Master Thesis of Cultural Economics and Entrepreneurship

Social Media Makes Your Dream Come True?

- In what ways do independent fashion designers in China exploit social media to facilitate their businesses?

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Abstract

Recently, a growing number of independent fashion designers dedicate to speak exclusively for Chinese individuality with their not-go-with-the-tide designs, which seems to make them the hope of Chinese fashion in the future. Moreover, by virtue of the increasingly influential social media instruments, these designers nowadays seem to stand more chances than ever to establish their own labels and survive with very little resources relatively. Though social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are blocked in the Mainland China; their equivalences there (i.e.: QQ, Renren, Sina Weibo, and Youku, etc.) are even more intensely used. Hence, with a research question of: *In what ways do independent fashion designers in China exploit social media to run their labels*, I intend to find out how independent designers in China undertake marketing, networking and other business-related activities through social media applications, what problems will be implied and what advice in both theoretical and practical senses can be provided, thus making my own contribution to the exploration of development possibilities of Chinese fashion design.

Overall, I adopted a mixed method of interviews and desktop research. Through interviewing 14 designers with 11 close-ended questions and 45 open-ended questions, I meant to sum up and analyze essential facts of the social media phenomenon among designers. Afterwards, I tried to find out what problems or prospects the results had implied with the guidance of theories reviewed. Secondly, through desktop researching two experts' blogs, reports, books, etc. and summarizing relevant information or points of views, I tried to draw lessons from their analyses of the general situation or other industries to pin down the relationship between social media mechanism and fashion business strategies, and to provide constructive advice for designers' improvement.

In the end, I found out that independent fashion designers exploit social media in an individualistic manner and though they rely substantially on several social media tools at the same time, they don't combine them mechanically to create a synergy, which is a waste of the biggest merit of Internet. From the way that independent designers utilize social media generally, we can see that independent fashion design in China are still in a preliminary phase of development and with limited support from traditional resources, how fast the Chinese independent design can grow at this starting stage depends considerably on the designers' using of social media. But if a designer can employ both social media and traditional media channels, which are still quite authoritative, to promote his/her label, the chances of an all-round success are more ensured.

Key words: Independent fashion designers; Social media; UGC; CGM; eWOM

Chapter 1- Introduction

1.1 Background information:

When asked to name a few representative Chinese fashion designers, one can find this question embarrassingly hard, so is the case with a typical Chinese fashion style. Due to the overall isolation from the West till 1979, anything deemed as against the communist ideology, e.g. fashion design, was forbidden in China. It was not until the past decade, based on the prosperity of Chinese economy, the concept of 'Chinese fashion' started to be embodied by professionals like designers, stylists, photographers, models, fashion editors and celebrities with their undeniable influence on publicity. However, with Western fashion dominating the universal taste for years and a successful precedent of Japanese 'East-Unconventionally-Meets-West' fashion, it has been a big challenge for Chinese fashion to impress the world with a peculiar style by its own tastemakers. Then how do the fashion designers, the central figure in this field, deal with this challenge generally?

In the past few years, fashion designers from the Mainland China began to gain recognition in the international fashion markets. Not only did they show their collections in the top four international fashion weeks, but also some of them have already based their labels in one or another fashion capital of the world, such as: Jefen in Milan, Uma Wang and Masha Ma in London and Mouse Ji in Paris. Certainly it was commendable that these pioneers managed to make Chinese fashion more visible worldwide, and buck the stereotype to some extent that Chinese fashion lacks international competitiveness. Nevertheless, they are few in numbers and exceptional in the sense that actually most of them did not launch their labels originally in China and their markets have claimed to be more western-oriented. In other words, Chinese fashion design has not been mature enough in general; and to cultivate a distinctive style that can be well-accepted both in China and around the world, home-based fashion designers are to be expected the most. As Charles Wang, co-founder of Dong Liang boutique in Beijing, told in a newspaper interview, 'up-and-coming indigenous designers share a notion that only through preserving its ethnic flavor can Chinese fashion designs ever become truly cosmopolitan' (Liu, 2011).

Unlike fashion designers who work in the mass clothing industry of China that very much emulates the western, Japanese or Korean modes, a growing number of independent fashion designers dedicate to speak exclusively for Chinese individuality with their not-

go-with-the-tide designs, which seems to make them the hope of Chinese fashion in the future. And this hope becomes stronger when, thanks to the Internet, designers nowadays stand more chances than ever to establish their own labels and survive by themselves or with very little resources relatively. Instead of investing the bulk of the start-up money in renting and decorating a solid shop as well as its maintenance, the designer can own an online store for free on China's biggest online marketplace Taobao, similar to eBay and Amazon. Furthermore, though social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are blocked in the Mainland China; their equivalences there (i.e.: QQ, Renren, Sina Weibo, and Youku, etc.) are as popular, thus being useful tools of the designers for marketing, networking, and other business-related purposes. In a word, it appears that social media makes it possible for the designers to undertake multitasking.

1.2 Research question:

Here I take more interest in how the designers make use of the social media tools, than of the e-commerce for online stores, because the former subject involves more behavioral variations and analytic depths. As a fashion enthusiast, I always yearn for the maturity of Chinese fashion. Through studying the independent designers and how they make their labels work by virtue of Internet platforms, I contribute to the exploration of development possibilities of Chinese fashion design, which is increasingly important because over the last two decades when the reinvigoration and high visibility of fashion design around the world have seen a growing acknowledgement of this sector as the `economy of signs and spaces' (Lash and Urry, 1994), the `culture society' (McRobbie, 1999), or the `cultural economy' (du Gay and Pryke, 2002a; 2002b; Scott, 2000). Although in China, the influence of fashion design on culture, lifestyle or other creative products has not been sufficiently exerted, it starts already to be concerned and promoted by fashion authorities in China and abroad. A few months ago, Vogue China and e-commerce site Thecorner.com introduced five Chinese designers from the Vogue Talents Corner, namely Uma Wang, Christine Lau, Riko Manchit Au, Shangguan Zhe and Zou You, to have their debut on the site, in order to boost in a joint effort the profile of emerging Chinese fashion designers. On the other hand, people like Gianluca Brozetti, Chief Executive of Roberto Cavalli, take a more neutral stand by saying that while the creativity of Chinese designers will certainly be appreciated in the West since the Western world knows little about China's aesthetic sensibility, it still takes quite some time to make a major impact under current circumstances (Ciancio, 2011). Therefore, this thesis of mine is meant to provide certain theoretical support and some practical advice for independent designers to

undertake marketing, networking and other business-related activities better with social media applications. And my research question is: *In what ways do independent fashion designers in China exploit social media to run their labels?*

To answer this topic question, the thesis is arranged in 5 sections (excluding the introduction part). In section 2, studies on fashion, fashion design and independent designers are reviewed to clarify some basic concepts in this field. In section 3, I will go through knowledge of social media, from the definition till its specific utilizations in business. The international researches in these matters either take a too broad stand (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011) or focus on just one aspect of fashion design business (Sengupta, 2012). None of them have fully elaborated on the detailed application of social media tools by independent fashion designers and the issues related. Furthermore, when I looked for guidance in the academic literature in Chinese, I found silences in response. Because actually it was not until the recent few years that the whole fashion industry in China starts to gain a growing attention; and till very lately the independent designers become surprisingly apparent and nationwide active. However, there are some researches discussing about the radical changes that social media have brought to the Chinese society, which is still a hot issue in debate now. In comparison, though not addressing my research topic specifically, international studies conducted for years on fashion design and increasingly on social media applications can be borrowed to help me build up a theoretical framework in section 4 and test my empirical research results in section 5. In section 4, apart from several sub questions formulated to set up the theoretical framework, expected answers to each question will be proposed before the methodology is displayed in details. In section 5, after presenting the results of my empirical research, implications of these results and the corresponding advice will be expounded. In the last section, I will conclude the strength and limitation of this thesis, and end the thesis with suggestions for future studies.

Chapter 2 - Fashion, fashion design and independent fashion designers

In this chapter, I will narrow down my scope from the most general concept of fashion to the specific subject of my research here: independent fashion designers. To be exact, in 2.1, I will summarize definitions of fashion with different dimensions (2.1.1) and clarify the relevance of fashion as an industry (2.1.2). In 2.2, the terms of fashion design and fashion designer (2.2.1), as well as the role of fashion design in the fashion industry (2.2.2) will be defined. In 2.3, to bridge the next chapter about social media, main features of independent fashion designers (2.3.1), the multitasks they have to be engaged in (2.3.2), the subsequent problems confronting them (2.3.3) and traditional role of intermediaries for independent designers (2.3.4) are discussed one by one, which provides basis to be compared with the situation after social media prevails.

2.1 Studies on fashion

2.1.1 The definition of fashion:

Sengupta (2012: 1) resorts to *the New Oxford Dictionary on Historical Principles* (published in 1901) in which 'fashion' is defined as the action/ process of making, manner, a prevailing custom, a current usage, conventional usage in dress and mode of life and 'the fashion' primarily denotes the mode of dress, etiquette, furniture and style of speech adopted in society for the time being. So it changes all the time, intentionally or occasionally. Based on the fact that fashion is related to social norms and customs, Sengupta (2012) argues that social groups/ swarms should be more engaged in the design process to benefit the most from collective intelligence, which will be discussed more later on.

A common misunderstanding by some people, e.g. in China, often mixes the term 'fashion' with 'clothing'. According to Yuniya Kawamura (2005), fashion and clothing, both as collective activities, require large numbers of people to produce the end product. But fashion bears certain social meanings that vary in different social contexts, while clothing provides the generic raw materials of what people wear. That is to say, clothing and fashion are produced through separate processes and institutions. The former goes through the actual manufacturing process of material clothing, whereas the latter involves those who focus on creating the idea of fashion, which is exactly the central task of fashion design. Nonetheless, though fashion and clothing are not mutually inclusive, nor are they mutually exclusive. Without clothing, fashion cannot exist.

As to designer fashion, Roodhouse (2003) suggests the 2001 "Mintel" definition from the Creative Industries Mapping Document by the Department of Culture Media and Sport, which specifies its core segmentations (couture, international designers, diffusion and high fashion), as well as peripheral activities as regards associated industries, such as: Fashion photography, Hair care and cosmetics, Accessories, Perfumes, Modeling, Magazine publishing, Design education, Graphic design, Product design, Textiles, Clothing manufacture and clothes retailing. Furthermore, based on discussions with those actively involved in this sector as to what they think their main business is, Roodhouse (2003) proposes a more realistic and democratic spectrum in contrast to the limited hierarchical structure of haute couture, ready-to-wear and mass market. A classificaiton of designer fashion thereafter includes: female fashion (smart/ casual), male fashion (smart/ casual), children's wear, sportswear, underwear, bridal wear, footwear and fashion accessories. In a word, as I understand, designer fashion is the fashion created by fashion labels/firms that accentuate the image and style of the chief designer, rather than hiding them behind the scene.

2.1.2 The relevance of fashion as an industry:

Those who tend to regard fashion only as a superficial and unimportant business must be neglecting a fact that this is an industry of great economic contribution to its locale. In New York alone, the industry supplies over 10 billion dollars worth of wages to its employees (The Importance of the fashion industry, 2010). You may argue that New York is an extreme example, but think about the whole supply chain of the fashion industry, mainly from fabric production, design & style, apparel manufacture, distribution, advertising, to retail operation (Sen, 2008), then it surprises no one that the fashion industry can feed such a great amount of residents and bring about enormous total income.

Apart from its conventional significance as revenue and job generators, as a recognized sub-sector of cultural industries, fashion has been strongly associated with the new 'creative class' (Florida, 2002) in 'contemporary economic development practices and urban policy' (Evans, 2009; Ponzini and Rossi, 2010; Pratt, 2009). Actually, since the 1990s, fashion has been encompassed into themes of urban renewal (Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998; Crewe and Lowe, 1996; Scott, 1995; 1996) and of the historical development of fashion spaces and cosmopolitan identities in urban centers (Breward, 1999; Mort, 1998).

Within the industry itself, the focus is indeed shifting away from the manufacture side to the design aspect of fashion, which seems to continuously bring about symbolic and cultural capital (Rantisi, 2004; Currid, 2007), with which a city can create its own

'distinction' from other places in an increasingly homogenized economy (Markusen and Schrock, 2006). Besides, according to Currid and Williams (2011), both Los Angeles and New York have benefited from the mutual branding that fashion and their cities provide to each other, for instance, Donna Karen New York. In other words, with the readily visible nature of fashion to do with looks or figures, when the industry scale is influential enough, people tend to associate the image of a certain brand with that of the place where it is located, so that fashion brands, especially the leading ones, will share some abstract features with their locales, for instance: when people talking about fashion brands in Paris and this city, they often use the same word like elegance, delicacy, classic but avant-garde in the mean time, which will not be together used for another city and its fashion.

