

# Paper for the Special Theme on Social Media: One of the Big Five Trends in ICT

## Social Commerce and Innovative Business Engagements: An Empirical Investigation

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**Abstract:** Social media (SM) is driving innovations in both individual and business lifestyles, unleashing new opportunities and spurring new business models. Chinese businesses, in particular, have seized upon the opportunity of integrating SM in innovative ways of business delivery. Yet there is little formal knowledge on this subject. The purpose of this research, therefore, is to empirically identify some of these SM-enabled business innovations in a Chinese context to develop fundamental knowledge and to build an evidence-based platform for understanding the motivation for adopting SM for business innovations. Qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with industry experts were analysed using content analysis techniques. The study finds that SM is enabling innovations in business including: (1) developments of *social media market territories* that are used by organizations for gathering market intelligence as well as for promoting products/services, (2) *strategic engagements* that are being used not only for tapping into diverse wisdom but also as a means of cultivating communities and enhancing product/service awareness before their launch, (3) quicker promotion to productivity, (4) development of *socialized commerce* activities based on new **S-Channels**, and (5) development of *social media market intermediaries*. Academically, the results extend innovation theories in a SM-oriented technological innovations context and identify some of the factors that could influence the adoption stage as in more general innovation theory. Managerially, the results could be valuable for strategising adoption of SM-enabled business innovation and tapping into the opportunities of social commerce and development of *S-Channels*.

**Keywords:** Business innovations, Social capital, New business trends, Socialized commerce, Social media market territories, Innovation theory

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### 1. Introduction

Social media (SM) is changing the dynamics of the way businesses and societies go about their day-to-day activities (Rathore, Ilavarasan & Dwivedi, 2016). It is cultivating new habits, attitudes, communities and friendships, and is breeding the emergence of *S-Generation (Social Media Generation)* (Huang, 2014). There is a growing sense of realization and belief, among individuals and organisations alike, that SM has the potential and utility to create value (Bertschek & Kesler, 2017).

The diverse and abundant ways in which SM creates value has led many businesses to swiftly move into cyberspace and establish their SM presence and identity (e.g., Old Spice, @Oreo, T-Mobile USA). Organizations are not only using SM for dissemination of their philosophies, values and messages; but they are also using it for business development and growth (Scuotto et al., 2017). The use thus far has been wide and varied; disaster management, event management, political and social campaigning, project management, city marketing and higher education, are just a few examples (Ram, 2018; Zhou & Wang, 2014).

One of the reasons SM has been applied in so many diverse contexts (as explained above) is its ability to empower organisations to innovate and do things in new ways (Lam, Yeung & Cheng, 2016). Simply put innovation is “introducing something new” (Gopalakrishnan & Damanpour, 1997). A business innovation could take several forms including (but not limited to), introducing new products/services; new markets, new

distribution channels, customer engagement campaigns; new business models/processes and collaborative ways of working (Hitchen et al., 2017).

SM is enabling business innovations by facilitating the tapping into the talent available external to the organizational boundaries. Organizations thus seek new: ideas, thoughts, viewpoints, ways of seeing and doing things from the SM communities; and translate these contributions for innovations in products/services, sales & marketing strategies and enhanced customer experience management to create business value (Qualman, 2012). Therefore, SM enabled co-creation activities are becoming regular practice where organisations encourage “external contributions to internal design” – called “open innovations” (Chesbrough 2003, p.24).

SM is also known to drive innovations in *internal* management through purposeful integration of knowledge and experience of various layers of staff and enhanced networking among employees (Lam, Yeung & Cheng, 2016). *Enterprise SM* is a vehicle to drive internal innovations and its use has been found to enhance return on investment (ROI) (Scuotto et al., 2017). It is claimed to improve operational efficiency and distribution channel management (Lam, Yeung & Cheng, 2016). SM, as such, is leading to development of new trends both from internal and external perspectives.

Naturally, these developments are facilitated by the fast spread of SM globally - as reflected in a recent report which forecasts the number of global SM users to reach 3.196 billion - up 13% on a year-on-year basis (Chaffey, 2018). China is at the center stage of all these happening as it has the largest SM community in the world (Statista, 2017a), estimated to consist of 580 million users by 2018 (Statista, 2017b). Also, penetration rate of SM in China is higher at 39.5%, compared to 37% globally (Statista, 2017c) precipitating a corresponding wide-scale use of Chinese SM for business purposes (Chiu, Ip & Silverman, 2012).

It is estimated that an approximately 50% of eCommerce in China is SM driven (Lamb, 2017). A recent PCW report suggests that in China, 25% buy directly from SM shops compared to 15% globally, and 45% discover new brands/products through SM as against 39% globally (PWC, 2017). These figures represent just the tip of the iceberg of the influence SM is having on businesses in China and globally.

