Original Article

Attractiveness, expertise and closeness: The effect of source credibility of the first lady as political endorser on social media in China

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Zongya Li and Yiyi Yin
The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Abstract

This study examines the strategies of political impression management adopted by the Weibo account Liyuan Fan Club from a source credibility perspective, investigating the capacity of each strategy in encouraging online political participation through measuring consumer's online brand-related activities (i.e. consuming, contributing, and creating). In addition to traditional dimensions of source credibility (i.e. expertise and attractiveness), a new dimension, namely "closeness," is added in based on previous studies in political branding and celebrity studies. A content analysis of 790 posts is conducted, in which the study finds that emphasis on Peng's attractiveness and closeness have positive effects on participatory behaviors on social media, while emphasis on Peng's expertise show no effect. Further analysis indicates that individual contributions of attractiveness and closeness on three levels of participatory behaviors are different, among which attractiveness is more effective in activating low-level participation, while closeness has more positive effect in encouraging high-level participation.

Keywords

Attractiveness, closeness, consuming activity, source credibility, the first lady

The concept of source credibility has generated various studies in terms of how positive characteristics of celebrity, public figure, or endorsers effectively impact receivers' perception, attitude, and related behavioral intention (DeSarbo & Harshman, 1985; Stewart, 2010). According to the Classic Source Credibility Model (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Johansson & Sparredal, 2002; Ohanian, 1990) and Source Attractiveness Model (Johansson & Sparredal, 2002;

Corresponding author:
Yiyi Yin, School of Journalism and Communication, NAH8, Humanities Building, New Asia College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, 999077, N.T., Hong Kong.
Email: yiyiyin@link.cuhk.edu.hk

McGuire, 1968, 1985), characteristics including attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness, have been measured as positive features that significantly provoke receivers' positive attitude and even purchasing action toward the products (Applbaum & Anatol, 1972; Hovland et al., 1953).

On the basis of previous developments of the models, this study aims to examine the positive characteristics of the image of Chinese first lady Liyuan Peng, especially those constructed in social media, and their effect on public's related online participatory behaviors. Through analyzing the media content posted by "Liyuan Fan Club," an official Weibo account promoting Peng's online image, this study intends to explore the effect of source credibility and attractiveness of Peng as a political endorser in Chinese social media.

The application of the Source Credibility Model and Source Attractiveness Model in political branding, especially regarding the first ladies, has been relatively neglected in the past. Although limited studies have examined how promoting first ladies as fashion endorsers effectively influenced public's attention and positive attitude (Matthews, Chaney, & Opiri, 2015; Stewart, 2010), these studies have paid more attention on the aspect of fashion, while ignored the political nature of the title of first lady. As female celebrity, first ladies certainly share similarities with models or actresses in many ways, but remain different in terms of her identity as a wife of the national political leader who engaged in politics as a profession (Merriam-Webster, 2009). This is thus important to apply the model on first ladies not only as fashion icons but also political endorsers who might influence public's attitude and related behavior toward the government.

The concept of political endorser came from the field of political branding in the past decades, in which the shift of citizen's attention and taste almost directly turned the focus of political communication from the fact to the form (Marshall, 1997; Postman, 1985; Street, 2003). Ultimately, affective power became the primary concern for celebrity politics to maintain the connection between politicians and the mass and then "embody the mass public affectively" (Marshall, 1997, p. 240). As Serazio (2015) has argued, the vanishing, or at least weakening public concern of the "fact" was gradually substituted by a concern of affection, emotion, and passion.

The effect of source credibility in Peng's case, thus, is not examined by its impact on public's behavioral intention of purchasing products used or wore by her, but by its impact on public's affection toward her, as well as the behavioral intention of consuming related media content. To achieve, this study, referring also to the political impression management theory, brings forward the concept of "closeness" as another dimension in examining the source credibility to see if the presentation of Peng's back-staged and "mundane" image has a significant effect on stimulating public's behavior intentions. As a new media, especially social media has blurred the line between front and back regions in politics, the personalization of politics becomes central feature of democratic politics of this century (McAllister, 2007). The politician is no longer presented solely as a party leader or as a political candidate but rather as a football fan or an amateur singer. In other words, the politician tries to establish an image of "ordinary" person who is approachable and friendly with an attempt to win favor and the vote. Therefore, secularization is a consequence of both media technologies and the strategies of politicians in managing impressions. This article considers Peng as a female political image who is promoted to be affective and attractive to the public. As a pre-famous folk singer before becoming the first lady, Peng has had public popularities and fans in the country. This career history has considerably helped with the transformation of her image from an attractive artist into an attractive political image. The evidences of her promotions and brandings can also be found in media. For instance, The *Time* in Beech (2013), similarly, ranked Peng as the 50th influential people in 2013 with comments as "stylish," "charm," and "glamour." The *Forbes* in Howard (2015) ranked Peng as the 57th powerful women in the world,

indicating her impressions as "sharp sense of style," "prominence on the global stage," and "commitment to their nation." Although above reports have pointed to several positive images of Peng, examination on how images being constructed or how they impacted public attitudes, was adequately rare. This study thus intends to raise and answer the ignored questions regarding Peng's image promotion on Weibo. As previous related studies mostly focused on Michelle Obama (e.g. Matthews et al., 2015; Stewart, 2010), this article is the very first one studying first lady in a modern Chinese context.

