獲取的新聞，可以在多大程度上滿足你以下方面的需求？請按具體情況選擇對應分數					
	不能滿足	較少滿足	一般滿足	較多滿足	完全滿足
Quick and Convenient 快捷方便					
A.在獲取新聞時，微博比其他方式速度更快	1	2	3	4	5
B. 在獲取新聞時，比其他方式更方便	1	2	3	4	5
C. 訂閱、檢索方便，容易獲得我想要的新聞	1	2	3	4	5
Information Form 資訊形式					
A. 新聞內容總量大	1	2	3	4	5
B. 新聞內容覆蓋範圍廣	1	2	3	4	5
C. 表現手段豐富（可同時使用文字、圖片、視頻）	1	2	3	4	5
D. 細節豐富，常有其他地方看不到的內容	1	2	3	4	5

Information Quality 資訊品質					
A. 新聞內容很有用	1	2	3	4	5
B. 新聞內容很有趣	1	2	3	4	5
C. 新聞可信度高	1	2	3	4	5
D. 簡明扼要，重點更突出	1	2	3	4	5
E. 後續補充報導豐富	1	2	3	4	5
Interaction and Feedbacks 互動與回饋					
A. 新聞回復內容精彩	1	2	3	4	5
B. 新聞回復速度快	1	2	3	4	5
C. 容易獲知大家的看法	1	2	3	4	5
D. 與評論者間相互間交流方便	1	2	3	4	5
Recognition needs 獲得認同感					
A. 被很多人關注會帶來滿足感	1	2	3	4	5
B. 可以推廣或公開我對某事的的高見	1	2	3	4	5
C. 可以獲得與朋友交流時的共同話題	1	2	3	4	5

第四部分　個人基本資訊

QD1　您目前的教育狀況：
1. 大學預科/專科學生　2. 本科生　3. 碩士生　4. 博士生

QD2　您的性別：
1、男　2、女

QD1　您的年齡：
1. 15-17　2. 18-20　3. 21-23　4. 24-26　5. 27 及以上

本次調查到此全部結束，再次感謝您的積極配合！