Despite this phenomenal growth, little is known about the role of SM in enabling business innovations in general and particularly in a Chinese context. While some empirical studies (e.g. Roberts, Piller & Lüttgens, 2016) have been done; many of the studies (e.g. Lee & Phang, 2015; Patroni, Recker & von Briel, 2015) are describing a work-in-progress scenario with theoretical/conceptual frameworks that seem to be at the early stages of development of knowledge. Some studies that have looked into influence of SM on business innovation have taken a narrow approach, e.g. Idota, Bunno and Tsuji, (2015), who examined SM-enabled product innovations and Hitchen et al., (2017), who investigated the benefits that drive SM enabled open innovations in small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

There seems to be clear dearth of studies that have looked at the issue holistically. On one hand this stifles the adoption of SM for business innovations and on the other hand the fragmented knowledge hampers the development of wholesale solutions or packaged knowledge for industry use; this has also been underlined by other authors, e.g. van Osch and Coursaris, (2013). A number of researchers (e.g. Hitchen et al., 2017; Rathore, Ilavarasan & Dwivedi, 2016) have, therefore, emphasized the need for in-depth empirical work for furthering research on SM and its influence in driving business innovations.

The main idea of this study is to address the above-stated gap in knowledge and to fill the need to build knowledge on SM-enabled business innovations for achieving internal and external efficiencies. We chose China as the focus of this investigation, because a staggering 50% of its eCommerce is SM based (Lamb, 2017), making it uniquely positioned to investigate the influence of SM driven business innovation. In light of above discussion, this study, therefore, examines the following question:

*What are some of the business innovations enabled by Social Media in China?*

Answering the research question is important and carries widescale economic and social implications. By learning from the experiences of businesses using SM for innovations as explained by the findings of this study, organizations can develop capabilities to tap into the potential of SM and hence could become economically better-off. Other contributions made by this study are:

1. It extends application of innovation theories (here defined as a process where an innovation is selected, adopted, implemented, used and phased-out) for SM-oriented technological innovations and identifies some of the factors that could influence the adoption stage as per innovation theory.
2. It provides evidence-based insights to managers including: Chief Information Officers/IT Executives; Business development managers, Product/Market development managers for designing and deploying tailored strategies to build SM-enabled innovations and take advantage of SM commerce. By learning from the results of this study, managers can make informed decisions on establishing new strategic partnerships and tapping into talent outside organizational boundaries.
3. Its results will help in policy making and development of industry best practices to stimulate use of SM for business innovations.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Use of Social Media in business**

The growth of SM is leading to development of Enterprise SM (ESM) such as having an official Wechat ID or official Facebook page. An ESM is defined as a platform to facilitate “intra- and extra-organizational communication, especially between employees, management teams and external stakeholders” (van Osch, & Coursaris, 2013).

The main aim of ESM is to enhance internal collaboration and external engagement with a view to deliver message and information, promote products and service, source new ideas, and build relationships with relevant stakeholders for betterment of the organization (Sigala & Chalkiti, 2015).

A number of authors (e.g. Risius & Beck, 2015) have found benefits of using ESM in such areas as innovation management, public perception and enhanced loyalty. For instance, “Direct2Dell” is a very popular corporate SM blog site which provides latest news, products/services information; and it engages with customers by asking them to publish their views and topics of interests on the site (<https://blog.dell.com/en-us/>).

Nutella, the spread manufacturer, has used a Facebook based ESM platform successfully to engage with their customers, recording 32.1 million likes for the pages that shared video content of Nutella spread (Kolowich, 2018). Other example uses of ESM include the Facebook pages of Adobe, UNICEF and Intrepid Travel (Kolowich, 2018). These few examples underline the importance of understanding the role of SM in enabling business innovations, an objective achieved by this study.

### **2.2 Social Media in China**

At an estimated 563.1 million users, China is arguably the largest social network market in the world (Statista, 2017a). Wechat, QQ, and Qzone top the SM platforms with an estimated 889, 868 and 595 million users respectively as of 2017 figures (Statista, 2017d).

According to a CNNIC (2018) report, the Internet population in China has reached an estimated 772 million with a penetration rate of over 55%. A latest 2016 Wechat report highlights the corresponding growth of SM in China. Wechat alone has 768 million daily logged-in active users showing a Year-on-Year (YoY) growth of 35%. The report further suggests that an estimated over 100 million calls were made per day and the total number of Wechat messages per day registered an increase of 67% and that 50% of Wechat users use Wechat for at least 1.5 hours per day. The information consumption through Wechat in 2016 reached 174.3 billion RmB showing a growth of 26.2% compared to previous year (China Internet Watch, 2016).