2.2 Studies on fashion design

2.2.1 The definition of fashion design and fashion designer:

Fashion design is more of a process than an action. As Sengupta (2012) summarizes, the fashion design process is typically phased with the 'research' stage preceding stages of 'design development' and 'manufacture' (Frings, 2007; Drew, 1992; Carr and Pomeroy, 1992; Stecker, 1996, as cited in Sengupta, 2012: 8). Jennifer Craik (2009) in her book "*Fashion- The key concepts*" lists more specifically the steps in and after the design phase: having a conceptual idea of a garment or look; making patterns, choosing the most appropriate fabrics; making samples; building a seasonal collection usually with a theme; outsourcing manufacture of preorders and likely sales; obtaining exposure and marketing; retailing; evaluating success and financial earning; and beginning planning for the next season. Fashion design is depicted by Craik (2009) as a relentless cycle of anticipating the future yet drawing on resonance of the past, which entails balancing the now with the future and the before. This is especially applicable to fashion labels which are positioned as not so niche or avant-garde, because it is often the case that ordinary consumers don't want to wear something too ahead of time but reject also anything that is out of fashion.

   To conclude an operational definition for fashion design here, it is the art of the application of aesthetics and techniques, with any suitable fabrics and supporting materials, to produce clothing and accessories. Accordingly, a fashion designer is the one who takes his/her main responsibility in conceiving a combination of line, shape, proportion, color, and texture for a garment. However, Jackson and Shaw (2006: 40) insist two abilities required as a designer: the ability to conceptualize original designs and the ability to acquire the technical 'know-how' with regards to fabric construction,

performance and so on. Although practical skills like sewing or pattern making are appreciated, I think the essential capability of a fashion designer is still to translate his/her idea into a concrete form. Generally speaking, some fashion designers work, unknown to the public, for big fashion companies that brands the company as a whole, whereas some others design for their own names, which constitutes the generation of designer fashion. But there are some outstanding fashion designers who take on at the same time both kinds of roles mentioned above and mostly they are so influential that their names are bound closely with the company brands, such as Karl Lagerfeld, John Galliano, Jean Paul Gaultier, etc.

2.2.2 Fashion design in the fashion industry:

Currid & Williams (2011) broke down the fashion industry into four main sectors: manufacturing, wholesale, supplies and design. In fact, players involved in the industry are many, e.g.: designers, tailors, seamstresses, support suppliers, stylists, models, photographers, casting agencies, advertising agencies, fashion critics & journalists, wholesale or retail practitioners etc. (Christopher, Lowson & Peck, 2004). However, the designers here are the backbone of the industry as they are responsible for the very central part of a garment: the design. Indeed, the designers have long been acknowledged as 'more interesting and newsworthy actors' in the industry than the manufacturers (Rantisi, 2004), which is exactly why I do research on independent fashion designers. Fashion is attractive to me mainly because the designers embed their interesting ideas into the product. For independent labels, the designers' personal aesthetics can be expressed to some great extent, as opposed to mass clothing companies that are usually too scared to be different from the rest, thus turning boring and commonplace. Furthermore, with the collapse of its manufacturing sector in such post-industrial economy, the fashion industry is evolving into a design- and innovation-oriented industry (Currid & Williams, 2011) that has become a central part of 'cognitive-cultural economy', as called by Scott (2008a, 2008b).

2.3 Independent fashion designers

2.3.1 Features of independent fashion designers:

Independent fashion designers, as qualified by Roodhouse (2003), usually do businesses in micro scales and the business is largely dominated by projects, networks, contracting and sub contracting, and cross disciplinary interactions. Larner and Molloy (2009) later confirm that independent fashion designers typically run privately owned, small- to

medium-sized enterprises to produce high quality original garments within themed seasonal collections. So to make clear whom I mean to investigate in this thesis, they are fashion designers either working as a sole trader or in a small firm owned by the designers (and their partners), with none or a few (fulltime or part-time) employees.

As for employees, Roodhouse (2003) find about the fashion designers in the Northwest, Yorkshire and Humber regions of UK that most of them employ relatively few full-time people and nearly half of the workforce are female, who don't even have contracts of employment sometimes. Despite that so far there is neither formal nor informal report on this matter in China, we can make reasonable assumptions drawing on studies on other cases. The study of Roodhouse (2003) just shows that major investment of independent labels is usually occurring in market research, product development, acquisition of equipment, and so on. Besides, public grants, funds, sponsorship and help in kind are minimal, which means the designers rely primarily upon its own financial resources, and the sale of goods and services is the substantial source of income. In that respect, this is a highly fluid, flexible and risky industry, so it is better to invest more in the core activity, e.g. the making of garments, than in the could-have-been-streamlined workforce. The employees' jobs range from finishing the garment to administration and sales, etc. To my knowledge, similar to the New Zealand designer fashion sector (Larner and Molloy, 2007), clothing factories or local outworkers do virtually all manufacturing for the fashion labels in China that don't do haute couture.

In addition, Roodhouse (2003) notices that the sector shows no interest in clustering works, largely in isolation and is strongly regionally based, with customers primarily located in the region. Likewise, the New Zealand designer fashion firms are intensely local in set-up, as opposed to large fashion houses owned by international luxury conglomerates. Nevertheless, according to Larner & Molloy (2009:38), though the New Zealand designers, especially the top ones, made for many times public commitments to be New Zealand-based niche players at the cutting edge of global fashion trends, they are actually firmly export-oriented, and much of the infrastructural support is aimed at preparing young designers for export readiness. The situation in China is partly different. Back in the time when e-commerce or social media platforms didn't exist, independent designers, much less than now obviously, had to cluster in fashion-conscious metropolises like Beijing or Shanghai, to rely on especially the network, media and professional resources assembling there only and to approach much more promising markets than elsewhere. But now, it seems that designers don't necessarily have to cluster by means of the mighty Internet. However, are those Internet applications, here the social media applications to be specific, reliable and sufficient all the time? Can they ultimately take

place of, e.g. traditional marketing or media instruments? These questions are to be answered with my research results at the end of the thesis.

2.3.2 Multitasking of independent fashion designers

Being 'independent' means that the designer probably has to take on multitasks and to be multi-skillful. They can't just concentrate on designing and making garments any more. Instead, they are entrepreneurs now, who need to oversee, e.g. the part of business planning or retailing, and may function as CEO, manager, marketer, and accountant all at the same time. Zucchella and Scabini (2007: 72, 73) enumerate eight skills required to be a successful fashion entrepreneur. First are strategy skills, with which the designer must understand how the business can fit into the market and how to implement all the necessary operations to surpass their competitors. Then planning skills are needed to anticipate on future market conditions so as to take measures in advance. The third skills, marketing skills, are crucial for fulfilling the task of appealing to customers, which theoretically determines how much (potential) revenue one can earn. As defined in *Fashion Marketing*, edited by Mike Easey (2009:7), fashion marketing is different from many other areas of marketing, because the tension between design (idealism) and marketing imperatives (utilitarianism) are particularly evident. In spite of that, a fashion marketer must act as a psychic like others do. Because the very intrinsic nature of fashion is change, fashion marketers must be familiar with the past and current trends, in which respect sole fashion entrepreneurs should find no difficulties, to develop and implement ad campaigns that are ensured with a desirable product image and to be geared towards the right group for the product.

Next are the financial skills, which is also very important, concerning not only the duty to manage money, e.g.: controlling cash flows or verifying expenditures; but also the mission to attract external finance from investors, such as banks and credit unions, venture capitalists, business angels, friends and families (Kuijstermans, 2008). Since it is generally hard for fashion entrepreneurs to obtain abundant financial resources, one's ability to collect funds and to maintain strong relationships with investors can be fundamental in the exploitation of market opportunities (Zucchella & Scabini, 2007). Besides, four managerial skills are required, when the designers hire someone to work for them. Motivation skills and leadership skills refer to the ability to summon up the spirits of employees and guide them in the jobs they have to undertake. Communication skills enable the entrepreneur to deliver clearly expressed ideas to people and influence their actions. Negotiation skills work when the requests of different parties are not univocal and the entrepreneur has to find out the possibilities of maximizing the outcomes of all in

order to gain an advantage. Apart from all these mentioned above, I would like to add in another critical skill used externally by fashion entrepreneurs, i.e. networking skills. There may be some overlaps with the previous skills. For instance, an entrepreneur has to utilize his/her networks, professional or social, to find appropriate investors for fund-raising. Basically, to do business or entrepreneurship is to undertake a social activity, in which networks facilitate one's work through optimizing the distribution of resources. In that sense, networking is also a fundamental task in the exploitation of opportunities for survival and success.

2.3.3 Problems of independent fashion designers

It goes without saying that founding a label of one's own is probably considered to be the highest dream a designer is willing to fight for throughout his/her life. But it is definitely not an easy choice to make; because there are miscellaneous difficulties perceived before and after one's setting up a fashion business. In other words, problems vary among different stages of running a label. According to Leadbeater and Oakley (2005: 308), creative or cultural entrepreneurs go through three critical phases in general. The first phase is called 'the gestation phase', in which designers mainly need to figure out what kind of label they want to establish, which further implies questions like: what distinctive selling points do they have in order to win a place in the market? Who are the target customers and how to reach them in marketing and retailing? What possible resources, physical or capital, can they acquire to open up this business? In this phase, questions related to concepts may be easily answered, for they have been thought about for quite some time. But when practical stuff, or rather, entrepreneurial stuff are involved, the designers mostly get headaches. For instance, how to get adequate and preferably continuous funds can be very nerve-racking for some. And to outsource the production or to do it in-house, which one is more feasible, financially and timely? Or if the designer feels a need to hire someone, he/she, more as an entrepreneur then, has to be concerned about his/her style of management.

The second phase of growth starts once the label has been set up. In spite of their painstaking preparations, the lack of business skills, such as accounting, management, regulations and financial planning, is still a weak point, which may become a vital point if they don't deal with it well. In a study on young creative newcomers in the design sectors in Belgium, Nauwelaerts, Franck and Broeckaert (2006: 18) find out almost 75 percent of the creative newcomers state that this lack of knowledge has caused serious problems for their company. Another vital problem resides in the marketing part. In the past, when there were only solid shops, one might not do any ad campaigns to make themselves

known but simply opened a shop and waited for people to come and for word-of-mouth to take effect. However, with the prevalence of the e-commerce, the competition has been much intensified, which brings an enormous challenge for the independents to be creative and effective in finding channels through which customers are drawn. So this lead to a sub-topic for the discussion later on: do social media platforms mitigate this problem, and how?

When it comes to financing, according to Van den Steenhoven, Van den Berg and Rietbergen (2005: 9, 11), creative newcomers would rather do some commercial assignments as a freelance to finance his own enterprise, than look for external fund resources. Roso (2006: 16) points out that, financing is the major bottleneck that can directly affect the start-up and growth opportunities of an enterprise. Because at least two collections need to be presented annually; and the R&D and the production of a collection have to be pre-financed, in two periods of a year, as long as six to nine months, the costs (investments) are much higher than the incomes, which in part makes fashion an undesirable sector for banks (Roso, 2005). Moreover, the asymmetrical ignorance between the private investors and the creative industries as a whole makes them have no knowledge of each other and their possibilities, thus making them more reluctant to cooperate with each other. This brings out the next problem of networking. In particular, Van den Steenhoven et al (2005: 12) identify a lack of networking with business people and that no connection with non-creative sectors makes it hard to look for sales points and to market their products. Again, we will discover if social media tools help in this matter.

Creative newcomers rarely reach the third phase of expansion, in which substantial rational investments have probably been made. Nonetheless, the entrepreneurial pressure is rather escalated than relieved. As suggested by Leadbeater and Oakley (2005: 310), in several parts the independents must be still careful: enough capital to finance product development and production, enough commercial discipline to make sure the investment is not wasted, positions in potentially lucrative international markets, unshakeable self-belief in distinctive talent and the rest should be left to a large dose of luck.

2.3.4 The role of intermediaries in the designer fashion sector

Although some intermediaries have been named a few times in the previous sections, it is still worthy of a more particular mention here about the all-along important role of intermediaries in the designer fashion sector, just so as to examine and emphasize in my empirical research how social media change the way that designers associate with these intermediaries, and perhaps the status of intermediaries in fashion business.