To proceed, this study chooses Weibo, the most popular social media in the nation, as platform to examine the effect of source credibility and attractiveness of Peng online. The specific research subject is an official Weibo account "Liyuan Fan Club," which is the only and very popular Weibo account with functions of Peng's online propaganda and promotion. This Weibo account was created by Mr. Fang who worked for an internet company, in March 2013. With initial motivation of creating a fan club to show support, Fang mainly collected news and photos of Peng via various channels. To discover the characteristics that are intentionally and strategically represented in Weibo posts released by "Liyuan Fan Club," a content analysis of the posts is employed to examine whether Peng's attractiveness, expertise, and closeness were visible in posts. In addition, this article further examines the relationship between above positive characteristics and receivers' behavioral intentions by linking the content analysis result to the consumer's online brand-related activities typology (COBRAs).

Literature reviews

Online interactions as "e-expressive" modes of political participation

As most of the widely accepted definitions of political engagement were proposed before the arrival of the internet, what qualifies as a valid act of political engagement in today's cyber age remains ambiguous (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). Early political participation centered on authentic and positive forms of participation like voting and election-related behaviors (e.g. Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954). Subsequent studies reached a consensus that political engagement should be multidimensional instead of unidimensional and began to expand the participatory schema to include more diverse political behaviors. In this way, the question is converted into how far this extension can and should go (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013).

Political discussion thus became a level in the expanded participatory schema. Although being regarded commonly as "passive kinds of involvement" (Conway, 1991, pp. 12-13), political discussion still plays a valid role in the spectrum of political engagement (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). Unlike voting or election-related behaviors, political discussion acts as indirect way of political engagement with considerable agent power of sharing of public life (Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004) and expressive participation (Endersby & Towle, 1996). Such agent power of political discussion became even more visible when it came to the online sphere. With the emerge of participatory culture and digital forms of political engagements as "e-participation," the power of online political discussion increased in terms of its reach and influence. For instance, Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (2012, p. 511) have considered political acts within social network as new "participatory forms" that included social-media-based political activities such as posting a blog, posting comments to a political blog, forwarding political content, "friending" a politician, joining a social-network group, signing an e-petition, and engaging in political discussion because these activities qualified as "e-expressive" mode of participation which "the public expression of political orientations" (Rojas

& Puig-i-Abril, 2009, pp. 906-907). Others also argued that such expressive mode of political engagement in online sphere is more influential than its offline counterpart (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). In other words, online discussions and expressions significantly play a role in persuading others and making calls to action (Robertson, Vatrapu, & Medina, 2010).

Accordingly, this study decides to classify netizen's expressive interaction with the account Liyuan fan club, including liking, commenting, and forwarding as "e-expressive" modes of political participation in the age of social media.

E-participation in Weibo: The COBRAs typology

To measure expressive participations, the study refers to the COBRAs in categorizing the social media-based consuming behaviors stimulated by the post content (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011). According to the contributors of COBRAs, this typology is useful to distinguish different levels of consumption online. Three types of online brand-related activities are suggested by them, including consuming, contributing, and creating (Muntinga et al., 2011). This article follows this typology to categorize three types of activities on Weibo.

"Like" as consuming. According to the typology, consuming behavior refers to "a minimum level of online brand-related activeness" (Muntinga et al., 2011, p. 15). The study considers the "like" amount of single Weibo post as the measurement of consuming behaviors on Weibo. "Like" is the minimum level of participation on Weibo. By liking certain Weibo post, people do not create any new content related to the brand, but simply express their appreciation or approve of the content.

"Comment" as contributing. Contributing represents a higher level of activeness than consuming, referring to the engagement in the "user-to-content" and "user-to-user" interactions (Muntinga et al., 2011, p. 17). The study considers the "comment" amount of single Weibo post as the measurement of contributing behaviors on Weibo. By commenting, people engage more in the user-content interactions.

"Repost with content" as creating. Creating is the highest level of activeness. It happens when users create content on the basis of the original content, and make their production available for other users to consume and contribute to. Different to contributing, creating behaviors aim at providing users' own content for public reading instead of just responding to the original text. On Weibo, the reposts with users' comments that open for reading and commenting would be considered as creating productions.

The Source Credibility Scale and the Source Attractiveness Scale

This study rests on two models, the Source Credibility Model (Hovland et al., 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Johansson & Sparredal, 2002; Ohanian, 1990) and The Source Attractiveness Model (Johansson & Sparredal, 2002; McGuire, 1968, 1985), which further propose a new model applicable to political branding context that contends two main attributes, namely credibility and attractiveness. Credibility is commonly measured by expertise, while attractiveness includes physical attractiveness and closeness.