Chinese SM is diverse in its form and character comprising of Social Networking sites (SNS), Message boards, Blogging, Micro-blogging, Mobile chat, Instant messaging, Video sharing, Photo sharing, Online music, Wikis, Q&A, Review, Check-in, Deal-of-the-day, Online trade, Professional SNS (Crampton, 2011). Hu et al., (2017) characterize Chinese SM usage into Informational and Socialization categories. With a mobile internet user population of 753 million, availability of multiple SM platforms, and diverse use of SM for business, China is a prime location for social commerce driven opportunities and an example case for building knowledge on SM driven business innovations.

## 2.3 Social media enabled business innovations

### 2.3.1 Internally oriented business innovations

#### Employees creativity

SM is driving new ways of communication, collaboration and co-evolution where organizational actors work with external sources for enhancing internal productivity and growth. (Bertschek & Kesler, 2017; Hitchen et al., 2017).

One of the business process innovations facilitated by SM is in the employee creativity area. Sigala and Chalkiti, (2015) argued that employees' creativity is positively associated with their participation "in social networks and their use of SM for: searching, storing and reading information (internal cognitive processes); and sharing, discussing and co-creating information (external cognitive processes)." Enterprise SM activities are influenced by cultural norms which in turn inhibit or facilitate employees creativity (Patroni, Recker & von Briel, 2015). Building technological infrastructure and cultural capital play a significant role in tapping into SM-enabled employees creativity (Barlatier & Josserand, 2016). At the same time, organisations need to watch out for barriers. Despite all the benefits, the level of current utilisation of SM is still low due to lack of readiness of customer-related, practice-related and knowledge-related processes (Antikainen & Valkokari, 2015).

#### Products/Services delivery

One of the key features of SM is its multi-purpose adaptability for different functions of a business. As such, enterprises integrate SM into business functions not only for connecting with their customers but also to spur innovations through generation of creative ideas sourced from external inputs. The use of enterprise SM fosters "simultaneously cooperative and competitive behaviour" resulting in innovations (Patroni, Recker & von Briel, 2015).

SM communities bring diverse information, experiences, knowledge and thinking patterns to breed new ideas for product/service innovations (Bertschek & Kesler, 2017). Rathore, Ilavarasan and Dwivedi, (2016) confirm such an understanding by arguing that users' insights gained through SM lead to radical innovations in products.

Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides, (2011) make a useful suggestion that SM capabilities can facilitate harvesting ideas, making sense of them through analysis and refinements. Customers' opinions, comments, compliments, complaints, and concerns about products and services could be vital source for finding inspiration and opportunities to innovate (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). Idota, Bunno & Tsuji, (2015) lent credence to this notion as they found that the use of SM influences product innovations and recommended that organizations should nurture social capital to amplify their efforts to innovate and stay relevant in the market.

Other ways in which SM can help in product/service innovations is by capturing customers' insights on: competitors' products/services, likes and dislikes for products, unorthodox or unique use of products/services, ease or complexity of product functions and features, and major trends in the market (Baregheh, Rowley & Sambrook, 2009). Active social listening and engagement make customers feel empowered, and results in enhanced customer satisfaction, loyalty and retention (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

#### Co-creation and business process efficiencies

Another theme that emerged from the literature is the influence of SM on business process improvements. Nascimento and da Silveira, (2017) in their literature analysis found that SM is enabling business process improvements in many ways some of which are: customer engagement for co-creation, citizens' engagement for improvements in public service delivery, teachers-students' engagement for enhanced e-learning, and content generation activities. These findings are consistent with earlier findings which show that organizations are exploiting power of online communities for co-creation (Errajaa, Partouche & Dutot, 2013).

### 2.3.2 Externally oriented business innovations

#### Open innovations

Review of the literature highlighted the role of SM in driving open innovations (Hitchen et al., 2017). The multiplicative and boundary-less access to communities of users enabled by SM allows organizations to encourage external contributions to internal design, typically termed as *open innovation* (Chesbrough, 2003, p.24). Seeking open innovations is cost-effective way too. Trott & Hartmann, (2009) saw the benefits in terms

of not only seeking ideas but suggested that SM also facilitates implementation of new ideas. SM communities provide a platform that motivates collaboration leading to open innovations (Antikainen, Mäkipää & Ahonen, 2010).

These external contributions come in a variety of forms including: general comments and feedback, opinions, blogs, product reviews, complaints, and visual symbols of likes and dislikes, to name just a few (Loukis, Charalabidis & Androutsopoulou, 2017). To draw upon wisdom of the users, organizations establish and cultivate dedicated and purposeful SM communities and develop a shared vision with the users (Hitchen et al., 2017; Tynjälä, Häkkinen & Hämäläinen, 2014).

**Marketing and branding**

Organizations are using SM to develop communities that serve as ‘brand champion’ spreading positive messages about products and services and hedging against any negativities (Nguyen et al., 2015).