Karra Neri's case study on the UK designer fashion sector (2008) demonstrates that a successful designer- intermediary relationship underpins most designers' business growth. In UK, people who help to influence retailers and consumers in favor of particular designers are considered to be fashion intermediaries who are often not recognized by those outsiders. Karra (2008:4) groups three important kinds of intermediaries who are regarded integral to most designer businesses: 1) Aesthetic service providers, are such as stylists, models and photographers, among whom stylists are particularly key to managing editorial work and media exposure, developing private client portfolios, advertising campaigns and gaining access to retailers. 2) Sales agents, who provide designers with sales expertise as well as access to specific regional markets. 3) PR agents and the press, who communicate the designer's brand to all the other intermediaries and consumers.

Then Kerra (2008) identifies three main issues in the designer- intermediary relationship in her research. First, designers often cares merely about making beautiful garments, but intermediaries argue that a consistent and relevant story– a strategic brand identity – is crucial in building the brand image, securing consumer receptiveness and establishing stable relationships with intermediaries. Secondly, Prioritizing PR than sales is actually not very feasible during the initial stage. Several leading PR agencies pointed out that the efforts they placed in the press could not translate into sales unless consumers can buy the promoted products immediately in the stores. So designers better have either online sales or retailer presence to maximize press coverage. Thirdly, the matching of designer with intermediary is also significant. Designers usually find intermediaries according to word-of-mouth or personal recommendations, but since the cooperation between them is critical for the business, some studies e.g.: on each other's working style, should be carefully done in advance.

Besides, the data in Kerra's research (2008) notably shows use of a reasonable range of marketing channels, among which blogging was still not very developed at that time and the high frequency of website use was undermined by the rudimentary character of many of these sites. These four-year-ago findings of hers just provide a comparison against nowadays' use of web or Internet marketing, which is going to be introduced in the following section.

Chapter 3 - Social media

Likewise, I will discuss about existing knowledge ranging from social media in general spectrum to within the boundary of China specifically. In 3.1.1, the concept of social media and some keywords will be expounded. Then in 3.1.2, the characteristics and the major impacts of social media will be elaborated on. In 3.1.3, the concrete forms and platforms where social media exists are enumerated. Next to a comparison between the newly flourishing social media and seemingly declining traditional media (3.1.4), how social media is used in business for marketing (3.1.5), networking (3.1.6) and other uses (3.1.7) are depicted. Afterwards, the status quo of social media in China (3.2.1) is presented with some general data, followed by the brief introduction of the most popular social media platforms in China (3.2.2).

3.1 Social media in general

3.1.1 Definitions and keywords

There has been a 'social media' phenomenon worldwide, as described by Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre (2011), in which consumers increasingly apply Internet-based platforms, such as social networking sites, blogs, wikis or content communities, etc. to create, edit, modify, share, and discuss miscellaneous Internet contents. In comparison, just a few years ago, people were mostly used to reading, watching, listening to and/or downloading the content on the Internet just for their own information or usage. As Shelly and Frydenberg, (2010) concluded, the World Wide Web has evolved from a collection of Websites containing static or infrequently changing texts, images and hyperlinks to support interactive Web applications for chatting, collaborating, sharing and viewing texts, photos and videos, etc. As a result, this social media phenomenon brings about an enormous revolution as regards the way of mass communication, which subsequently changes the relationship between brands and consumers; and calls for a re-definition of the consumers' role in business (more details later on).

To give an exact definition of social media, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) describe it as a cluster of ubiquitously accessible online applications based on the scalable technology and ideology of Web 2.0 that, according to Shelly and Frydenberg (2010), allows users to generate and organize their own content, so that overall quality of the site improves. Likewise, Kietzmann et al. (2011: 241) explain that social media employs mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms, via which individuals,

organizations or communities share, discuss, co-create, and modify contents. In a word, social media is a kind of interactive media that has little to display if there is not enough, or rather, not effective user participation.

A key word used in social media studies is User-Generated-Content (UGC), which enables user participation in a real sense by shifting from merely letting them download to also upload a lot. YouTube, Wikipedia and MySpace exemplify the successful application of UGC (not in terms of their commercial outcomes but simply the popularity among users). In a Web 2.0 era, contents on the Internet are generated by not limited groups of people any more but any user who just needs to have access to the Internet and sometimes a registered account as requested by certain sites. Moreover, there is usually no or little charge for uploading user-generated contents. Consequently, the world's data centers are now replete with exa-bytes of UGC that, in addition to creating a collective asset, may also contain data that can be regarded as a liability (Scott, 2010). Although the vast burgeoning of UGC contributes substantially to the accumulation and circulation of human knowledge, it also brings about a large amount of wrong, falsified, subjective and unilateral, or rubbish information, which then entails a mechanism of examination and verification. But there has not been and will probably not be such a universal mechanism. Hence, apart from the monitoring of different degrees by website administrators under some general laws/regulations to avoid falsified, offensive or irrelevant content, copyright infringement issues and the like, users should also judge by themselves about the reliability and authenticity of Internet contents.

One prominent result that UGC gives rise to and changes the brand-consumer relationship substantially is Consumer-Generated Media (CGM), which is a new source of online information that are created, initiated and circulated by consumers in an attempt to share with others their opinions or ideas about products, brands, services and various related issues; including but not limited to: consumer comments on brand homepages, consumer ratings/postings on public discussion boards/forums, blogs, microblogs and social networking web sites, consumer-to-consumer emails and so forth (Blackshaw and Nazzaro, 2004). As far as I am concerned, it is through these online word-of-mouth vehicles that independent fashion designers with limited marketing instruments seem to be able to obtain, for one thing, almost free but efficacious publicity; for another thing, sufficient and more true-to-heart consumer feedbacks. But this thought of mine needs to be justified by my empirical research results. Anyway, Blackshaw and Nazzaro (2004) have contended that although consumers are still more or less influenced or stimulated by traditional marketers and marketing activities, they nonetheless own and control online word of mouth that appears far more trustworthy (except those faked by paid posters) than

the ever-artificial traditional media. Generally speaking, when the growing influence of CGM poses great opportunities for independent fashion labels, challenges are also emerging in the mean time, which will be another sub-topic in my empirical research.

3.1.2 Characteristics & impacts

Antony Mayfield (2008) summarizes the following characteristics of social media: 1) Participation. Social media emphasizes and encourages user participation to an unprecedentedly great extent, because without adequate user participation, the platforms will be devoid of contents thus attractiveness; 2) Openness. Contents on most social media platforms are open to everyone with rarely any barriers, unless the generator set certain restrictions, but this kind of access-restricted content often gets frowned on. Then the line between media and audience is largely blurred, for whether users provide feedbacks or contribute ideas, others can see it and be influenced, which is how a media functions basically; 3) Conversation. While traditional media undertakes only one-way transmittal of contents, social media enables two-way conversation between any users. So you may converse on a social media platform with someone that you otherwise will never have a chance to talk to; 4) Community. The above-mentioned characteristics of social media make it quickly to form online communities, as users can easily identify with others who share common interests in, for instance, a love of photography, a political issue or a favorite TV show, etc. Hence, while social media is very individualized nowadays, it also often shows a great tendency of grouping users, either by virtue of the intrinsic set-up of certain social media platforms (e.g.: through the individuality labels you add to your own account, the site can find others who have the same/similar labels and recommend to you as potential relations), or initiated by some users who feel a strong need to do so. But usually online communities display a loose and unstable structure that doesn't have any concrete force to stay long and vibrant; 5) Connectedness. Not only users get connected to each other through social media services, different social media platforms also make use of links to other sites or homepages, thriving on the shared resources.

Generally speaking, the most fundamental impact of social media having on the mass communication is that it brings new means of production and distribution of contents. As Mayfield (2008) explains, it used to be individuals and organizations, namely the traditional media, who owned the production facilities and infrastructure to create contents and distribute them to the audience. With the advent of high-speed Internet access, ever-advancing digital technology, handy and low-cost (or even free) editing software, together with people's exploding aspiration to speak out loud, social media rises

as a reflection of the times, enduing people with an irresistible ability to generate one's own content, be it words, images, video or audio, etc. Moreover, the content created by a nobody can be as influential as by a celebrity or a national TV station, with even bigger infectivity, because the distribution channels are maximized by the indefinitely transmittable social media. Indeed, if there is no corresponding way of distributing one's contents to others, the benefits of social media will be half detracted. Mayfield (2008) takes blogs as an example. Usually people don't want to be bothered with checking several blogs one by one every time. As a result, they sooner or later will lose track of some blogs, which constitutes a reader loss of the blog authors. Then with the innovation of a technology called RSS (Really Simple Syndication), people can subscribe to a blog or website, like they do with traditional newspapers or magazines, only in a more precise and condensed way. Whenever there is an update, RSS will notify a 'reader' by automatically sending full or summarized contents and the reader doesn't even have to visit the original website (King, 2003), which therefore ensures the due distribution of a blog. Besides, another notable innovation of content distribution through social media is, by simply @ someone you want to share information with on Facebook or Twittter, this person is informed of your move and probably also involved in the next round of content circulation.

3.1.3 Forms and platforms

The specific forms that social media takes on include: blogs, microblogs, v-logs, picture-sharing, music-sharing, wall-postings, email, instant messaging, crowd sourcing and voice over IP, to name a few (The Complete Guide to Social Media, 2010). Furthermore, drawing on a set of theories in the field of media research (social presence, media richness) and social processes (self-presentation, self-disclosure), Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) create a classification scheme for different social media platforms. According to them, social media platforms can be divided in six main types: collaborative projects (e.g.: Wikipedia), blogs and microblogs (e.g.: Twitter), content communities (e.g.: YouTube), social networking sites (e.g.: Facebook), virtual game worlds (e.g.: World of Warcraft) and virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life). Some platforms integrate all or most of the social media forms, e.g.: Facebook; whereas some others specialize in one or a few forms, e.g.: Flickr. Due to the features of social media in general, the more forms a platform employs or the more information its adopted form contains, the more users and participations it has. Facebook, Twitter or YouTube are the three best global examples. As of May 2012, Facebook has over 900 million active users, more than half of them using Facebook on a mobile device (Sengupta, 2012). Twitter also gained rapid popularity worldwide since its creation in 2006, with over 500 million active users as of 2012

(Twitter.com Site info, 2012); while more than 800 million unique users visit YouTube each month (Statistics-YouTube, 2012).

Kietzmann et al. (2011) present a honeycomb framework to define how certain social media platforms focus on some or all of seven functional building blocks they conclude: identity (the extent to which users expose themselves), conversations (the extent to which users interact with each other), sharing (the extent to which users exchange contents), presence (the extent to which users know if others are present), relationships (the extent to which users relate to each other), reputation (the extent to which users know the social standing of others) and groups (the extent to which users are grouped into communities). Moreover, none of today's major social media sites focus solely on just one block (Kietzmann et al., 2011: 249). For instance, YouTube users stress sharing, conversations, groups and reputation; whereas LinkedIn's primary blocks are identity, reputation and relationships. Therefore, based on the implications that each block has in regards to how firms should understand the engagement needs of social media users, Kietzmann et al. (2011) propose a guideline- the 4 Cs: cognize (a firm should first understand its social media landscape), congruity (a firm's strategies should conform to its goal and fit different social media functionalities), curate (a firm must act as a curator of its social media environment) and chase (a firm must catch up with the velocity of information flows which could affect their current or future position in the market) - for firms to comprehend, react to and monitor their different social media activities, from which I may draw some useful lessons for my empirical research.

3.1.4 Comparison with traditional media

In *The Complete Guide to Social Media* (2010), social media are distinguished from traditional media (also called industrial media, such as newspaper, television and radio etc.) in the following aspects: 1) Reach. One feature that social media and industrial media have in common is the capability to reach small or large audiences. For instance, either a 'tweet' or a TV program may reach zero or millions of people. Nonetheless, traditional media typically adopt a centralized framework for organization and dissemination, whereas social media, by its very nature, tend to be more decentralized and less hierarchical with multiple channels of distribution. 2) Accessibility. Compared to traditional media whose core activities like production are usually restricted to state or private owners, social media are much more available to the public at little or no cost. 3) Usability. Traditional media generally require specialized skills and training, as well as significant resources to publish contents. However, most social media productions do not necessitate such skills or resources; in theory, anyone with access can operate the means of social media activities. 4) Immediacy. Traditional media have relatively longer time lag

between communications than social media do, because the latter can be capable of virtually instantaneous responses, except when the user delayed the response on purpose). Nevertheless, as traditional media start to utilize social media tools in their production or distribution, this time lag difference may not be that obvious over time. 5) Permanence. Contents on traditional media, once created, cannot be altered. For example, once a newspaper article is printed and distributed, it is impossible to call back thousands of newspapers and make changes. Conversely, social media allow almost instantaneous re-edition or alteration, which shows a merit of high flexibility but also a demerit of inconsistency to a certain degree. Notably, hybrid of traditional and social media have come into being, mainly in order to transform and revitalize the declining traditional media threatened greatly by the rapid penetration of social media. Community media exemplifies this kind of hybrid media, using both social and industrial media frameworks.

