Overview

More than one in five internet users are Chinese. The nation’s 500 million internet users are just behind Japan on time spent online per day at an average of 2.7 hours. Internet connectivity is not expected to reach the majority of the one billion strong population until 2015.

Although China blocks western social networks, domestic social networking sites are immensely popular. Half of internet users are on more than one domestic social network and 30 per cent log on to at least one network every day.

China blocks foreign social networking sites, and censors posts on domestic social networks, yet social networking remains hugely popular amongst young urbanites.

China’s famous one child policy has resulted in youngsters looking for the companionship of others their own age online.

This combined with the general mistrust of government-controlled media has resulted in social networking becoming the quickest, cheapest and most trusted way to communicate over long distances.
Social Networks

China has a thriving social networking scene with dozens of popular networks.

**QZone** is currently the most popular social networking site used in China. Populated mainly by teenagers, it has over 190 million active users (481 million registered). The popularity seems to be down to its owner Tencent’s resources rather than being the best service on the market, and users tend to move on to other social networks when they grow up. Also QZone users post under nicknames as the user base is so young, and they tend to go there to make new virtual friends, rather than talk to existing ones.

**RenRen**, launched in 2005, is China’s answer to Facebook. It has about 95 million active users. Around 74 per cent of its users are under 30 and most are students or office workers. Like Facebook, users are encouraged to build up content in RenRen, which makes it harder for them to consider leaving the network.

“**RenRen is China’s answer to Facebook, with about 95 million active users**”

**Kaixin001** is another Facebook-type site which allows users to upload images, download games and blog. Its 40 million active users are mainly under 30 (61 per cent), but it has a higher amount of users in the 30-39 demographic (33 per cent as opposed to Renren’s 18 per cent). When analysed in late 2011, traffic had dropped by 65 per cent over 18 months, which resulted in Tencent investing $100m USD – in turn gaining some access to the more white-collar Kaixin user base.

**Pengyou** used to be a social network for kids, but is now another network used by students and office workers. Launched in 2010, it has around 80 million active users. Pengyou is another Tencent network and a RenRen and Kaixin competitor.

**Douban** is another Facebook type social network founded in 2005. Its best known for book, music and movie reviews. Over 71 per cent of Douban users are under 30, and it has around 20 million active users, variously described as urban youth, or “trendy young people”.

Social Networks

**Weibo (microblogs)**

*Sina Weibo* launched in 2008 and is generally considered to be the Chinese version of Twitter – although with more functionality. It had over 250 million registered users as of October 2011, and 25 million messages are sent via the site per day. Sina also campaigns for special causes, such as the social farming collective, which helps farmers with direct source selling.

*Tencent Weibo* is Sina’s main competitor and more like Twitter. It’s reported to feature a better user experience than Sina, which seems to be focusing more on monetisation. Founded in 2010, it pulls most of its 20 million active users from QQ (a Tencent owned instant messenger site).

**Video**

*YouKu* is the Chinese version of YouTube. Launched in 2006, users can upload videos of any length. It’s well known for its library of TV shows and films and features many professionally produced original videos. YouKu is also much more relaxed about copyright than YouTube.

YouKu has its own computer animated mini-series – **Miss Puff** – which is incredibly popular among urban 22-29 year olds and under 21s. Brands work with the producers of Miss Puff in the form of product placement. For example, you’ll get lingering shots of the back of her MacBook or a close up of her Marlboro cigarettes.

**Location-based apps**

*Jiepang* launched in 2010 and is very similar to Foursquare. It’s a location based mobile app that lets users check-in at locations, earning rewards and discounts. It has just announced a deal with Tencent, which will allow users to log in to Jiepang using their Tencent account, giving Jiepang access to 700 million Tencent users.

There are many other social networks such as *51.com*, which has been popular in more rural areas, and dating social networks like *Jiayuan* and *Zhenai.cent*, but it has a higher amount of users in the 30-39 demographic (33 per cent as opposed to Renren’s 18 per cent). When analysed in late 2011, traffic had dropped by 65 per cent over 18 months, which resulted in Tencent investing $100m USD – in turn gaining some access to the more white-collar Kaixin user base.
Influencers

Chinese social network users appear to have more respect for brands that use social media to reach out to them.