Blogging, messaging, live streaming video, and professional sites can be used for brand awareness and promotion (Kietzmann et al, 2011). A number of sites such as Weibo, WeChat, Facebook, Twitter, and Baidu are used for brand development and engaging users in marketing narrative (Kolowich, 2018). A mixture of videos and interactive marketing content is used to advertise and promote the brand message on SM sites with the intention of multiplying the effect when the information is forwarded by users to their networks (Crampton, 2011).

Organizations also use SM sites to re-brand or re-package their product and services. A brief captive message e.g., from Twitter or Wechat can pay high dividends in raising brand awareness (Trott & Hartmann, 2009) with a link to detailed product description webpages showing photos and videos on the products (Sashi, 2012). Nguyen et al., (2015) argued that SM strategic capability has a positive association with brand innovation, moderating the relationship between knowledge acquisition, market orientation, and brand innovation.

**Public sector efficincies**

SM is also being used for enhancing governance and public service provision. Tursunbayeva, Franco and Pagliari, (2017) through their literature review found that government agencies use SM for ensuring transparency, accountability, democratic participation, co-production and evaluation. The idea is to be more inclusive and open at the same time. Zheng (2013) on the other hand identified various drivers and challenges towards use of SM for governance. Hacking and lost trust in government were some of the challenges they mentioned.

In conclusion, the literature review points to a number of research streams (Table 1) as discussed above. However, the existing knowledge on the subject is still in its infancy and necessitates further research.

**Table 1:** Themes emerging from literature review

Literature theme	Some relevant studies
SM-enabled Open Innovations, Creativity and Co-creation	Antikainen, Mäkipää & Ahonen, (2010); Hitchen et al., (2017); Humala, (2015); Sigala & Chalkiti, (2015).
SM-enabled business value	Dong & Wu, (2015); Scuotto et al., (2017).
SM-enabled product/process innovations	Bertschek & Kesler, (2017); Idota, Bunno & Tsuji, (2015); Rathore, Ilavarasan & Dwivedi, (2016); Roberts, Piller & Lüttgens, (2016)
SM-enabled brand and marketing innovations	Nguyen et al., (2015)
SM-enabled business innovations/ESM innovations	Culnan, McHugh & Zubillaga, (2010); Kietzmann et al., (2011); Nascimento & da Silveira, (2017); Patroni, Recker & von Briel, (2015); Zhou & Wang, (2014)
SM-enabled innovations in Governance	Tursunbayeva, Franco & Pagliari, (2017); Zheng (2013).
SM-enabled innovations in education	Tess, (2013)
Barriers to SM driven innovations	Antikainen & Valkokari, (2015).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Sample selection and respondents

The study adopted qualitative exploratory research design as it suited investigation of a research question that pertains to an area of research which is still in early stages of knowledge development. This is an approach that is also consistent with prior studies (e.g., Patroni, Recker & von Briel, 2015). Moreover, since the study sought to develop new knowledge and insights by asking “how” or “why” perspective on the issue, it was deemed appropriate to use qualitative design (Yin, 2015).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Since the focus of this investigation is SM driven business innovations in a China, therefore, the respondents working in Chinese organizations were identified through our networks using a convenience sampling technique followed up by a snowball approach, which is also consistent with prior studies (Maramwidze-Merrison, 2016).

The respondents for the study came from a variety of industries including Media, Software / IT, and Finance. The respondents performing roles in Product Development, Operations, Marketing, Media Communication, Finance and General Management with involvement in SM matters in their organizations make up the sample configuration. They were expected to meet certain criteria of knowledgeability in order to be appropriate for the study. The respondents’ diversity helped us in seeking a more inclusive understanding and enabled us to capture knowledge from a variety of perspectives. It was important as the authors were investigating an emerging issue with little existing research (Aboelmaged, 2014). The profile of respondents is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Sample profile

Respondent	Job Title	Core duties	Organization Size (No. of People)	Organization Type	Industry Type
1	Finance Manager	Finance	200-400	Private	Real Estate
2	Marketing Staff	Marketing	>100,000	Multinational	Food and Beverage
3	Chief Executive Officer (CEO)	Product Development	<=50	Private	IT
4	Operations Manager	Operations	>500	Listed Company	Financial Services
5	Marketing	CRM	<=50	Private	Retailing
6	CEO	Product Development	<=50	Private	IT
7	Manager	General Management	<=50	Private	Retailing
8	Media Specialist	Media Communication	<=50	Private	Financial Services
9	Software Development	Product Development	<=50	Private	IT Services in Manufacturing
10	Marketing	Marketing	200-300	Multinational	IT

Data collection was derived from a total of ten interviews; such a sample size is consistent with prior studies on SM e.g., Parveen, Jaafar & Ainin, (2015). Also, since SM research is still in its infancy and the authors were investigating an emerging issue the sample size was regarded as adequate for building foundational knowledge.