3.1.5 Social media for marketing

Social media has been increasingly added to the scope of Internet marketing, which (also known as web marketing, online marketing, web-vertising, or e-marketing) self-evidently refers to the marketing of products or services over the Internet. Apart from social media marketing, Internet marketing also contains the following kinds generally: display advertising; search engine marketing (SEM); search engine optimization (SEO); Email, referral, affiliate, inbound and video marketing (Charlesworth, 2009). In the traditional marketing models, the content, frequency, timing, and medium of communications are usually collaborated by firms or organizations with external agents, e.g.: advertising agencies, marketing research firms, and public relations firms; but the growth of social media, with the emergence of Web 2.0, has provided a set of tools that allow people and organizations themselves to build social or business connections, share information and pursue project collaboration online (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Social media marketing, as defined by Mangold and Faulds (2009), is the process of gaining traffic or attention through social media websites, such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. According to *The Complete Guide to Social Media* (2010), Social media marketing usually aims at creating content that attracts attention and encourages readers to share it with their social networks; then the sharing will presumably get resonation because it appears to come from a trusted, third-party source, instead of the firm or the brand itself. In marketing, social media may be equal to consumer generated media in a sense that social media marketing is driven by online word-of-mouth, which results in earned media rather than paid media. In that respect, Kietzmann et al. (2011) conclude that the power has been shifted from those professionals in marketing and public relations to the individuals and communities that create, share and receive blogs, tweets, movies,

and pictures online, etc. It is now up to firms to decide if they want to get serious about social media and participate in this communication, or ignore it.

Social media marketing mainly relies on the use of social networks, COBRAs and eWOM to successfully advertise online (Kincy, 2011). Through social networking sites, e.g.: Facebook, information related to the user's likes and dislikes is available to marketers. This technique is crucial, as it indicates the target group who then should be advertised accordingly. COBRAs stands for Consumer's online brand related activities, which, for instance, can be uploading a picture of your 'new Converse sneakers to Facebook' (Muntinga, Moorman & Smit, 2011). Another technique for social media marketing is online word of mouth or electronic WOM. A typical example of eWOM can be an online hotel rating. A high rating will probably result in the free advertisement for the hotel, whereas a low rating can potentially ruin the hotel's reputation.

Social media marketing benefits organizations or individuals at little or no cost with a direct channel for customer awareness & support, a means to gain competitive insight, a tool of online reputation management and accesses to strategic partnership (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). However, the viral nature of social media (i.e.: openness and connectedness, etc.) also requires organizations or individuals to protect their information well and closely monitors the communication they have on certain social media platforms, otherwise a single neglecting or mistake by an employee can result in grave consequences for the whole company. Aaccording to Wiler (2011), a flash poll with the participation of 1225 IT executives from 33 countries demonstrated that social media mishaps cost their companies a total of $4.3 million in 2010. The top three social media mishaps confronting an organization in the past year included: employees sharing too much information in public forums, loss or exposure of confidential information, and increased exposure to litigation. So far a comprehensive summary of the merits and demerits of social media marketing is missing in the academic literature; hence I intend to find out its strong and weak points through my interviews with independent designers based on their actual using experiences.

3.1.6 Social media for networking

Although social media platforms like blogs and microblogs can be helpful, to use social media for networking, the most specialized tool is a group of social networking sites (e.g.: Facebook, LinkedIn and MySpace, etc.), which according to Boyd and Ellison (2007: 211) refer to web-based services that allow individuals to: 1) establish a public or semi-public profile within a limited system; 2) display a list of their connections or relations; 3) view and traverse their list of networks and those made by others within the system. In *The Complete Guide to Social Media* (2010), social networking sites most often requires

users to register a free account, meanwhile encouraging users to create profiles revealing more or less information about them selves, but recently it also becomes common for various firms to create profiles to advertise products and services. Afterwards, users can post blogs or signatures, upload pictures, comment on others posted contents, search for others with similar interests, articulate and compile the list of contacts, and so on. To protect user privacy, one can choose who is allowed to view his/her profile, add him/her to the list of relations and contact them directly, etc. on most of social networking sites. At the forefront of emerging social networking trends is the concept of 'real time' and 'location based' ("The Complete Guide to Social Media", 2010). 'Real time' is similar to live broadcasting and 'location based' enables the users to 'check-in' to places where they are temporarily by right of the GPS in their cell phones or digital objects. Besides, the nature and names of these services may vary from site to site.

As pointed out by Boyd and Ellison (2007), what makes social networking sites so special for networking purposes is not just that they let otherwise-may-not-meet strangers know each other, but rather that they enable users to make visible their social networks. Therefore, I take fashion designers for instance: theoretically if the designer builds a relationship with an intermediary (e.g.: a stylist or a press) on a social networking site, then the interaction between them or of both of them with their other relations are visible to each other usually, which on one hand present the designer to other relations of the intermediary; on the other hand, show to the designer the network of the intermediary, thus increasing the possibility of 'friending' more intermediaries on the site and probably developing professional networks in this way. Furthermore, unlike other communication platforms, social networking sites also allow users to find like-minded individuals ("The Complete Guide to Social Media", 2010). Once they discover each other, a long-term relationship based on their mutual interests may be established and multiplied many times over, an ad hoc community is likely to be formed. For designers, there may be potential sponsors among these like-minded relations, who identify strongly with designers and appreciate their talents so much as to finance them to keep their labels existing.

3.1.7 Social media for other uses

Though not meant for sales, the nature of social media brings about new ways for sales agents to find, communicate and understand their customers. Apart from getting sales information, some sites become a sales outlet where transactions can take place directly, according to my own observation. Despite the opportunities, some uncertainty remains towards social networking in many sales organizations (CRM and Social Networking: Engaging the Social Customer, 2009). At far as I know, there is no official payment channel for personal and commercial use enclosed in social media sites. So when it comes

to payment, risks arise for both sides. That is why cautious or more conservative sales people tend to view social media as an unproven channel that deviates from 'core sales activities' (CRM and Social Networking, 2009). Nevertheless, many sales agents are still realizing the benefits of incorporating social networking into their traditional sales processes (CRM and Social Networking, 2009).

In addition, there emerges a creative way of applying social media, esp. social networking sites, to the production of goods. Botsman and Rogers (2011) argue that since the Internet nowadays has been inherently decentralized and democratic, fashion production can follow this pattern and evolve from the classic Web 1.0 format of fashion production into the more interactive, inclusive and dynamic Web 2.0 pattern. Sengupta (2012) presents a case study of 'Kuch Bhi' movement by Neil Dantas (an Indian designer) on Facebook, which conforms to the web 2.0 phenomenon, initializing collaborative fashion design process through social networking site and placing the fashion designer just as a catalyst in the design process. Sengupta (2012:4) suggests to call this process as 'crowd sourcing' rather than collaborative intelligence because in this case the wisdom of the crowd is utilized to source ideas or stories for products against a reward system (tangible or intangible) rather than overall collaboration to invent / create a new concept for a 'common good'.

3.2 Social media in China

3.2.1 General situation

The development of Internet in China has been transforming the country tremendously. There was never a space that can assemble so many voices from the masses. According to *The 2011 Chinese Online Public Opinion Report* (Zhu, Shan, & Hu, 2011), up till June in 2011, China has had the most netizens in the world with a still increasing total number of 485 millions and the coverage rate of Chinese Internet has gone up to 36.2%, which is next only to television in this aspect. The statistics in a Boston Consulting Group study shows that Chinese netizens spend an average of 2.7 hours per day on the Internet, similar to the usage patterns in developed countries like America or Japan and much more than other developing countries (Crampton, 2011). Moreover, although the government tries to control the Internet with a nationwide censorship, ordinary Chinese netizens have gained access to information in ways that they could not imagine just a few years ago.

In particular, the thriving of various social media platforms enables millions of Internet users to share information with others online to an unprecedented extent. Despite the restrictions on some foreign websites, especially the most widespread social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, there have flourished a bunch of homegrown and

state-approved equivalence platforms, which will be introduced one be one in the next part. Crampton (2011: 29) points out that by some measures, usage of these Chinese social media platforms is some of the most intense in the world and he summarizes several factors contributing to this prosperity of social media, namely: rural- to-urban migration that has separated families, the loneliness of the one-child generation, and a distrust of information from government-controlled media, etc. In a word, in China, social media has increasingly become an integral part of people's daily lives, thus a substantial tool for enterprises to employ to gain influences and advantages.

To my surprise, according to *The 29th Statistical Report on China's Internet Developing Situation* (China Internet Network Information Center, 2012), social media marketing are far not pervasively employed by small to medium sized enterprises and in general it accounts for just a small proportion of Internet marketing, out of which the top three manners in China so far are still email marketing, e-commerce platform promotion, search engine optimization. Nonetheless, based on many favored features of social media mentioned above, the potential of social media marketing in China is to be reckoned with and this thesis of mine, though focusing on independent fashion designs, can pose as a reference concerning the feasibility and reliability of social media in the business of small-sized enterprises in China's creative industries.

A notable condition that social media brings about is that Chinese netizens are quite keen on the online discussions directly about companies or organizations, probably because they finally have some free and far-reaching channels or platforms to express their opinions or feeling towards companies, products or services and so forth. As cited by Crampton (2011), a recent study by OgilvyOne in China found that about 55 percent of Chinese Internet users have initiated or participated in online discussions about companies. Therefore, Crampton (2011) suggests that understanding what consumers are saying online about companies and deepening their knowledge of Chinese social media platforms should better be seen as an imperative rather than an alternative for not just indigenous companies but also those foreign firms that want to get a foothold in this country. Furthermore, Crampton (2011) contends that a lack of engagement with netizens should also be better regarded as a business risk than as a lost opportunity due to the deep penetration and great influence of social media.

3.2.2 Leading social media platforms

As Chinese people get increasingly involved online and social media has grown to become the shared commons, consumer behaviors are changed accordingly: they are unprecedentedly enthusiastic about airing opinions, asking for advice, and discussing about companies or products on social media platforms (Crampton, 2011). Many

companies have recognized the need to adjust their marketing strategies, because, as said before, ignoring this trend could be a business risk today, instead of a mere lost opportunity. The Chinese equivalences of the most famous international social media platforms are as follows: for collaborative projects, there is Baidu Baike against Wikipedia; for content communities, there are Youku and Tudou against YouTube; for microblogs, there are Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo against Twitter; for social networking sites, there are Qzone (affiliated to QQ), RenRen and Kaixin001 against Facebook. Besides, some online communities and forums are likewise popular all over China, such as Tianya, Mop and Douban. Tianya and Mop are all embracing, so to speak, in terms of contents and ways of communication; whereas Douban specializes more in recording information and creating contents in regard to movies, books, music and other art-related subjects, thus this online forum is pre-assumed by me to be a reasonably useful platform for fashion designers and my empirical research is going to find out about it.

Since SNS are characteristic of allowing both mass and private communications, some information may only be circulated within private community, thus leaving out to some extent the supervision of site administrators or related government departments. Consequently, a growing number of SNS have welled up, such as RenRen, QQ, Kaixin001, Hainei8 and so on. Compared by Crampton (2011), Facebook is regarded as the default SNS in many countries especially in the West, gathering all demographics; however, the same does not hold true in China, where segmented audiences, ranging from urban youth to university students and migrant workers. For instance, Kaixin001 is a platform designed more for urban and young professionals, with most of its members being white-collar workers in the first and second-tier cities; Users don't have to create personal contents but simply exchange information about professional progress, life style, relationships and hobbies, etc. Next, QQ is the first and largest social networking site in China, with the widest user age and regional distribution. QQ is more of a combination of MSN and Blog. Its 'blog' function is exerted through its affiliated platform, known as Qzone, which especially attracts a sizable portion of migrant workers to share personal diaries. In addition, RenRen is considered to resemble Facebook the most, whether from its page layout to functionalities and it typically attracts university students because it primarily categorizes users by their schools and entrance/graduation years.