The term "Source Credibility" refers to the endorser's positive characteristic which can increase the level of acceptance and persuasion in the process of advertising (Ohanian, 1990). The model

argues that the effectiveness of the source depended on perceived level of expertise and trustworthiness of an endorser (Hovland et al., 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990). According to Hovland et al. (1953), expertise has been defined as "the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions" (p. 21). It is generally associated with knowledge, experience, or skills that the endorser possesses in a given area (Ericsson & Håkansson, 2005). In this sense, athletes are perceived as persuasive when endorsing sports-related products and doctors are perceived as experts when representing pharmaceutical products. Trustworthiness refers to "the degree of confidence in the communicator's intent to communicate the assertions he considers most valid" (p. 21).

Although early empirical work suggested that trustworthiness served as a determinant in the process of persuasion (e.g. Friedman & Friedman, 1978), scholars like Ohanian (1990) argues that trustworthiness is not significantly associated with purchase intentions. According to Ohanian (1990), the degree of trustworthiness highly depended on: (1) the overall social trust of the communicator's occupation and professions and (2) the receiver's perception of communicator's behavior (McGinnies & Ward, 1980; Ohanian, 1990). In dealing with Peng's case, this study majorly focuses on how media content in social media portrays the positive characteristics of Peng. Although the perception of such images is equally important in the big picture, it is now excluded in this article due to the specific research purpose and methodology.

Following the initial model of Hovland and his associates, The Source Attractiveness Model has its origins in the social psychological research as a component of the "Source Valence Model" of McGuire (1985). By definition, attractiveness functions as establishing affective bond between the source and its receiver. It is to say that people are more likely to be influenced by the source when they have a desire to identify with. Meanwhile, they are more likely to identify with people they find likable (Ericsson & Håkansson, 2005; Kelman, 1961). In McGuire's model, "likability" serves as the first significant dimension in attractiveness, referring to "an affection for the source due to physical appearance, behavior or other personal traits" (Erdogan, Baker, & Tagg, 2001, p. 40). In its further development, likability has been merged as component of "physical attractiveness" addressed by Ohanian (1990), referring to the desirable features and qualities in terms of facial and body appearance, dressing codes, postures, and so on (Morrow, McElroy, Stamper, & Wilson, 1990). As the very classic factor in attractiveness, physical attractiveness mainly emphasizes the visual characteristics of sources and celebrity figures, but has been criticized for objection of bodies, especially for female image appealing for visual pleasure and male gaze (Mulvey, 1989). To a large extent, the image of how the sourced figure lives, interacts, and positions himself/herself in reality has been largely neglected in physical attractiveness.

As both reflection and supplement, this article suggests an additional dimension, namely closeness, in attractiveness other than physical likability. Unlike physical attractiveness's emphasis on visual pleasure, closeness refers to the establishment of affective intimacy between source and its receiver, which is usually achieved by promotion or branding strategies. It aims to shift the focus merely on "objective" attractiveness into the interest of affective relationship, and pays more attention to how the sourced figure, as not only an exhibited beauty, but as socialized human, strategically communicate with its audience. The concept of closeness draws first on the two dimensions other than likability in McGuire's Model, namely the audience's supposed similarity and familiarity to the respondent (McGuire, 1968, 1985). In the model, similarity means "a supposed resemblance between the source and the receiver." Familiarity refers to "knowledge of the source through exposure" and indicates that the source is easy to recognize (Eredogan et al., 2001). The two dimensions, despite the absence of critical sense in McGuire's subjectivity, have tried to go beyond

simple physical appearance and indicating a widening schema to include virtuous characteristics such as intellectual skills, personal traits, and lifestyles serve as the antecedents of achieving receiver's identification with the source (Patra & Datta, 2012). However, none of them is comprehensive enough to conclude the strategically established intimacy between source and its receiver. For example, the tendency of secularizing politician's public persona appears as helpful strategy in decreasing the distance between political figure and public (Corner, 2003; Marshall, 1997). The emphasis of an ordinary and private persona, as Marshall puts in, could be seen as a converged construction of politics and entertainment, in which links one's personality into his or her political ideology (Marshall, 1997). In this sense, the portrays of endorser's personal life and social network with others should also be considered as significant component in building affective bond with the audience, yet cannot be adequately explained by either similarity or familiarity. Therefore, this study decides to use the term "closeness" as a more comprehensive and symbolic term with an attempt to cover the common ground of the strategical tendency to shorten the social distance between the source and its receiver.

Factors in the New Source Credibility Scale

Physical attractiveness. Ohanian (1990) does not offer a clear definition of attractiveness in his study except for emphasizing the unidimensional feature of the concept. In other literatures that consider attractiveness as a factor in the Source Credibility Model, the concept is commonly defined in terms of facial and physical attractiveness (Baker & Churchill, 1997; Caballero & Pride, 1984). In the present study, the term is generally defined as the desirable features and qualities in terms of facial and body appearance, dressing codes, postures, and so on (Morrow et al., 1990).

A large quantity of studies in political marketing and political branding have indicated the important influence of attractiveness on engaging attitudinal change and behavioral intention in consumption and even political participation. In political campaign, various studies show that compared to ideological positions and political party affiliation, voters' perceptions and assessment of the candidates' character exert more impact on voters' preference and voting behaviors (Kelley & Mirer, 1974; Rosenberg, Kahn, & Tran, 1991). Attractiveness is even more important when celebrity is female. According to van Zoonen (2006), this might be the only but still limited strategy for female politicians to brand herself as celebrity.