#### 3.2 Questionnaire Design and Data collection

The research instrument was developed based on a thorough review of literature as previous authors have identified some of the key issues in SM enabled innovation practices. Using the semi-structured questionnaire, first we gathered information on respondents’ characteristics, that included industry, company size and title/position description. Then using open-ended questions, we collected respondents’ expert knowledge on the role of SM in driving innovations.

Specifically, respondents were asked about the nature of use of SM for business (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), the type(s) of SM tools they are using, how SM is driving business innovations and the impact in terms of driving innovations (Culnan, McHugh & Zubillaga, 2010).

The interviews lasted for an approximately 30 minutes and were conducted either face-to-face or over phone which is also consistent with prior studies (Hajli et al., 2017). Interviews were recorded, and the researcher also took notes. The semi-structured format of the interviews helped in asking more question to establish clarity and gather more information. It also allowed interviewees to share their knowledge and expert opinion in their own way (Grosse & Glock, 2015). All the interviews were transcribed. As the interviews were conducted in Chinese, the interviews were translated into English based on their Chinese transcriptions.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

Qualitative content analysis technique was used to analyze interviews data. Content analysis technique is defined as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; pp.1278). It suited the study as it helped to identify and analyze themes and patterns emerging from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.80).

Initial theming was constructed based on questions in the semi-structured questionnaire that were derived from literature. These themes were later refined as analysis progressed. Such an approach is considered to be researcher’s theoretical or analytic interest driven and is useful for rich content-based data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The researcher read the transcripts to understand the content and the basis of respondents’ views and expert opinion, thereby giving meaning to the data. While reviewing the respondents’ opinions to the questions, the researcher grouped and combined the repetitive occurrences and similarities across the answers to form themes and sub-themes. This review and refinement process led to clarification and gaining of a better understanding, resulting in finalization of themes (e.g. Innovations in marketing) and sub-themes (e.g. SM marketing territories, SM marketing intermediaries, marketing event management).

## **4. Findings and Discussion: SM enabled business innovations**

The analysis of data shows that SM is certainly enabling various types of business innovations. These innovations are mainly geared towards strategic cooperation, process improvements, product innovations, and distribution channel management. The authors discuss the key findings below.

### **4.1 Innovations in strategic cooperation**

Our analysis shows that 60% of the respondents are of the view that SM is driving innovations in strategic cooperation management. The presence of strong SM platforms brings parties together to form win-win relationships, where one party gains access to an established SM platform to channel their products and increase market share, and other party’s seek to cash-in on the brand reputation and recognition of the products offered through their SM platform. A number of respondents (respondents 3,5,6,8,9 and 10) considered this to be an important innovation enabled by SM. For instance, respondent 5 elaborated:

*“Tencent’s leading digital music platform QQ music will be responsible for Sony Music’s Digital Music Copyright promotion, management and distribution business in mainland China. The two sides will jointly promote China digital music original process.*

*The advanced technology platform and a large user base of Tencent, combined with Sony Music Entertainment’s rich production experience, music library and artist resources, the new strategic cooperation will help Tencent provide a high-quality music experience model for Chinese mainland consumers. Tencent will be linked to the whole platform to promote Sony’s artists as well as with other Chinese mainland online music service providers to provide distribution of music content to the Chinese mainland consumers as a further step.”*

Respondent 9 highlighted the different side of strategic cooperation in acquiring, nurturing and tapping into talent beyond organizational boundaries by saying:

*“Bao Steel is in the process of reform for innovate talent training mechanism and creating a good ecological environment. Social media can help the company form network of R&D personnel, carry out the overseas technology tracking, customer service and training etc. Make talent management model become more flexible and more convenient.”*

SM functionalities offer flexibility to create multiple *interest groups* to connect with the abundant talent available outside organization. It helps strategically, as it reduces financial burden of having people on the payrolls and at the same time allows to tap into wisdom of communities. If managed effectively, these groups can empower an organization to develop new ideas, test and commercialize innovative products (Constantinides, 2014).

The development of SM enabled research and development networks (R&D) (as pointed by Respondent 9) allow organizations a better chance of capturing the needs of a large variety of global customers, tap into global talent and hence be able to design products/services that have greater potential of global utility and approval.

Respondent 6 further cemented this view with an example (below) of how SM enabled strategic cooperation is resulting in operational improvements, such as new ways of improving product functionalities, design and troubleshooting procedures:

*“User feedback in the iterative process of the product: Adapting user feedback coming through social media continuously can help in improved product (development). An example is the Mi model. Using specific data, acquired from the (social media) forum, the developers update the operating system on Tuesday and Thursday.*

*Mi fans provide weekly feedback messages. Based on the feedback, Engineers will announce the update point, Po in the social media forum. Mi fans vote and choose the best point to repair. This way users play a critical role to help designers improve the application.”*

The findings point to the influence of SM in establishing innovative ways of engagement and working. The results show that SM is a tool that can be used for both tactical/operational and strategic benefits. The analysis shows that organizations can leverage SM for strategic value with nature and modus operandi of engagement open to the organizational choice (Ram, 2017). The results also extend earlier research that emphasized a process-based approach to co-creation enabled by SM (Errajaa, Partouche & Dutot, 2013).