The phenomenon of offering real-time and location based updates of what you are doing, how you are feeling, or links to other sites in microblogs takes place most recently, typified by Sina Weibo (Sina is the name for the portal site; Weibo literally means microblog in Chinese). The four biggest portal sites in China, namely Sina, Sohu, Netease and Tencent, all have their own Weibo platforms, among which, though Sina Weibo is a latecomer to the this field, it is the most popular microblogging, or social media platform

so to speak, in China for the moment. According to *The 29th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* published by China Internet Network Information Center (2012), till December of 2011, the users of Sina Weibo totaled 249.88 millions and accounted for 48.7% of all netizens. In the following texts, unless particularly explained, Weibo means Sina Weibo especially. Weibo allows users the same as Twitter to post 140-character messages and follow friends. However, users can also post photos or videos and comment on others' posts on Weibo, which are not enabled in Twitter. Besides, another distinction between Weibo and Twitter lies in the actual lengths of messages posted in Chinese versus English. Crampton (2011) explains that even with a message of the same length of 114 characters in both languages, 114 characters in Chinese can be translated into 434 characters in English, so this language efficiency turns micro-blogging in China into a more blog-like platform. One of my research purposes is to find out to what extent the independent designers utilize these social media platforms and what else platforms that I haven't mentioned here are also employed.

Chapter 4 - Framework and methodology

In this chapter I will present the theoretical framework and the methodology for the thesis. In 4.1, the theoretical framework with sub-questions (4.1.1) and expectations (4.1.2) will be given. Next, a detailed research design (4.2) is displayed. Since I combine two methods in this research, in 4.2.1 details of the interview design are presented and in 4.2.2 how I will conduct a desktop research is stated.

4.1 Theoretical framework

4.1.1 Sub questions:

In order to answer the general thesis question: *In what ways do independent fashion designers in China exploit social media to facilitate their businesses,* the theoretical framework of this thesis is concretized with several sub-questions that are developed out of all my doubts or assumptions rising from the literature review. The pertinent aspects I focus on here mainly concern the marketing, customer relationship, networking and fundraising aspects of an independent fashion label. Later on the empirical results will be re-organized and integrated to answer these sub-questions.

1) For the marketing aspect: how do independent fashion designers apply social media to the marketing of their labels?
   a   What social media platforms do they use for marketing their labels and how do they use these platforms respectively?
   b   To what extent do they rely on social media for marketing purposes and in what ways can social media increase or maximize marketing outcomes?
2) For the customer relationship aspect: how do the designers interact with customers on certain social media sites to maintain customer relationship?
   a   In what manners do designers interact with customers?
   b   Do designers read and reply to their customer feedbacks as much as possible?
   c   Do designers think their communication with customers on social media platforms is efficient and timely and which platform is the best in this respect?
   d   In which aspects especially do designers value customer opinions?
3) For the networking and fundraising aspects: how do social media change the way that independent designers associate with intermediaries and business people?
   a   What social media platforms do they use to build up networks for their labels, and to what extent do they reply on these platforms?
   b   How do they interact with intermediaries on certain social media sites?

c Is social media already a significant medium to establish or expand fashion networks that require professional communication skills?

d Does social media help designers to network with more business people or create more chances for you to attract investors?

4) For other aspects: To what other parts of the business do designers also apply social media? And how?

5) About competition: how do designers think about competition on social media sites?

a Does social media mitigate or intensify the competition, and how?

b What are the strong and weak points of utilizing social media in designers' businesses?

6) Prospect: in general, is social media a flash in the pan, or it will/has become an irreplaceable tool to carry out business?

7) What are the implications of the designer's application of social media to their businesses?

8) What suggestions can be made to improve both designers' application of social media and services of social media themselves?

4.1.2 Research expectations

Research expectations here are meant to examine, after the presentation of empirical results, how much of the real situation conforms to the preliminary assumptions as follows that are based on the theories, reports and similar cases I reviewed previously. Then we can also know what part of literature is confirmed by empirical facts and what else is original in this case, thus adding to the literature in a practical sense.

1) The most used and important social media platform of independent fashion designers will prabably be Sina Weibo, followed by Blog, QQ, Douban, Kaixin001 and Renren. Moreover, I expect Sina Weibo to be applied to the most areas of fashion business, while other sites each having one or a few specialized function(s). Through Consumer-Generated Media (CGM), eWOM and COBRAs, the marketing outcomes are assumably to be maximized.

2) The more established a label is, the more officially the designer will perform on social media platforms; whereas designers who just started their fashion labels will probably be very nice and friendly to customers. Furthermore, by virtue of social media, consumers are more likely to provide ample and timely feedbacks to the designers. Besides, I suppose that independent designers will pay the most attention to customer opinions regarding quality and services.

3) Weibo and Douban are expected to be the most useful platforms for designers to associate with fashion intermediaries, with the former site also creating chances for

designers to get acquaintance with business people. Especially for those young designers who established their labels right after graduation without working in the fashion industry first, social media has been their principal medium to build and extend fashion networks with relatively more ease.

4) Social media tools are expected to be also used as a sales channel for independent designers.

5) Social media bring about great opportunities for designers in terms of marketing, networking and so on, thus more designers can start their own labels with fewer resources. As a result, the competition is supposed to become intense. An obvious merit of social media is expected to be its inexpensiveness compared to the traditional media, while the demerit is probably a lack of monitoring mechanism that can avoid falsified, offensive or copyright infringement information.

6) Rather than a flash in the pan, social media has become an irreplaceable tool for designers to facilitate their business. But traditional media will still for a long time exert great influences and may be more organically combined with social media.

7) The basic problem implied by the interview results may be various individualistic usages of social media by designers.

8) A general suggestion that may be given by experts for designers to improve their utilization of social media is to study social media thoroughly enough especially when they can only count on social media to promote their labels.

4.2 The research design

On the whole, though there were some quantitative elements in the research results, I conducted a qualitative study that was 'richer in the meanings, concepts, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things' (Berg, 2008: 3). Moreover, I drew on existing theories concerning the application of social media in general business operation, e.g.: the honeycomb framework by Kietzmann et al. (2011), to examine the phenomenon of independent designers utilizing social media services, hence this was also a deductive study. To be exact, I adopted a mixed method of interviews and desktop research. Since the topic is about the behavior of independent fashion designers' using social media tools, interviewing the designers was a must. Due to the designers' limited capability to perceive the complicated situation on the whole, opinions from professionals, especially media and communication professionals who in the mean time possess a knowledge of business or the other way around, seemed quite helpful for understanding the relationship in general or a specific domain between social media mechanism and business strategies, and providing feasible suggestions for future moves. Therefore, a desktop research of e.g.

interviews posted in texts or videos on websites, professional blogs, e-books or library materials, was also necessary.

4.2.1 Interviews

First of all, the unit of my analysis was the fashion designer, either working as a sole trader or in a small firm owned by the designer him/herself (and their partners), with none or a few (fulltime or part-time) employees. As for the method of data collection, there are structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, which differ in the flexibility of interview questions (Bryman 2008). Here I adopted a combination of structured and unstructured interviews, by sending first the same structured questionnaire to each designer with 11 close-ended questions (e.g.: dichotomous & scaled questions) against 45 open-ended questions (e.g.: completely unstructured & sentence completion questions), and then different supplementary questions based on the respondents' answers so as to get more equal weights of information and make a more valid comparison.

I didn't do face-to-face interviews with the designers. Instead, they finished the questionnaire on a website whose link was sent by me through Sina Weibo private messaging or by email. The reason why I did interviews in this survey-like way was owing to my sampling of the interviewees. Social media by nature eliminate geographic limits for communication to a great extent; hence there was no point of focusing on and going to just one or two cities to get samples. Nor did I have enough money and energy to travel around China to meet designers. Actually, social media itself had provided a quite handy and efficient way to find and choose designers. I selected samples through Sina Weibo (the Chinese Twitter). Because, firstly, Sina Weibo is the most trendy and intensely-used social media platform nowadays in China, attracting 48.7% of all netizens (China Internet Network Information Center, 2012) and making not just the users themselves but also their networks the most visible compared to others. Secondly, Sina Weibo enables users to attach certain labels to articulate their profession, identity or interests etc. Then anyone who labels him/herself as independent fashion designer can be listed out in the search result. I got 71 results by typing the Chinese word of "independent fashion designers" in the search bar and I chose to send the questionnaire link to thirty of them whose followers numbered over 1000, which indicated a relatively high level of networking ability of ordinary people who didn't have any pre-exposure in public before entering social media platforms. The thirty designers resided all over China, most in the metropolises like Beijing or Shanghai but also some from the second-tier cities. When my first invitation didn't get any replies within a week, I invited the designer again. When there is still no response, then I didn't bother him/her any more.

The interview questions are attached as appendix at the end of the thesis. I segmented

the questions to address the following dimensions of business operation: marketing, customer relations, networking, fundraising, other possible uses, competition, except for the beginning and concluding ones. Within each dimension, I formulated the questions with a logic of what, who, where, how and why, in order to depict as detailed a picture as possible of how independent fashion designers have been utilizing social media services. For the close-ended questions, I simply counted the percentage of each chosen option. But usually the closed-ended questions were followed up by an open question concerning why choosing that option or asking for exemplification. As for open-ended questions, I found key terms from their replies, coded and categorized them (Bryman, 2008) for answering the sub questions in the part of interview report. All in all, through the interviews, I meant to sum up and analyze essential facts of the phenomenon with the guidance of theories reviewed before. Afterwards, I tried to find out what problems or prospects the results had implied.

The small number of interviewees has to some extent undermined the representativeness and generalizability of my research outcomes. Besides, the interviews were more like surveys, which were too structured to allow flexible questions to be interposed and doubts or curiosity to be cleared up right away. Moreover, the interviewees probably did not devote as much time and attention as in a face-to-face one. That was why I sent supplementary questions to the interviewees after I checked their answers and found some questions incompletely answered. Another limitation of this interview was caused by my limited access to some critical information. I could not ask any question concerning their business confidentiality like capital invested or turnovers; what's more, to protect privacy, most users on Sina Weibo did not display to anyone all of their tweets, thus the comments and communications with others, nor was there any way that I could let the designers expose those hidden parts for me. Otherwise, I could have conducted statistical tests of significance, e.g.: a Chi Square test of the relationship between the turnover and the related interaction with others on the site, which was a quantitative addition to provide testable and straightforward expression to my qualitative ideas.

4.2.2 Desktop research

Desktop research refers to the process of searching information within one's personal space, e.g.: personal computer or other devices like mobile phones (Elsweiler, Jones, Kelly & Teevan, 2010). The information can be drawn from documents, emails, or visited web pages. One uniqueness about desktop research is that the files collected can be highly multimedia, including text, image, and video, and often have important meta-data associated with them, e.g., emails having senders and recipients; documents having authors (Elsweiler et al., 2010). In addition, Library materials can also be used as sources

of content.

After I searched around, I found two experts' opinions and theories quite pertinent and applicable to my thesis question. One was Tang Xingtong, an expert of online marketing of various businesses, with more than 10 years of core experiences in social media marketing, search engine marketing, affiliate marketing, and online advertising. He has been posting blogs on his official blog site (http://blog.sina.com.cn/along5418) to address various issues of new media marketing, especially social media marketing, the hottest topic in marketing in recent years. Tang also published a book: *Megatrends of Social Media Marketing: Strategies and Methods* in 2011 to reveal how social media have changed the way of marketing and business operation, with introductions of different forms of social media and the corresponding instructions on the utilization of each form.

Another expert was Zhuang Yinli, who has worked also for years in web analytics and social media marketing research, for which he established a specialized website (http://www.piaoshi.org/) with blogs, reports, speech or interview videos. Through reading the two experts' blogs, reports, speeches, books, etc. and summarizing relevant information or points of views, I tried to draw lessons from their analyses of the general situation or other industries to pin down the relationship between social media mechanism and fashion business strategies, and also apply their advice to the improvement of both designers' application of social media and services of social media themselves. The main limitation of this desktop research was that, what I found were actually too broad or irrelevant to the sector of independent designer fashion. Therefore, I must select the findings that fitted well the situation of independent fashion labels or make reasonable adaptations according to the features of this sector.

Chapter 5 - Empirical results

Firstly, I will present the interview report (5.1), in which facts concerning aspects of marketing (5.1.1), customer relationship (5.1.2), networking and fundraising (5.1.3), other uses (5.1.4), competition (5.1.5) and prospect (5.1.6) are presented based on the order of sub questions formulated in the previous chapter. In 5.1.7, I will conclude how much the interview results have matched my expectations. Then implied problems of these facts are recognized in 5.2, after which corresponding solution-seeking advice is concluded from the desktop research and literature review.