Literatures relating attractiveness to source credibility have found similar results. In Ohanian's (1990) test, more attractive endorsers have stronger effect on consumer's positive attitude and purchasing intention. Similarly, other studies also indicate that attractive communicator has a strong impact on public opinion and purchasing desire (Joseph, 1982; Till & Busler, 2000). The present study thus proposes:

> H_1: The emphasis on Peng's attractiveness in posts will have a positive effect on the number of COBRAs.

Expertise. The concept of expertise refers also to "authoritativeness" (McCroskey, 1966) and "qualification" (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1969). In other words, it suggests the communicators' expertise in their profession (McGinnies & Ward, 1980). One shows more his or her professional skills or reputation will largely influence the expertise perceived by the receivers. In the case of Peng, expertise is defined as her achievement and authoritativeness as the first lady of China. For

example, a fine portrait of Peng's behavior on an international meeting event with other politicians is considered as a presentation of her expertise as a national figure and politician.

Previous studies have indicated that communicator or endorsers with higher expertise have a positive impact mainly on attitude change (Crisci & Kassinove, 1973; Goldsmith, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000; Ohanian, 1990). For example, in their research on the expertise address and its effect on persuasion, Crisci and Kassinove (1973) report a significant direct effect of expertise on how people will listen to others' advice. On the basis of these literatures, this article proposes the following:

H_2: The emphasis on Peng's expertise in posts will have a positive effect on the number of COBRAs.

Closeness. The dimension of closeness draws on McGuire's (1985) Source Attractiveness Model with a particular emphasis on the attempts to shorten the social distance between source and its receiver. This article uses the term "closeness" to refer to the establishment of affective intimacy between source and its receiver, which is usually achieved by promotion or branding strategies including portraying endorsers in terms of persona, lifestyle, subjectivity, and social network.

Closeness is added here as additional dimension other than physical attractiveness in defining attractiveness, which treats the endorser not only as exhibited object appealing for visual pleasure, but as socialized human in real life and social network. It also echoes to the tendency of secularization in politics, which leads to the promotion strategies in political branding that aim to create intimacy between politicians and the public (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999). Closeness, as many studies in audience and especially fandom studies have suggested, is commonly utilized by celebrities' mediated images to fulfill fans' psychological needs of constituting intimacy with the fan-object (Caughey, 1978; Duffett, 2014; Schickel, 1985). Portraying celebrity as mundane and approachable person who shares similar lifestyle with the so-called "common people" thus became sufficient strategy to communicate with fans. Chin and Hills (2008, p. 11) examined how "unofficial" images of celebrities on blogs created a form of "subcultural" public persona to be "felt by fans." Similarly in the case of Peng, with an attempt to establish an image of approachable, there are many posts that focus on her mundane lifestyle and off-staged life, including her leisure time, connection with close friend, and connection with family and spouse. Through these posts, audiences are more likely to be influenced because they feel a sense of similarity and empathy for the person. As the power of closeness in attractiveness has been largely ignored in the previous studies, few have ever examined its effect in influencing public's affective attitude and supporting behaviors. Therefore, in studying the effect of source credibility in a relatively new subject, the present study attempts to propose:

H_3: The emphasis on Peng's closeness will have a positive effect on the number of COBRAs.

Besides, as mentioned above, the COBRAs typology has categorized the online consuming behaviors into three subcategories, namely consuming, contributing, and creating (Muntinga et al., 2011). These three subcategories imply different levels of participation. As previous studies examining the effect of source credibility on consumer's behaviors rarely consider consuming behaviors as a multi-dimensional concept, this article attempts to also test if the three factors of the revised source credibility scale influence differently on each level of consuming behavior. A research question is thus raised as:

RQ: To what extent does source credibility affect consumer's consuming, contributing and creating behaviors differently?

Methodology

Data collection and sampling

As briefly mentioned in the previous section, this article chooses the posts released by the Weibo account "Liyuan Fan Club" as samples to examine. The reason to choose this account is first because Weibo is the most important open social media in China, while "Liyuan Fan Club" is the only official account on Weibo that specialized in Peng's image promoting. As a propaganda account under the name of "fan club," this account implies series of strategical branding attempts to attract and engage the public as "fans." This is therefore, considered as an appropriate subject to study with. Second, "Liyuan Fan Club" is also a popular account on Weibo with more than 1.6 million followers. This also makes it as appropriate subject to observe consumer's band-related behaviors.

Since the first post in March 2013, "Liyuan Fan Club" has posted more than 1000 posts. Each post is used as a sampling unit as source that gains certain COBRAs. Among these, several posts that are deleted by the account itself during the coding process are not accessible so that they are not included in analysis. In addition, to exclude irrelevant posts like simple greetings or luck drawer, posts without a direct or indirect mention of Peng are excluded from analysis. Finally, 790 posts are analyzed to examine the effect of source credibility on people's consuming behaviors. Each post can consist of texts, pictures, and videos, and none of them is indispensable. That is to say, there are six types of post at most: post with only texts, post with only pictures, post with only videos, post with texts and pictures, post with picture and videos, and post with text, pictures and videos.