95 per cent of Chinese internet users say that brands that microblog can be trusted to some extent. That may not sound groundbreaking, but the Chinese tend to be more sceptical of what they are told, a result perhaps of a historic relationship with government and misinformation.

Despite the uncertainty, 61 per cent of web users say that they have made a purchase because of digital advertising.

International brands are starting to reach out to Chinese consumers over domestic social networks. When RenRen asked its users what their favourite brands on the site were, the top trusted brands were both global brand names: Coca-Cola and Samsung. Other brands picked out in their own categories were Estee Lauder, CK, Nike, Audi and VW.

Sina Weibo’s top three brand accounts are all international brands: Durex, Starbucks China and adidasOriginals. Sina is also starting to become popular with western celebrities, with actors like Tom Cruise taking to the site to engage fans.

“How brands are using Chinese social networks

- McDonald’s Kaixin001 campaign, Group Lunch, encouraged users to arrange to meet for lunch at a local McDonald’s. 150,000 people ended up participating.

- Chanel has benefited from group purchasing website meituan.com. 3,000 bottles were sold in less than two days, after a 60% discount on Chanel No.5.

- L’Oreal brand Biotherm opened its Sina Weibo account in 2011 and quickly acquired over 40,000 followers by engaging with fans and answering questions.

“61% of Chinese web users say that they have made a purchase because of digital advertising”
Language & Culture

Language

Although there are several languages and dialects spoken across China, Simplified Mandarin is the main written language used in mainland China, but Sina Weibo is developing an English language version. Older generations say that internet usage is starting to modify the way that language is written and spoken by the young, but it's hard to know what is the impact of the internet and what is just kids just being kids, adding their own adaptations to language.

“The children of the one child policy have been defined as individualistic, spoilt, and westernised...apparently they like their luxury brands”

Culture

According to a survey by Jack Morton Worldwide, Brazilian and Chinese internet users are the most likely to engage with brands online. Word of mouth information is important in a nation where official news sources are distrusted, and brands, especially foreign ones, can be seen as more impartial.

The impact of laws such as the one child policy on modern culture shouldn’t be underestimated. The policy was introduced in 1978 in an attempt to curb the massive Chinese population growth. The children of the one child policy have been defined as individualistic, spoilt (apparently, they like their luxury brands), economical, westernised and sceptical.

Growing up without siblings has encouraged them to form friendships online, and living in a state where misinformation is rife has led them to distrust official sources of information - hence the love of microblogging. Popular and slightly anti-authority bloggers include Han Han, a high school dropout who has blogged about democracy, and Murong Xuecun.
The younger generation may be turning to social media to get the real story, but social networks and microblogs are still subject to censorship by the Chinese government.

One incident was sparked by a hit and run at Hebei University. The driver challenged his one surviving victim to sue him if he dared, saying: “Go ahead, sue me if you dare. My dad is Li Gang!” (the deputy police chief of a neighbouring district). This caused many Weibo users to speculate about corruption and led to the government ordering the networks to stop all “hype regarding the disturbance over traffic at Hebei University”.

“Sina Weibo has over 100 censors on the payroll and will delete messages and accounts that use certain keywords”

Sina Weibo has at least 100 censors on the payroll, and it will occasionally delete messages and accounts that use certain keywords. On 31st March 2012 six people were arrested and 16 websites shut down for – what the official news agency called – spreading false rumours on the internet. These rumours had also appeared on Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo, and so both sites were apparently punished. As a result both sites prohibited users from posting any comments between 31st March and 3rd April.

A New York Times journalist opened an account on Sina Weibo to discover just how much censorship went on there, and after a few low key rebellious posts he sent a message out about Tiananmen Square which was deleted within twenty minutes. Once the media became aware of the account it was deleted.
Perspectives

The links below provide further information and analysis on the themes explored in this report.

EU Asia Centre Website
Bammman, O'Connor & Smith (2012) on Censorship
HPL Research Paper on China Trends
McKinsey China Social Media Boom Graphic
The China Observer
China Daily
Resonance China
China Internet Watch

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