5.1 Interview report

In the end, I received 14 responses out of 30 designers. To protect their personal information and business confidentiality, I didn't ask for their real names and I even promised not to reveal their most used social media account names. Therefore I called them in the research results with capital letters from A to N. Their basic information of no sound hint of personal identity but relevant to their fashion labels are presented as below:

Designer	Age	Gender	City	Solid Store	Online Store	Time/year	Employees
A	29	M	Beijing	Yes	Yes	3	12
B	24	M	Beijing	No	Yes	0.5	3
C	27	F	Shanghai	Yes	Yes	3	7
D	21	F	Xiamen	No	Yes	0.4	0
E	26	F	Chongqing	Yes	Yes	2	2
F	30	M	Beijing	No	Yes	1	0
G	33	M	Beijing	No	Yes	1.5	4
H	29	M	Shanghai	Yes	Yes	2	4
I	23	M	Shanghai	No	Yes	0.25	0
J	24	F	Beijing	Yes	Yes	1	2
K	24	M	Guangzhou	No	Yes	1	0
L	29	M	Xiamen	No	Yes	2	5
M	28	F	Beijing	Yes	Yes	2.6	4
N	26	F	Chengdu	No	Yes	1.3	0

Out of fourteen designers, there are eight males and six females, aged between 21 and 33. Five designers labels are based in Beijing, followed by four in Shanghai, two in Xiamen (southeast), one in Chongqing (southwest), one in Guangzhou (south) and one in Chengdu (southwest). All of them have online stores, but only six own solid stores. From the above table, we can roughly see that the more years the label has been established; the more employees (partners) there are. As told by these designers, five of them had their own labels at the beginning of their careers, mainly relying on adequate funds, easy channels to

reach customers on the Internet and '*a brave heart*' (Designer F); whereas the other 9 designers worked for fashion or related companies/organizations first and waited till the basic conditions for running a label became mature or finding some partners with the same interest but useful experiences/resources in different aspects. Next, some essential facts of designers' application of social media tools are summarized from the interview answers and presented:

5.1.1 For the marketing aspect

The main question here is how independent fashion designers apply social media to the marketing of their labels. Three sub-questions contribute to provide a complete answer.

a. What social media platforms do they use for marketing their labels and how do they use these platforms respectively?

Firstly, all of them always/ very often employ Sina Weibo in advertising campaigns (14 designers), brand building (14), information issuing (14), sales promotion (14), and online marketing research (5). They check Weibo several times per day, not just for the business but also personal relations.

> Designer D: '*Every time when I use the Internet, I surf Weibo first and refresh it every other minutes because it is updated any second.*'

Seven designers have their own Douban groups (two built by themselves and five by their fans) with their labels being the group theme. Douban is more of a platform for the designers and their fans to discuss about designs, concepts, as far as some related aesthetic topics or life experiences behind, etc. than a regular information releasing channel. Some designers (A, D) check their Douban groups every other two/three days; some (B, E, I, J) do it weekly while Designer M will log in Douban just to put on her latest designs.

> Designer M: '*I just care about feedbacks on my service. I don't want to talk too much with fans about designs. I don't cater to other's taste, otherwise I am not me.*'

A notable fact about Douban is that most of the Douban fans are not real customers.

> Designer A: '*Fans are not necessarily customers. For instance, some college student fans, they know our label through magazine or the Internet. They love it so much and they keep talking about it on Douban yet they do not have the financial means to purchase a garment now. But they are potential customers who may do it one day.*'

Seven designers (A, C, F, G, H, L, M) used to use Blog a lot to issue product information or sales promotion and display their brand images. However, after the rise of Weibo (microblog), even with RSS (King, 2003), blog is still greatly neglected or abandoned.

> Designer L: '*It's surpassed by microblog in terms of the update speed of information in such an information era.*'

Five young designers under 26 years old (B, D, E, I, N) built their first networks and customer groups on Renren for they switched directly from college students to independent designers and when they were in college, Renren was their most used social media platform. Currently Renren is still a major platform for them to introduce products or campaign activities, but as critical as before.

Designer I: '*All the relations we got from Renren were my peers.*'

Designer D: '*I feel more comfortable to use Renren than Weibo. Users are of more or less the same age and same mentality on Renren but on Weib, you can run into someone that is like from another world.*'

Designer B: '*When your business is expanded, you have to move to bigger platforms with users of more various backgrounds, e.g.: Weibo. Since almost all my Renren relations are overlapped in Weibo, undoubtedly I will focus on Weibo that contains much more relations.*'

In addition, two designers (K & N) connect their stores on Taobao (the biggest e-commerce platform in China) to Meilishuo (a newly-thriving online female fashion community where e-vendors advertise especially their most popular items and meanwhile consumers can rate and comment on these items, and if one would like to purchase something, there is a hyperlink to the item's Taobao shop). As I observed, though the products on Meilishuo are quite fashionable, there are not much emphasis on original designs or independent designers. Most of the products are simply copies of some high fashion designs, but of course with many cost-efficient adjustments. In other words, this is a platform for the mass fashion not the designer fashion; hence designers who do not position their labels as the mass fashion will not utilize Meilishuo.

b. To what extent do they rely on social media for marketing purposes and in what ways can social media increase or maximize marketing outcomes?

For all designers I interviewed (except Designer A who are more established than others), social media is critically important. From the table above, it can be seen that none of these labels exist for more than three years and almost one third of them are still working alone. Under the circumstance that traditional marketing instruments require absolutely large amount of financial and physical capitals, social media, with direct access to even more customers and relatively minimal expenditure, is unanimously acclaimed as '*the mainstay of the marketing dimension*' (Designer J).

Moreover, ten designers (A, B, C, D, E, F, I, J, K, N) regard using social media for marketing purposes one of their must-do multitasks, among whom three designers (A, H, M) learnt some marketing skills before (either from school or working practices).

Designer J: '*It is about how my label is presented to the public. It is about image. So*

I'd rather do it my self.'

Four designers (A, H, L, M) think professional marketing skills are definitely required in using social media for marketing purposes; while the others think it is more or less OK if you are not professional enough.

> Designer K: '*Since it's social media. The media is socialized, thus individualized. If you are still very standardized nowadays on the Internet, perhaps you will simply be ignored because you are boring.*'

Undoubtedly eWOM is crucial for especially those who only have online stores. It is their 'lifeline' (Designer I). Besides, designers all agree that, to utilize social media tools, the point is not how many customers you can contact by yourself, but how much you can let your customers disseminate information for you, namely, how much you can exploit the Consumer-Generated media (CGM). Furthermore, Designers C points out that by seeing who are sharing your product or brand information, a brand could reach a very precise target group. As said by Kietzmann et al. (2011), organizations can use the information harnessed on social media to help recognize their most vocal constituents, namely, the most influential consumers. From the interviews it seems that CGM depends mainly on how attractive or valuable your posts are so that consumers feel a great impetus to share them with others spontaneously.

> Designer B: '*Through posting some well-edited pictures of the products with beautiful literary illustration, the possibility of being reposted or shared by others are doubled, because some may appreciate the pictures while some others may identify with the texts. This has been especially applicable on Renren.*'

> Designer E: '*I don't' assume all the time what will be interesting for that won' be very helpful. Actually, sometimes I've been cunning by associating my posts with the most popular topics on the Internet, thus borrowing their great influence and getting twice the result with only half the effort. For example, I used the Taobao style[1] of releasing new collection on Weibo and it received more responses as expected.*'

> Designer G: '*Taking Sina Weibo for example, if you want to be surer that your Weibo followers indeed read your posts, you can @ them to make them a part of the post and they will be informed of your move by a private message. They have to check the post in order to remove the message from the unread box. But you may get your hands cramped by @ all your hundreds of followers.*'

As for COBRAs (consumer's online brand related activities), since most of the labels are

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[1] Taobao style has been quite popular on the Internet lately, known for a fakingly intimate way of product presentation by storeowners on Taobao to their customers. It typically starts and often pauses with calling customers 'dear' and describes things in a lovely manner.

quite young thus not influential enough, apart from Designer A and C, no other designers have adopted this method yet.

> Designer: '*We did a COBRA lately which ended up quite well. That was if someone retweets one of our Sina Weibo, meanwhile @ three people in this retweet, he/she will have a chance to win a wonderful gift prepared by us.*'

Last but not least, Designers A, B, F, H and J have done online marketing research before through Blog (Designer F, H) and Weibo (A, B, J). The outcomes were more or less satisfying.

> Designer B: '*It was useful. For instance, you can find out which cities or areas your customers assemble the most.*'

> Designer F: '*This way of asking for customer preferences is just quite straightforward for me.*'

5.1.2 For the customer relationship aspect

The general question for this aspect is how independent fashion designers interact with customers on certain social media sites to maintain customer relationship, which can be answered from following points:

a. In what manners do designers interact with customers?

Designers B, F, K and N interact with customers in a normal way, nor very distant nor very close. Because 'it feels decent and safe' (Designer B); whereas Designers C, D, E, L tend to communicate intimately with customers, for '*people like to be treated friendly and when you talk like friends, things can be settled more easily than otherwise*' (Designer C). Besides, Designers G, H, M prefer to behave officially towards the customers. As Designer H explained, '*when the business is growing, patterns should be formed, or rather, formalized, especially in regard to relationships with customers, for it is also a display of the brand image*'. For the rest designers (A, I, J), their manners depend on, e.g.: '*how familiar we are with certain customers*' (Designer A) or '*the way that the customer speak with you*' (Designer J).

b. Do designers read and reply to their customer feedbacks as much as possible?

While the other eleven designers say 'it depends' with their limited time, energy or human resources, Designers B, D, I usually read and reply to as many customer feedbacks as possible because they established their labels just a couple of months ago and they need sufficient feedbacks to see what improvements can be made and what customer groups they can really attract.

> Designer D: '*If you reply to customers this time, they are likely to provide feedbacks*

again next time. But if they don't get any replies, they may not even buy your stuff any more.'

Designer I: '*It's like making friends. You pay attention to others; then others pay it back to you. A few rounds later, a relationship can be built. The interaction never ends, unless you want to end the relationship.'*

c. Do designers think their communications with customers on social media platforms are efficient and timely and which platform is the best in this respect?

Five designers (A, D, E, I, K) think that their communications with customers on social media platforms are totally efficient and timely, while another 5 designers (B, C, F, J, L) think it is very efficient and timely and the rest say it's just moderate. All designers can get the most customer feedbacks from Weibo, after which Douban & Renren are also quite useful platforms to receive opinions. To my surprise, 4 designers (F, I, K, N) use QQ (the Chinese MSN) to let customers contact them directly.

Designer K: '*I tell them my QQ number just for confirming the purchase order, product delivery or after sale services. I try to be precise and brief. Long and unnecessary conversations will be avoided.'*

d. In which aspects especially do designers value customer opinions?

All designers completely value their customer opinions in the aspects of product quality and customer services. Next, except Designers G, H and M, others also attach importance to feedbacks on design. In general, the designers have more diverse answers for this question.

Designer A: '*I pay special attention to the first impression my garments give to customers, as well as the after-sale experiences they have.'*

Designer C: '*I know it's a bit narcissist, but I communicate with customers mainly to see in person how much they can understand my design and me. Then I feel a sense of achievement.'*

Designer F: '*I very much care about what they like and we will try to design something that meet their requirements or expectations. Meanwhile, I am also rather concerned with our quality, e.g.: fabric and execution, and we try to standardize this aspect the most.'*

Designer H: '*I expect to increase our brand sentiment among customers thereby.'*

Designer N: '*I take any f their sincere feedbacks serious and I try best to improve my work accordingly.'*

5.1.3 For the networking and fundraising aspects

How social media have changed the way that independent designers associate with intermediaries is the general question for the aspect of networking. For that of fundraising, some facts will be revealed in the last small question d.

a. What social media platforms do they use to build up networks for their labels, to what extent do they reply on these platforms?

The pattern of designers' utilizing social media for professional networking resembles that for the marketing aspect, but still they are slightly different. All designers stress the top importance of networking with other professionals on Weibo. Secondly, some professionals may also linger on Douban, so this is another beneficial networking site. Besides, three designers (A, C, H) apply a quite international and professional networking site: LinkedIn to their businesses.