Data preparation

Each post is analyzed and assigned to one of three levels (no, low, and high) of all three content categories: attractiveness, expertise, and closeness.

First, posts focus on dressing, facial, and body attractiveness are coded as posts emphasizing on attractiveness. Coding is based on texts and pictures comprehensively. For example, a post with text as "an excellent representation of Chinese style" plus two pictures focus on Peng dressed in a *qipao* is emphasizing Peng's attractiveness, especially her dressing attractiveness. A post talks about "smile is a kind of quality" with a picture focuses on Peng's side face and smile is also emphasizing Peng's attractiveness, especially her facial attractiveness. In coding, posts not mentioning anything related to Peng's attractiveness are coded as "0 = Not mention of Peng's attractiveness." Posts that emphasize on Peng's attractiveness are then divided into two categories according to the level of emphasis on attractiveness. As each post on Weibo consists of a text no longer than 140 characters and 9 pictures, classification standard is as following: posts with less than four pictures (including equal to four) emphasizing Peng's attractiveness (texts can be emphasizing attractiveness or not), or posts with more than five pictures but without emphasis on attractiveness in texts are assigned to "Low level of emphasis on Peng's attractiveness" category, coded as 1. Posts with more than five pictures emphasizing Peng's attractiveness, meanwhile with texts also emphasizing Peng's attractiveness are assigned to the category of "High level of emphasis on Peng's attractiveness," coded as 2.

Second, posts focus on Peng's working agenda, including her meeting with other public or political figure (except for Xi Jinping in ordinary settings), her presence on national or international events and her daily work as the first lady, are coded as posts emphasizing on Peng's expertise. For example, a post with text as "meeting with Korean president" plus three pictures with Peng shaking with president Park is emphasizing Peng's expertise. Similarly, those posts are categorized into three categories where 0 = not mention of Peng's expertise, 1 = low level of emphasis on Peng's expertise, and 2 = high level of emphasis on Peng's expertise.

Then, posts focus on Peng's mundane lifestyle and off-staged life, including her leisure time, connection with close friend, and connection with family and spouse, are coded as posts emphasizing on closeness. For example, a post with text as "us" plus a picture on Peng and Xi's romantic interaction is emphasizing Peng's closeness. Posts on Peng's relations with her other private families or friends, like her daughter, mother-in-law, and previous colleagues are also emphasizing Peng's closeness. Similarly, those posts are categorized into three categories where 0 = not mention of Peng's closeness, 1 = low level of emphasis on Peng's closeness, and 2 = high level of emphasis on Peng's closeness.

Two coders carry out the coding independently and simultaneously. Coders are trained using a preliminary subset of posts. The training process continues until both coders are comfortable and confident with the various coding categories. Definitions and examples of the various categories are provided for coding (See Appendix 2).

To test inter-coder reliability, the two coders code the same 152 posts that are randomly selected from the 790 posts analyzed in this study (approximately 20% of the total sample). An inter-coder reliability check using Cohen's Kappa is run on the three variables (i.e. attractiveness, expertise, and closeness) that require a judgment call from the coders. The measure of agreement is .95 for attractiveness category, .88 for expertise category, and .89 for closeness category which indicates a high level of reliability on the coding instrument and among the coders.

Statistics concerned with COBRAs behaviors that were the number of likes, the number of comments, and the number of reposts presented at the bottom of each post. The authors collected all posts posted between 3 March 2013 and 24 October 2015. As the number of likes, the number of comments, and the number of reposts keep updating constantly, to assure the data are consistent and valid through the whole study, the research sets a deadline for recoding all the statistics, that is 2 November 2015. In other words, after the deadline, any changes in the numbers are invalid and are not to be included in the analysis.

Results

A total of 790 posts are analyzed in this article, each post is assigned to one of three levels (no, low, and high) of each source credibility factor (attractiveness, expertise, and closeness). In other words, each post is labeled with separate levels of the same three factors. In attractiveness dimension, there are 633 posts mention no attractiveness of Peng, accounting for 80% of all posts. Meanwhile, 109 posts (14%) belong to "low level of emphasis on Peng's attractiveness" and 48 posts (6%) are assigned to "high level of emphasis on Peng's attractiveness." In expertise dimension, some of 55% posts (439) don't mention of Peng's expertise, while 25% posts (197) belong to "low level of emphasis on Peng's expertise" and 20% posts (154) belong to "high level of emphasis on Peng's expertise." In closeness dimension, 70% of posts (553) are assigned to "not mention of Peng's closeness," 22% (172) are assigned to "low level of emphasis on Peng's closeness," and 8% are assigned to "high level of emphasis on Peng's closeness."

The number of consuming behaviors ranges from 4 to 87, 644 ($M=1905.27$, $SD=5648.70$). The number of consuming behaviors is non-normally distributed, with Skewness of 7.14 ($SE=.09$) and Kurtosis of 78.44 ($SE=.17$). The number of contributing behaviors ranges from 0 to 13,587 ($M=180.36$, $SD=659.18$). The number of contributing behaviors is non-normally distributed, with Skewness of 14.09 ($SE=.09$) and Kurtosis of 250.50 ($SE=.17$). The number of creating behaviors ranges from 2 to 68,084 ($M=869.27$, $SD=4442.41$). The number of creating behaviors is also non-normally distributed, with Skewness of 11.46 ($SE=0.09$) and Kurtosis of 142.85 ($SE=0.17$).