## 4.2 Innovations in marketing

The analysis also shows that SM is influencing innovations in market research (respondents 2,4 and 8 mainly and respondents 3 and 9 in general). Organisations are using SM capabilities to conduct customer analysis and use SM-generated statistics to understand market for their products/services and line of business as narrated by Respondent 2:

*“Sina Weibo provides large amount of statistics and fans analysis. It helps entrepreneurs to make precise and measurable results and establish a foundation to marketing in a social way.*

*When we were doing 21 Super-VITA, there is a theme of the campaign that the whole family jump up. At that time, I did preliminary market research and analysis. Social media also have big data, such as Baidu search and Taobao Search index. These SNS can provide more objective data. We analyzed the kind of competing products.”*

The point made by respondent 2 suggests that SM provides a flexible, cost-effective and measurable system to understand market portfolio and business eco-system. The benefits of having an established marketing eco-system could influence organizations to establish their **social media market territory**. This is because future customers will be somehow linked to SM and their perception and understanding about the products/services can be gathered and measured effectively using SM. Organizations can therefore understand their customer needs by analysing relevant SM market territory. The findings underline a significant departure in the way marketing research will be done and are consistent with earlier work by (Constantinides, 2014).

Respondent 8 weighed in with another innovative marketing trend in the contest of Finance industry:

*“Content production: Event registration; specialized knowledge; activity information is now mainly based on event registration. We also have an official ID “Investment Morning Paper” for people to learn about the latest news of finance industry. At present our service ID can collect project information, provide some forms for investors to fill in. We then contact them and post videos on WeChat. Those who have financing demand can contact investors directly. We received many registrations by this way, and will follow up. We also loaded articles on our Micro-blog and other websites. Currently, we have articles in all personal Medias concerning finance and economy. Later we plan to build the personal media matrix but it is not completed yet.”*

The explanation points to a different side of innovation in marketing where organizations use SM to cultivate special interest customer groups, providing them with updated and dedicated information relating to their interests. These customers are then directed to other service providers for transactional needs. What this means is that SM is empowering organizations to initiate dedicated marketing focused on specific set of customers. These SM-enabled groups e.g. Wechat groups, serve the purpose of **Social media market intermediaries**. In this way, organizations can setup marketing events where they invite buyers and sellers based on certain match-making criteria.

The examples discussed above are just the tip of the iceberg of how SM is influencing innovative marketing strategies, as *Respondents 4 and 6* highlighted too. While offering new findings, this study strengthens prior research in similar context (e.g, Nguyen et al., 2015). One of the things to note however is that the dynamic nature of SM based data will require more effective ways in which data is analyzed, if organizations are going to use that data for devising any meaningful marketing strategies.

#### **4.3 Innovations in translating Promotion to Productivity**

The results show that SM is becoming a new means of translating promotion to productivity. It provides opportunities to actually achieve benefits out of the promotional investments. Respondent 4 puts this way:

*“As for e-commerce to insurance industry, it is more than just a tool, it is a big cake remain to be explored. Through the support of effective data, the insurance company can get access to more clients’ data to increase the sales and help promotions.*

*With the launch of new version 5.0 of Weixin, the new added payment function can make the purchase through Weixin come true, which means the insurance companies can transfer the promotion of social media to productivity. While PICC and Ping An insurance is among the first two to allow this to happen. Before Oct. 2013, the two finished upgrade of official Weixin platform and the customers can purchase products through it.”*

The suite of features available in SM platforms often make these platforms a one stop solution for end-to-end transactions e.g., Wechat allows activities from promotion to payment. Such functionality is resulting in innovative empowerment of translating SM-enabled promotions to actual sales and productivity improvements in short time compared to other distribution channels.

Another respondent 6 explains how SM promotion is leading to productivity:

*“In the process of product promotion and research, social media can help developers save costs, optimize communication and feedback effects.”*

Some other respondents (3 and 9) were generally supportive of innovative trends in branding and promotion. It is worth mentioning that the benefit proposition in nurturing promotional activities into tangible sales – which is highlighted by the results - points to the notion that SM is not just another fad but it is a tool of productivity and business profitability. However, leveraging these benefits means being **‘competition smart’**, because openness of SM creates equal opportunities for all. Only those organisations that take a focused and planned approach will be able to reap the benefits of translating their promotions into productivity (Asio & Khorasani, 2015). The findings strengthen the earlier research where Floredu and Cabiddu (2016) highlight

the importance of understanding and choosing a rightful communication strategy that suit the context to leverage advantages offered by SM.