> Designer J: '*Anyone who knows about the vast resources on Weibo will use it.*'
>
> Designer L: '*When you connect with or even just find one professional on Weibo, this professional's whole network is available to you.*' That just conforms to what Boyd and Ellison (2007) conclude: social networking sites realize not just knowing otherwise-may-not-meet strangers, but also making visible their social networks.
>
> Designer M: '*Using LinkedIn is especially for building an international network that may add some edges to our label now and also accumulate network resources for future development.*'

b. How do they interact with intermediaries on certain social media sites?

Unlike the way they interact with customers, to associate with intermediaries, most designers prefer to behave as friendly as possible and do expect to develop friendships thereafter.

> Designer K: '*Call it utilitarianism, but that's kind of imperative. Premised on personal relationships, things can be worked out faster and better in this business.*'
>
> Designer L: '*I like to make friends with the intermediaries not because they are helpful to my business but rather we share many things in common, e.g.: a passion for fashion.*'

On the other hand, a few designers (B, G, H, M) insist that a normal communication with intermediaries is enough for them, unless this intermediary is truly a suitable friend to make.

> Designer G: '*I don't want to look snobbish or get a cold shoulder, so before I think this is the person I can be friends with, I won't be very intimate.*'
>
> Designer H: '*It depends on the specific situation. Usually I communicate with both customers and professionals officially, because that's professional! But for example,*'

when everybody is joking about something, you can be that serious any more.'

c. Is social media already a significant medium to establish or expand fashion networks and do social media require professional communication skills?

All designers either completely or very much agree that social media have already been a major medium to establish or expand fashion networks, because '*in a trend-chasing industry like fashion, not using the most trendy application is considered "out" already*' (Designer K). Out of all sites, Weibo is for sure the most worthy platform for networking, since '*it has the widest range of users*' (Designer L). As for professional communication skills, only three designers (B, G, H) think they are necessary for '*being professional is being efficient*' (Designer H). Others contend that the rising of social media breaks the standardized rules and '*as long as one's meanings are correctly expressed, it doesn't really matter through what way*' (Designer J).

d. Do social media help designers to network with more business people or to create more chances for them to attract investors?

So far, eight designers (A, C, E, G, H, J, L, M) face no need to raise external funds but they also agree that social media help to network with many otherwise-may-not-meet business people. Among the rest less financially adequate designers, Designer B indeed attracted an investor on Renren and he still receives consistent funds from this investor till now.

Designer B: '*The investor was one of my clients I had on Renren at the beginning. She was about my age and she liked my style very much. As a result, she decided to invest in my business and we are more like partners now.*'

Designer I: '*Though I have much more chances to connect with those businessmen on social media sites, it still feels very strange if I just talk to them out of the blue. Timing is important, so is whether we have any common topics.*'

5.1.4 For other aspects

For what other parts of the business do designers also utilize social media?

Half of the designers use social media platforms, e.g.: Weibo and QQ, also for selling their products directly and when it comes to the step of payment, they will switch to the label's Taobao store to use the authorized payment channel. Moreover, all of them use social media to provide customer services.

Designer F: '*Social media are the perfect tool to provide timely and accurate customer services.*'

In addition, only Designer A has done crowd sourcing through Weibo for designing an anniversary limited edition T-shirt and the outcome was 'quite good'. This is probably because Designer A has his own label for the longest time, thus being appealing to more Weibo users. To date Designer A has over forty two thousand followers on Sina Weibo, which is indeed a reasonable base to rally crowd sourcing.

5.1.5 About competition

Regarding how designers think about competition on social media sites, the interview results can be integrated into the three questions below:

1) Does social media mitigates or intensifies the competition, and how?

To my surprise, all designers think that social media actually intensifies the competition. As Riz (2012) indicates, since social media provides access to all types & ranges of businesses, the competition becomes heavy and the Internet is saturated with miscellaneous verified and unverified information. Consequently the attention of users is lost within all the bombarding and suspicious news they are exposed to.

Designer A: '*Taking Weibo for example, the product information that we issued originally would be more or less plagiarized by other competitors. Some even copied and pasted our designs or pictures!*'

Designer B: '*With a combination of e-commerce and social media, the cost of establishing and publicizing a label has been greatly reduced, which subsequently lowers the access to get into this business.*'

Designer C: '*The competition is more intense with ever-increasing competitors and ever-increasing consumer expectations.*'

2) What are the strong and weak points of utilizing social media in designers' businesses?

For one thing, designers mention such strong points of social media as '*instant and direct communication*' (Designer A), '*listening more to the customers*' (Designer B), '*pretty interactive*' (Designer D, F, I), '*fast-reaching*' (Designer G), '*low cost but high efficiency*' (Designer J). Indeed, Internet marketing on the whole, according to Martin et al. (2003), is cost-efficient for the company can use it to reach a wide audience for a small fraction of traditional advertising budgets, let alone social media. Moreover, with the information highway on the Internet, 'companies can see the results of their marketing efforts quickly' (Designer H).

However, some designers are in the mean time exploiting traditional media instruments, such as magazines, newspapers, TV programs, etc. When comparing them with each other, Designer A thinks that '*traditional media are still very influential and authoritative*

while the information on social media is too fragmented and self-bragging', which thereof requires users to judge the validity and reliability of the online information, as suggested by Scott (2010) in the previous part. Besides, Designer A points out, when they present products or activities to consumers, their competitors can '*see and steal their resources, ideas, methods and strategies without taking any responsibilities'*. Moreover, the free and unlimited 'repost', 'retweet' or 'share' functions of most social media sites currently undermine as well the urgency of copyright protection, however, this issue should never be dropped since it ensures the intellectual property rights which are the basic rights rooted especially in creative industries.

5.1.6 Prospect

In general, is social media a flash in the pan, or it will/has become an irreplaceable tool to carry out business?

In total, eight designers (A, B, E, F, G, I,K, N) consider that social media has been an indispensible tool for them to carry out their fashion businesses, whereas the other six designers are more conservative and think it will be an irreplaceable business tool in the future but not now. Furthermore, designers all agree that social media is a double-edged sword which they dare not to say they've mastered well already, with the challenges rising together with opportunities.

> Designer G: '*Now in the information era, everything changes so fast. When we haven't figured out certain features or functions of a social media site, some other features, functions or social media sites have emerged and prevailed.'*
>
> Designer L: '*Though using social media seems to be inexpensive when comparing the ratio of cost to the reach of the target audience with traditional media, it actually needs you to invest much more attention to study and get used to it.'*
>
> Designer E: '*In the past you just need to tell people what you could offer and waited for the goods to be sold to see the result. Now with social media, you can soon anticipate the result and interfere in the process by actively communicating with consumers, which really requires a lot of attention and efforts.'*
>
> Designer J: '*You have to be really careful, for whatever you put out there can be spread over terribly fast.'*
>
> Designer K: '*The social media phenomenon is irresistibly growing, but I just don't know if it will go out of control.'*

5.1.7 Conclusion

First of all, as I expected, Sina Weibo is the most used social media platform of independent fashion designers. But the influence of Blog has been diminished to a great extent, because writing blogs requires people to make more efforts to create more detailed

and complete contents, thus decreasing their update frequency, whereas Weibo is updated every second by thousands of people or organizations, providing real-time information enough to get someone addicted to it. What's more, blog cannot enable people to build extensive networks, which is a crucial drawback of it compared to Weibo. Next, Sina Weibo is indeed applied to the most aspects of designer businesses, mainly as a fast lane to publicize products and to combine customers, professionals and other contacts all in one network, whereas Douban functions more as a discussion board for the label fans to express their opinions in depth. Besides, QQ is practically a handy channel to provide customer services and Renren, though originated as a platform for college students to socialize, grows together with these initial users and remains as a major site for some designers to carry out marketing activities on. To maximize marketing outcomes, designers really rely considerably on eWOM and Consumer-Generated Media, but at this period not so much on COBRAs.

As for the relationship with customers, there is not a uniform pattern. Only a few designers adopt an official way to interact with customers, while the others don't feel the absolute need to formalize communication. Moreover, although most designers did not spend much time or efforts to reply to their customers, they think they'd got sufficient and timely feedbacks. All designers indeed attach the most importance to the aspects of product quality and customer services. Other aspects that they also value are such like after-sale experiences, understanding of designs and brand sentiment etc. Anyway, in my opinion, it shouldn't be the designer's personal inclination but the label positioning that decides principally to what aspects the attention is paid.

Next, the role of Weibo in the aspect of associating with fashion intermediaries is really unshakeable, while Douban is proved to be the second suitable platform for exchanging ideas or information. Also, all designers acknowledge the great importance of social media in expanding their networks to an extent that they otherwise may not achieve, either with fashion or business professionals. The significance of social media for grass root designers (basically starting business from scratch in terms of both resources and experiences) is stressed again in this part.

The interview results justify as well that social media tools can be used as a sales outlet; and clear my doubt regarding the issue of payment, for which authorized payment channel on China's biggest e-commerce site Taobao will be resorted to. Crowd sourcing, however, is not an option for designers now but maybe in the future when the designer is influential enough to do so.

In addition, for all designers, the competition does become fierce with social media opening access for all kinds and scales of businesses. Though the market is broadened to a national level even for a sole trader, the competition is also nationwide. In that sense, the

designer really needs to be distinctive enough to stand out of the many. Also, the designers truly need to take a balancing point between the strengths of social media, such as cost efficiency or timely interactions, and its weaknesses like difficulty to protect copyrights and monitoring posted contents.

Generally speaking, though traditional media are considered still very powerful and credible, designers have regarded social media either now or in the future as an irreplaceable tool to facilitate businesses. However, the double-edginess of social media makes it even harder for designers to handle. One designer has realized that if she cannot be sure about the consequence of their postings, she'd better not put it online. With the complicated environment on the Internet and the high speed of content transmission, when designers are happy with the publicity efficiency or consumers' hot debate over the label, they may suddenly get shocked by the mutated situation that they find they already lose their grip on. A serious problem here is that many designers haven't perceived such latent crises in social media utilization, which in my eyes is because for one thing they don't know proficiently about social media; for another thing, neither have they exploited social media deeply enough to confront the crises. In the next part, specific problems and causations that are implied in the interviews are expounded and some general suggestions for designers to improve their social media utilization are proposed right after.

5.2 Implied problems and constructive advice

The above facts of the designer's application of social media to their businesses imply several problems as follows. Some problems seem to be caused by the objective conditions of designers and their labels, but in fact it is mainly a matter of visionary planning. For each problem, there will be some solution-seeking advice that I borrowed from the two experts, Tang and Zhuang, in my desktop research and other researchers introduced in the part of literature review.

Firstly, none of the designers talked about strategies; nor did they even mention the word. Instead, they used casual terms like 'I care about', 'I feel', and 'I prefer' etc., when speaking of how they conduct marketing campaigns and deal with customers or intermediaries on social media sites. Neither did most designers here think about professionalizing their core business skills, e.g. marketing and communication skills. Therefore the implication is that these designers actually equaled themselves with their labels and mixed up their own personalities with their brand images. It is true that independent fashion designers design for their own names and individualities and in such a Web 2.0 era, every individual can be a media, so one needs to stand out with creativity and personality, but to optimize limited resources for an independent designer label, strategic plans and actions on an organizational level are required. Even if you are a sole

trader temporarily, you should already be aware what role in a firm you are playing at certain moments for your label. As identified by Tang (2011), many small enterprises typically haven't realized the significance of making visionary strategies concerning each business aspect that social media are applied to, which may seem OK now but will definitely be unfavorable for the brand expansion in the future. Hence Tang (2011) advises enterprises better not to dive into the matrix of social media before they have an exact idea about what they want to achieve for the firm's long term benefits and how they will make it happen through social media tools. This advice is similar to the Congruity guideline of Kietzmann et al. (2011) that suggests a firm to develop strategies that are congruent with different social media functionalities and the goals of the firm.