As results show the data as non-normal and so to reduce skewness, a log transformation is carried out. According to George and Mallery (2010), the values for asymmetry and kurtosis between −2 and +2 are considered acceptable to prove normal univariate distribution. After log transformation, the number of consuming behaviors is normally distributed, with Skewness of 0.34 ($SE=.09$) and Kurtosis of −0.92 ($SE=.17$). The number of contributing behaviors is normally distributed, with Skewness of 0.22 ($SE=.09$) and Kurtosis of −0.06 ($SE=.17$). The number of creating behaviors is also normally distributed, with Skewness of 0.62 ($SE=0.09$) and Kurtosis of 0.65 ($SE=0.17$).

Three one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) are separately conducted to compare effects of source credibility factors (attractiveness, expertise, and closeness) on COBRAs behaviors (consuming, contributing, and creating) (See Appendix 1).

First, a one-way ANOVA is conducted to compare effect of level of emphasis on Peng's attractiveness (no, low, and high) on COBRAs behaviors and the ANOVA show that the effect of attractiveness on consuming behaviors, $F(2787)=9.72$, $p=.000$, and creating behaviors, $F(2787)=5.75$, $p=.003$, are significant, while the effect of attractiveness on contributing behaviors is not significant. In consuming behaviors, Post-hoc analyses indicate that the mean score for the high level of emphasis on attractiveness condition ($M=2.71$, $SD=1.08$) and low level of emphasis on attractiveness condition ($M=2.60$, $SD=0.99$) are both significantly different than the no emphasis on attractiveness condition ($M=2.27$, $SD=0.91$). Post-hoc analyses on creating behaviors using the Scheffé post-hoc criterion for significance indicate that the mean score for the high level of emphasis on attractiveness condition ($M=2.46$, $SD=0.63$) is significantly different than the no emphasis on attractiveness condition ($M=2.17$, $SD=0.67$). However, the low level of emphasis on attractiveness condition ($M=2.32$, $SD=0.66$) does not significantly differ from the high-level condition and no attractiveness condition. Thus, H_1 is supported.

Second, a one-way ANOVA is then conducted to compare effect of level of emphasis on Peng's expertise (no, low, and high) on the COBRAs behaviors and the ANOVA show that the effect of expertise on consuming behaviors, creating behaviors, and creating behaviors are not significant. Thus H_2 isn't supported.

Third, a one-way ANOVA is conducted to compare effect of level of emphasis on Peng's closeness (no, low, and high) on COBRAs behaviors and the ANOVA show that the effect of closeness on consuming behaviors, $F(2787)=3.13$, $p=.044$, contributing behaviors, $F(2765)=5.71$, $p=.003$, and creating behaviors, $F(2787)=15.07$, $p=.000$, are all significant. In contributing behaviors, Post-hoc analyses indicate that the mean score for the high level of emphasis on closeness condition ($M=1.96$, $SD=0.73$) is significantly different than the no emphasis on closeness condition ($M=1.68$, $SD=0.65$), However, the low level of emphasis on attractiveness condition ($M=1.75$, $SD=0.65$) does not significantly differ from the high level condition and no closeness condition. Post-hoc analyses on creating behaviors using the Scheffé post-hoc criterion for significance indicate that the mean score for the high level of emphasis on closeness condition ($M=2.53$, $SD=0.67$)

and the low level of emphasis on closeness condition ($M=2.35$, $SD=0.71$) are both significantly different than the no emphasis on closeness condition ($M=2.13$, $SD=0.65$).

Discussions

The aim of this study is to analyze the impression management strategies from source credibility perspective, and to examine impacts of three factors of source credibility, that is attractiveness, expertise and closeness, in encouraging engagement of users on social media. It also figures out whether separate level (no, low, and high) of these factors play significantly different roles in activating COBRAs behaviors. In addition, individual contributions of these three source credibility factors on three levels of participation are also compared. Overall, the study finds that emphasis on Peng's attractiveness has a positive effect on consuming behaviors and creating behaviors, and emphasis on Peng's closeness has a positive effect on all COBRAs behaviors, while emphasis on expertise has no effect on COBRAs behaviors.

From descriptive statistics, we find out that the Weibo contents posted by "Liyuan Fan Club" strongly emphasize Peng's physical attractiveness, especially on dressing style. Meanwhile, the results also indicate that Peng exposed frequently in a public sphere with professional images. In addition, there is a clear tendency of emphasizing Peng's closeness, especially presenting her private relationships and personal lives. Due to the fact that political branding and political impression management stay currently on an initial stage in China, the public are rarely able to access to private information about politicians and their families. At the same time, the Chinese government is very restricted in online information, especially sensitive and private information about the country leaders. Taking these conditions into consideration, we insist that the current emphasis on Peng's closeness dimension has been a further step in the development of impression management in China.