#### 4.4 Innovations in distribution channels

Another finding that emerged from our analysis was that SM is enabling creation of new distribution channels. Predominantly, mobile or handheld device-based SM activities offer consumers flexibility and agility to buy goods and service anytime and anywhere.

Calling it '**Socialized eCommerce**', respondents 3 highlights the trends in SM-based distribution channel innovations in this way:

*"Socialized e-commerce. Users tend to be more focused when using mobiles and thus gaining more accurate information. On the other hand, users are more eager to shop through mobile device and 88 percent users will place orders in 24 hours when getting what they have been searching for.*

*This is quite meaningful for e-commerce website. The web can provide related contents about brands, interaction and more advanced ways of searching. But for mobile devices, it has to be clean and without irrelevant information, so that the users can makes decisions quickly."*

The key point from the above explanation is that phenomenal growth in use of handheld devices when combined with SM apps, provide a distribution channel that is efficient, productive and specific to customer needs. In China, it is estimated that **Social commerce** accounts for almost 50% of eCommerce activity at this point in time (Lamb, 2017). With more and more people moving into SM space, the adoption of SM enabled distribution channels is expected to grow further.

Respondent 7 emphasizes how SM-enabled distribution channels are changing the nature of competition by saying:

*"First is our own website, second is by QQ and WeChat which pass information faster. By launch new products we will consider increase investment on line. At present, there are not many new ways to publicize but traditional ways like print media, newspaper, and stores. Traditional travel agencies can still survive for a period of time by their brand accumulation, but the competition of new media is also making a great influence."*

The above narration highlights that SM serves as both informational and transactional medium offering significant advantages compared to other distributions channels. Other respondents (including respondent 5,9, and 10) also subscribed to this view that SM is changing the nature of business distributaries and offering new options. The findings also strengthen earlier research (e.g, Dogruel, 2014).

The results suggest that organizations need to take full advantage of innovative SM-enabled commerce and exploit the fast-developing SM markets. However, SM-enabled distribution channels are highly competitive in nature (Nguyen et al., 2015). Organizations intending to exploit social commerce need to have a focused strategy; otherwise losing a potential customer to another supplier in the channel will always remain a high possibility due to: (1) availability of many suppliers, and (2) changing perception influenced by other users in the social networks.

#### 4.5 Innovations in product enhancement capabilities

SM driven product improvements is another business innovation emerged from our analysis. Certainly, the findings are in line with prior studies (e.g., Idota, Bunno & Tsuji, 2015) that highlighted the role of co-creation and co-evolution in product/service improvements.

Respondent 6 explained the iterative process that helps in product enhancements as below.

*"User feedback in the iterative process of the product: Adapting user feedback coming through social media continuously can help in improved product (development). An example is the Mi model. Using specific data, acquired from the (social media) forum, the developers update the operating system on Tuesday and Thursday.*

*Mi fans provide weekly feedback messages. Based on the feedback, Engineers will announce the update point, Po in the social media forum. Mi fans vote and choose the best point to repair. This way users play a critical role to help designers improve the application.”*

The use of iterative process for product enhancement as explained above highlights a key business process innovation that is aligned with agile approach to product development (Idota, Bunno and Tsuji, 2015). The important aspect of this innovative trend is that organizations are able to seek multi-channel inputs from users as SM platforms are growing in variety and numbers (Kolowich, 2018). This innovative engagement with potential customers in a constructive way not only helps build trust and enhance satisfaction, but the tactics also serves as a product introduction and awareness campaign; something also argued by Wang, Min and Han, (2016).

Respondent 2 shows another perspective of SM enabled product improvements by explaining:

*“we do activities in Zhejiang Province. So it depends on what is the most popular: Weibo shows how many average microblogging messages have, how many replies forwarded, their opinion about what interest them most? which social programs? We found that song and dance programs are ranked second, and parent child programs or something like “Sisters over Flowers and Grandpa over Flowers” are ranked the first. The concept of family interaction in this area is relatively strong, so this activity can be implemented. So we first found users’ habits, and then find out how to link this life habits with product (improvements). For exmple, when we make a campaign of 21 Jingweita (a healthy medical food).”*

The findings underline the importance of multi-dimensional access and the boundary-less opportunities of engaging with users, suppliers, partners and other stakeholders enabled by SM leading to business process improvement capabilities. The multi-channel engagement provides data that can be used for product/service improvements. Our findings also strengthen the belief that SM-enabled product/service improvements are not limited to a particular few business segments, but its influence is wide ranging across various segments of economies, e.g. Finance, retail, and entertainment, just to name a few based on our data.