One-way ANOVA analysis verifies our hypothesis that attractiveness dimension has a positive effect on COBRAs behaviors. This finding is consistent with most of previous studies in both advertising and political branding in which attractiveness facilitates positive attitude change (Baker, & Churchill, 1977; Caballero, & Pride, 1984; Mills & Harvey, 1972; Petty & Cacioppo, 1980) and encourage participatory behaviors (Kelley & Mirer, 1974; Rosenberg et al., 1991). To explain the relationship between attractiveness and source credibility, Elaboration Likelihood model (ELM) proposed by Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann (1983) as a two-process model of response to advertising stimuli, is most effective. This model assumes that persuasion travels through a "central route" under conditions of high involvement, while travels through a "peripheral route" in low involvement. The significant difference between these two routes lies in the cognitive effort individuals spend in dealing with persuasive messages. Attractiveness serves as important stimuli in persuasion under both conditions. Under conditions of low involvement, consumers only glance at an advertisement for a second or two before moving to the next message. Compared to detailed statements, visual impression is more evident and may even be all the information conveyed. While under conditions of high involvement, attractiveness serves as stimuli in activating consumers' curiosity in messages, then leading to further comprehension of the message and even discussion. This model can explain the positive effect of emphasis on Peng's attractiveness in increasing source credibility, then, subsequently, encouraging engagement of users on Weibo.

However, statistical results in this study suggest that emphasis on Peng's expertise has no effect in encouraging participatory behaviors, which is not consistent with most of previous studies.

According to ELM, highly involved users are more likely to pay attention on probative aspects of the message (e.g. expertise) and then engage in making valid assertion, enhancing recall, more discussion, and so on. Since "expertise" derives from an actor's ability to provide information to others because of her experience, education, or competence, it constitutes the denotative qualifications of a person (Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1973). In other words, expertise information is processed more as a central persuasion cue than as peripheral information (Homer & Kahle, 1990). That is to say, cognitive effort required in processing expertise information is intense. While in China, especially on Weibo, users have relatively low cognitive involvement toward information requiring further elaboration. On the one hand, it is possibly because of the 140-word restriction of the Weibo post limits and quantity and quality of serious and comprehensive discussions. On the other hand, it is also influenced largely by the immature and relatively manipulated public sphere on Chinese social media. Consequently, expertise information on Weibo easily fails to attract attention and elaboration, or to increase source credibility in encouraging consuming behaviors.

A large quantity of literature in marketing domain suggest that perceived closeness between an endorser and the consumer can have a positive effect on source credibility. For example, closeness based on race (Spence, Lachlan, Westerman, & Spates, 2013; Whittler & DiMeo, 1991), gender (Flanagin & Metzger, 2003), sexual preference (Atkinson, Brady, & Casas, 1981), and language (Aune & Kikuchi, 1993) can significantly affect source credibility. In addition, perceived closeness to the endorser in overall lifestyle, cultural background, and basic values is also positively related to source credibility (Phua, 2014). This is because closeness is usually significantly associated with endorsers' attributes like competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill, factors serve the function in increasing source credibility, then are transferred over to the consumer's evaluations of the endorsers' credibility. Previous studies in political communication have also examined that perceptions of closeness with politicians are directly related to perceptions of their credibility and potential political action (Dunn & Nisbett, 2014).

As introduced in the earlier parts, we use the COBRAs model to divide the three levels of online consuming behaviors. From consuming to contributing and to creating, the level of engagement and participation gradually increases. According to results of one-way ANOVA, attractiveness dimension is more effective in encouraging consuming behaviors than contributing behaviors and creating behaviors. In other words, people are more likely to react by simply viewing or "liking" it, rather than producing any contents or interactions in response to the posts. Meanwhile, results of one-way ANOVA analysis indicate that closeness dimension was related to all three levels of online participation, the predictive power increase progressively from lower level of participation to higher level of participation.

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Author biographies

Zongya Li is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Communication at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her research interest includes consumer behavior, health communication, and environmental communication.

Yiyi Yin is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Communication at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Before pursuing Ph.D. degree, she has been trained in cinema studies and critical theory. Her research is mostly about popular culture and youth in China, with particular interests in fan culture and digital fandom.

Appendix I

Table 1. One-way ANOVA of attractiveness on COBRAs behaviors.

	Level of emphasis on attractiveness						F	p
	No emphasis		Low level of emphasis		High level of emphasis			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Consuming behavior	2.27	0.91	2.60	0.99	2.71	1.08	9.72	.000
Contributing behavior	1.69	0.65	1.76	0.67	1.89	0.76	2.33	.098
Creating behavior	2.17	0.67	2.32	0.66	2.46	0.63	5.75	.003

ANOVA: one-way analysis of variance; COBRA: consumer's online brand-related activities.

Table 2. One-way ANOVA of expertise on COBRAs behaviors.

	Level of emphasis on expertise						F	p
	No emphasis		Low level of emphasis		High level of emphasis			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Consuming behavior	2.33	0.98	2.36	0.91	2.36	0.88	0.09	.911
Contributing behavior	1.72	0.67	1.70	0.65	1.72	0.65	0.06	.940
Creating behavior	2.24	0.72	2.17	0.63	2.20	0.58	0.66	.519

ANOVA: one-way analysis of variance; COBRA: consumer's online brand-related activities

Table 3. One-way ANOVA of closeness on COBRAs behaviors.

	Level of emphasis on closeness						F	p
	No emphasis		Low level of emphasis		High level of emphasis			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Consuming behavior	2.29	0.95	2.46	0.92	2.50	0.88	3.13	.044
Contributing behavior	1.68	0.65	1.75	0.65	1.96	0.73	5.71	.003
Creating behavior	2.13	0.65	2.35	0.71	2.53	0.67	15.07	.000

ANOVA: one-way analysis of variance; COBRA: consumer's online brand-related activities.

Appendix 2

Coding scheme

Table 4. Description of coded source credibility variables.

Source credibility variables	Dimension	Coding instructions	Scoring method
Physical attractiveness	Text dimension	Here, the text of a post as related to attractiveness is coded. To be specific, texts mention Peng's dressing, facial and body attractiveness are coded as posts emphasizing on attractiveness	0 = not mention attractiveness of Peng in the text 1 = mention attractiveness of Peng in the text
	Picture dimension	Here, the image of a post as related to attractiveness is coded. We have argued for the inclusion of the following set of characteristics in attractiveness studies: Peng's facial attractiveness (e.g. Peng's face in close-up and facial expression in close-up), Peng's dressing style (e.g. Peng's clothing in close-up and accessories in close-up), and Peng's body attractiveness (e.g. Peng's pose close-up)	The amount of images focuses on Peng's attractiveness in one post. 0 = none; 1 = a few (1–3); 2 = medium (4–6); 3 = many (7–9))
	Video dimension	Here, the video of a post as related to attractiveness is coded. To be specific, videos showed close-up shots of Peng's dressing, facial, and body attractiveness are coded as posts emphasizing on attractiveness	0 = not mention attractiveness of Peng in the video 1 = mention attractiveness of Peng in the video
Expertise	Text dimension	Here, the text of a post as related to attractiveness is coded. To be specific, texts mention Peng's working agenda, including her meeting with other public or political figure (except for Xi Jinping in ordinary settings), her presence on national or international events and her daily work as the first lady, are coded as posts emphasizing on Peng's expertise	0 = not mention expertise of Peng in the text 1 = mention expertise of Peng in the text
	Picture dimension	Here, the image of a post as related to expertise is coded. We have argued for the inclusion of the following set of characteristics in expertise studies: accompanying Xi Jinping on his international visits, participating in advocacy activities, and participating in various international and domestic programs through specific visits alone (e.g. visit a Moscow boarding school for orphans and children, attend an AIDS prevention, and treatment program in Zhejiang University)	The amount of images focuses on Peng's expertise in one post. (0 = none, 1 = a few (1–3), 2 = medium (4–6), 3 = many (7–9)

(Continued)

Table 4. (Continued)

Source credibility variables	Dimension	Coding instructions	Scoring method
	Video dimension	Here, the video of a post as related to expertise is coded. To be specific, video mention Peng's working agenda, including her meeting with other public or political figure (except for Xi Jinping in ordinary settings), her presence on national or international events and her daily work as the first lady, are coded as posts emphasizing on Peng's expertise	0 = not mention expertise of Peng in the text 1 = mention expertise of Peng in the text
Closeness	Text dimension	Here, the text of a post as related to closeness is coded. To be specific, texts mention Peng's mundane lifestyle and off-staged life, including her leisure time, connection with close friend and connection with family and spouse, are coded as posts emphasizing on closeness	0 = not mention closeness of Peng in the text 1 = mention closeness of Peng in the text
	Picture dimension	Here, the image of a post as related to closeness is coded. We have argued for the inclusion of the following set of characteristics in expertise studies: Peng's old photos as a folk singer; Peng's new and old photos with spouse, families, and close friends; Peng's photos on attending leisure or personal activities	The amount of images focuses on Peng's expertise in one post. (0 = none, 1 = a few (1–3); 2 = medium (4–6); 3 = many (7–9)
	Video dimension	Here, the video of a post as related to closeness is coded. To be specific, video mention Peng's mundane lifestyle and off-staged life, including her leisure time, connection with close friend, and connection with family and spouse, are coded as posts emphasizing on closeness	0 = not mention closeness of Peng in the text 1 = mention closeness of Peng in the text

Table 5. Description of coded COBRAs variables.

COBRAs behaviors variables	Coding instructions	Scoring method
Consuming	Participating without actively contributing and it's the lowest level of activeness (e.g. searching for and viewing posts generated by the account, reading comments, and reposts created by other users, "liking" the post)	Count the total number of "likes" to the post
Contributing	Middle level of activeness (e.g. comments on the original post, comments on other users' comments, repost the original post, and repost other users' comments or reposts)	Count the total number of comments and reposts within one post
Creating	Highest level of activeness, their production of content will be consumed and contributed to by other users. The difference between contributing and creating COBRA type lies in the empowerment motivation held by creating behavior. People engage in creating are not only driven by social interaction and building personal identity motivation, more importantly, are fond of taking control of their own circumstances and influencing others	Count the total number of "likes" to the comments

COBRA: consumer's online brand-related activities.