## **5. Conclusion and Implications**

As SM is becoming pervasive in our daily lives, it is driving innovations in every walk of life. China, with its extensive penetration and use of SM for all types of activities is spearheading the adoption of SM for business innovations. Yet little formal knowledge exists on the subject. Therefore, developing the fundamental knowledge, this study identified a number of SM-enabled business innovations and ways of doing things as summarized below.

**Social media market territories:** As SM communities are growing large and diverse, organizations need to define their own sphere of influence. The way information that is shared on SM multiplies in no time makes it vital for organizations to build their own loyal SM-communities that hedge against the negative messages, and to spread positive sentiments. Therefore, one of the business innovations that this study identified was an interest among organizations to identify and establish *Social media market territories* for gathering market intelligence as well as promoting products/services and brand awareness.

**Strategic engagement:** SM is leading to innovations in strategic engagement with customers and other stakeholders, as has been found by this study. SM enables organizations to tap into global talent for business development activities. Global involvement of people not only helps in learning from wisdom of communities beyond organizational and country boundaries and seeking diverse perspectives, but also guides an enhanced understanding of the needs of potential consumers to develop universally acceptable products/services.

**Promotion to Productivity:** SM is facilitating quicker translation of promotions into productivity as SM platforms are laced with *one-stop-solution* technologies for customers to preview, purchase and pay for products/services using one platform in quick time. As most of the SM apps can be used on portable or hand-held devices, this one-stop solution to preview and purchase creates a significant potential of making sales 24X7, and is one of the key business innovations identified by this study.

**Socialized eCommerce:** The mobile or handheld devices-based SM eCommerce termed as *Socialised Commerce* is leading to development of innovative distribution channels i.e. *S-Channels*. These *S-Channels* offer flexibility, ease and ubiquitous-ness allowing new opportunities for revenue generation. These new distribution channels allow quick market entry at low cost with little barriers, making SM based business environment very competitive.

**Social media market intermediaries:** SM also facilitates development of SM-market intermediaries. Organizations can setup an intermediary digital environment with high flexibility and at low costs, where these intermediaries bring buyers and sellers together for promotion and sales activities held over SM platforms.

While the findings provide a picture of SM-enabled business innovations in a Chinese context, we believe that some of the observations such as establishment of *S-Channels*, *SM market intermediaries* and developing strategic engagements can be applicable to Western context too. Western SM app, such as Facebook, has the functionalities that can facilitate SM-enabled business innovations, similar to identified by this study. However, such a proposition needs further investigation and empirical validation.

### 5.1 Theoretical and Managerial Implications

This study makes a number of significant novel contributions. Academically, drawing upon the Chinese businesses experience, the results significantly build fundamental theoretical understanding of some of the SM-enabled innovative business processes and the ways in which those processes are manifested using SM. China being at the forefront of SM use for business make the results relevant for further theoretical developments as well.

Secondly, the findings extend knowledge on the application of innovation theories for new form of SM oriented technological innovation by offering evidence on some of the possible factors (e.g. marketing innovations, distribution channel innovations, see Section 4 for details) that could influence the adoption stage in the general innovation theory sense. Thirdly, since the business innovations identified in this study transcend various industries, so the results have highlighted the inter-disciplinary nature of SM technologies laying the foundation for furthering inter-disciplinary theoretical work. Finally, to the best of our knowledge this is one of the first studies that have identified SM-enabled business innovations in a Chinese context.

Managerially, the results provide guidance for senior executives such as: Chief Information Officers/IT managers; Business development managers, Product/Branding and Market development managers for designing and deploying tailored strategies to build SM-enabled innovations and take advantage of SM commerce. The results also provide some examples on how to establish strategic engagement with various stakeholders such as setting up dedicated SM groups for ideas generation, product testing, and brand awareness; make informed decisions about design of new product/services by collecting inputs from sources beyond traditional channels (e.g. marketing surveys), and tapping into market opportunities. Managers can use knowledge developed in this study to establish innovative business processes to exploit social commerce in the context of their specific business needs.

Policy makers can use these results for development of social commerce markets and establish policies and procedures to stimulate SM economy.

### 6. Limitations and Future research directions

The study has opened up many new research opportunities. Further research is needed to identify more SM-enabled business innovations in Chinese as well as other countries' context. More in-depth studies that investigate the process in which these business innovations manifest are needed. Future research involving larger sample size with respondents from multiple industries can help firming up our preliminary findings. More research is needed to look into different industry concentrations to create bespoke knowledge for how SM is evolving in particular industries' contexts. Additional research is also needed to investigate innovation drivers and triggers for SM enabled product versus service innovations.

One of the limitations of this study is small sample size, though being new area of research, it is somewhat inevitable, although consistent with prior studies. Given the qualitative research design, generalizations of

findings of this study should be made with caution. Our results are based on subjective opinions and hence more large-scale studies are needed to further strengthen the knowledge developed by this study.

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