Secondly, it's shown in my interview results that only a few designers read and reply to consumer feedbacks as much as possible, which indicates a lack of monitoring online word of mouth (eWOM) and a deficiency of engagement in discussions about their labels and that is the critical point from which the designers may start to see the bad 'edge' of the social media sword. Even there were a few designers who did check what consumers were talking about, they understood the situation from an individual social behavioral perspective. For instance, Designer D replied to consumers based on a reciprocity principal and Designer I did it like 'making friends' (see Page 34). None of the designers realized the seriousness of being out of the conversation, especially the one with negative consumer feedbacks. As reminded by Crampton (2011) in the previous part, understanding what consumers are saying online about their labels is more of an imperative than an alternative and a lack of engagement with consumers is more of a business risk than a lost opportunity for the independent designers. To be specific, when you don't check such feedbacks, as well as the causations and give appropriate explanations and/or take quick actions to solve the problem in time for the consumer, the best consequence is simply that the consumer is probably not going to buy your products any more and others who saw the incident may get a negative impression about your services; however, the worst result can be that one negative feedback stirs up many others in kind and since the consumers can connect easily with each other online, they may fight together against your ignorance or indifference and ultimately crush the image of you label on the Internet. In order to avoid crises and not to lose control, a firm must act as a curator of social media interactions and contents, which also involves developing strategies regarding mainly when and how to chime into the conversation (Kietsmann et al., 2011)

Next, the designers did not invest enough resources, time and attention in social media exploitation, especially their interactions with consumers. Indeed typical features mentioned above of independent fashion designers are their shortage of various resources

and split attention for multi-tasks. But in particular for those who don't have access to traditional media instruments and/or only have online stores, social media are the essential tool to which they must devote sufficiently. What's more, the marketing mode on the Internet has been transformed in such social media phenomenon from simply advertising to being combined with establishing direct relationship with consumers, as pointed out by Tang (2011). Thereby, not necessarily more capitals but definitely more time, attention and perhaps human resources should be invested to cognize (see Kietzmann et al., 2011) the firm's social media landscape so as to understand the velocity of conversations and progress of relationships that can change the firm's current or future position in the market (McCarthy et al., 2010). Besides, preceding the strategy formulation and implementation, adequate market and marketing researches are also necessary for gaining information about the firm's position in market and the changing customer behaviors. However, only one third of designers I interviewed have done marketing research before.

In addition, obviously Sina Weibo accounts for a big share of all designers' social media application and next are Renren, Douban and QQ. It is good that designers use different social media platforms that each has a distinctive combination of social media functionalities and engagement needs theorized by Kietzmann et al. (2011). Nevertheless, though designers apply these social media platforms to different aspects of their businesses, the contents they put out online are not differentiated. To be exact, when there is new information, they merely synchronize it on all their registered social media sites, which virtually is the same way as with traditional media instruments that only stresses exposure but not audience feelings. Nowadays people know better about what they want or like from the Internet, only when you customize contents or information for them, there is a great chance that they are willing to accept and share your postings with others (Zhuang, 2011a). Apart from tailor making contents for different social media platforms, a seamless integration of all social media sites is also missing in the acts of interviewed designers. According to Zhuang (2011b), the social media ecology is diversified with different (overlapping) groups of users occupying their most suitable sites. To create a synergy out of these social media sites, the designer should integrate the user, content or information flows from each site and display the summarized outcomes on the label's official website or core social media platform. For instance, the designer can adopt technologies like Plug-in or API (Application Programming Interface) to its official website to showcase the real-time movement updates of the label's most active social media accounts, or set hyperlinks of different social media sites on every product page to encourage visitors to recommend and share this product (information) on his /her chosen sites through the links, thus bringing about the effect of consumer generated media.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I try to generalize my findings with new insights in 6.1, concluding the features of Chinese independent fashion designers and their application of social media instruments, thus making an initial contribution to the vacant field of independent fashion designers study in China. What's more, I will briefly compare my results to the western situation reviewed in the literature, so as to find out what is special about China in an international scope. Afterwards, a critical reflection will be given to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of this research in 6.2. Then the thesis will be ended with suggested topics for future researches.

6.1 Concluding remarks

Similar to their international peers, Chinese independent designers mostly run their labels in micro scales, which is largely determined by their limited resources in various aspects. Because of the small scale of their businesses, the designers, especially the solo ones, perform more like vendors than entrepreneurs, which differs from their western peers. Consequently, these designers' application of social media instruments is inclined towards more individualistic than organizational behaviors, which may hinder their business expansion with more costs and more risks. However, it is hard to urge them now to take on an organizational stand and visionary strategies accordingly, for their stages of development currently are not ready for that way of thinking. So we don't have to rush them in this matter for the time being, but we do need to emphasize the importance of understanding social media environment and taking active measures to deal with it, either as an individual or an organization. Thereby, designers' staying away from the discussions about them or their labels, as indicated in my findings, is particularly risky for their businesses and they should urgently be aware of impact of eWOM that can take you off the ground but also down on the ground in a much faster manner than before. In fact, to better cognize and utilize social media features, designers should not just explore them all by him/her self. Instead, a short cut to pick up what's applicable and what's not is to learn from other companies' experiences, among which many typical ones have been analyzed and elaborated in web or paper reports or some increasingly popular lectures given by social media experts. In addition, when designers are studying social media, they should realize that the social media landscape in China is different from the western ones. The former is dominated by Weibo (microblog), whereas the latter are more stuck to Facebook. The more fragmented and frequently updated information on Weibo makes the relations and networks more precarious than those on Facebook. Hence independent designers in China should be more careful undertaking business tasks with Weibo and try

to develop more exclusive label related activities for the Weibo platform to maximize the outcome.

Till now, my answer for the thesis question stated at the beginning- *In what ways do independent fashion designers in China exploit social media to facilitate their businesses-* will be: independent fashion designers exploit social media in an individualistic manner and though they rely substantially on several social media tools at the same time, they don't combine them mechanically to create a synergy, which is a waste of the biggest merit of Internet. From the way that independent designers utilize social media generally, we can see that independent fashion design in China are still in a preliminary phase of development and with limited support from traditional resources, how fast the Chinese independent design can grow at this starting stage depends considerably on the designers' using of social media. Nevertheless, traditional ways of promoting fashion via traditional media, e.g. coverage in fashion magazines, will keep exerting great influences, for that is still regarded as the most authoritative and mainstream acknowledgement of a designer's talents. In other words, if a designer can employ double channels, namely traditional media and social media channels, to promote his/her label, the chances of an all-round success are more ensured. The best thing about social media is that, for those who don't have access to traditional media at first, social media can be a promising breakthrough, by which the designer can search for fashion intermediaries or even authorities directly to build relationships with them and gain access to those otherwise unreachable traditional media instruments. At last, my concluding suggestion for the independent fashion designers in China now is, it is no easier to resort to social media than to traditional media, actually more studies, strategies and prudence are required for utilizing social media. Just as an Old Chinese saying goes, social media can be the key to either one's success or undoing.

6.2 Reflections on my research and Suggestions for future studies

The strength of this thesis is encompassing all the main aspects to which social media can be possibly applied for independent designer labels. Moreover, realistic advice concerning how to comprehend and utilize social media in an objective point of view is proposed. However, if a detailed comparison can be made between Chinese independent designers and their western peers of a typical country, we will have a clearer reference point then.

Besides, the generalizability and insightfulness of my research results are a bit weak owing to a low response rate and the non face-to-face way of interviews. Another limitation of this research was a lack of statistical data, due to business confidentiality and personal privacy, thus no verification in a quantitative way of the behaviors of designers on social media sites. For future studies, plenty of topics can be adopted with the rapid

changes of social media and its application. For instance, studying from the consumer's side of using social media will be a solid threshold to conduct consumer relationship management via social media. Currently, how to associate various social media tools to generate synergy seems to be the most urgent issue to be debated. In addition to focusing on social media utilization, researches addressing the whole supply chain of independent fashion design are also necessary to depict the ecology of this infant sector of the fashion industry in China and draw a more comprehensive picture to be compared with the general situation in other leading countries.

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Appendix:

Interview Questions

If you have your own fashion label currently or lately, please answer my following questions:

__Basic information:__

Account name (one on your most often used Social media platform):

_____

Gender:_____   Age:_____
City:_____

1. How long have you been running your own fashion label?

2. Do you have a solid store, or just online store, or both?

3. How many people work for/with you (partners included)?

4. Did you establish your label at the beginning of your career or after working for other fashion companies first?

5. What realistic conditions allow you to start up our own labels, especially in terms of marketing, networking and fundraising conditions?

6. How do you generally think about the role of social media in facilitating the above-mentioned aspects of your business?

__Marketing and customer relationship aspect:__

7. Do you apply social media to the marketing aspect of your label?

8. How often do you do that? Please specify it.

9. Your answer for the previous question means that you rely_____ on social media for the marketing of your label?

   A. Totally;

   B. Very;

   C. Moderately;

   D. A little;

   E. Hardly.

10. What made you start to do marketing by virtue of social media?

11. What social media platforms exactly do you use? Can you give a descending order to them in regard to their importance?

12. Why do you attach different importance to each of them? (You may answer this question in terms of the information accuracy and authenticity, communication frequency, interaction instantaneity, and feedback sufficiency, etc. or you may have other points of view, which are also appreciated here.)

13. Is using social media for marketing purposes one of your own must-do multi-tasks? Why?

14. If yes, did you learn any marketing skills before, from school or working practices?

15. If not, do you have professional marketing people to do it?

16. To what extent do you think the professional marketing skills are required in using social media for marketing purposes? And why?

　　A. Totally;

　　B. Very;

　　C. Moderately;

　　D. A little;

　　E. Hardly.

17. How to develop and gear ad campaigns or sales promotion towards the right group for your products through social media? (You may elaborate on one or two social media platforms you use most often for this purpose.)

18. Your customers provide _____ feedback to your marketing campaigns?

　　　A. Abundant;

　　　B. Adequate;

　　　C. Not much;

　　　D. A little;

　　　E. Hardly

19. Your customers will give feedbacks mostly on _____(social media platforms).

20. Have you ever done any marketing research through social media? Was the outcome satisfying?

21. In what manners do you interact with customers, e.g.: intimate, official or just normal?

22. Do you read and reply to their customer feedbacks as much as possible??

23. To what extent do you value the customer's opinions?

　　A. Totally;

　　B. Very;

C. Moderately;

D. A little;

E. Hardly.

24. In which aspects especially do you value customer opinions?

25. You think your communication with customers on social media platforms is _____ timely.

A. Totally;

B. Very;

C. Moderately;

D. A little;

E. Hardly.

26. You think your communication with customers on social media platforms is _____efficient.

A. Totally;

B. Very;

C. Moderately;

D. A little;

E. Hardly.A:

27. Please name the best one.

28. Please exemplify one failure of utilizing certain social media platforms for marketing purposes owing to its nature or defect. How did you deal with the failure?

29. Are there apparent differences between traditional media and social media marketing channels? Please exemplify it.

30. Compared to other marketing medias, you think social media are_____ better/worse, and why?

A. Absolutely;

B. Much;

C. Somewhat;

D. A little;

E. Hardly.

31. What else marketing medias do you use?

32. Why do you think social media are better/worse？

33. Do you think social media will be/has been a reliable choice for the marketing of your label?

Networking and fundraising aspect:

34. Do you apply social media to networking for your label?

35. If yes, then what social media platforms exactly do you use for that? Can you give a descending order to them in regard to their importance?

36. Why do you attach different importance to each of them? (You may answer this question in terms of the information accuracy and authenticity, communication frequency, interaction instantaneity, and feedback sufficiency, etc. or you may have other points of view, which are also appreciated here.)

37. Social media has brought about _____% of resources for your fashion or business networks. Please give a prominent example.

38. Please give a prominent example.

39. To what extent does social media help you to get involved in the valuable networks that you otherwise might not do as easily?

   A. Completely;

   B. Very;

   C. Moderately;

   D. A little;

   E. Hardly.

40. You think your communication with other professionals in the social media network is _____ timely.

   A. Totally;

   B. Very;

   C. Moderately;

   D. A little;

   E. Hardly.

41. You think your communication with other professionals in the social media network is _____efficient.

   A. Totally;

   B. Very;

   C. Moderately;

   D. A little;

   E. Hardly.

42. In what manners do you prefer to behave in this network, e.g.: friendly or officially?

43. Why in this manner？

44. To what extent do you think professional communication skills are required in using social media for networking purposes? And why?

   A. Completely;

   B. Very much;

   C. Moderately;

   D. A little;

   E. Hardly.

45. According to your observation or knowledge, is social media already a significant section of fashion networks? Even if professionals met each other in real life, they would still like to interact on social media platforms? Why?

46. Please exemplify one failure of utilizing certain social media platforms for networking purposes owing to the nature or defect of social media. How did you deal with the failure?

47. Did you raise any funds through social media relations?

48. Did social media help you to network with more business people or create more chances for you to attract investors?

Concluding questions:

49. Do you check how your rivals are doing with social media?

50. Do you have a fear of missing out?

51.Thus do you get additive to social media？

52. In that sense, do you think social media intensify or mitigate the competition?

53. Do you find any double-edged-sword characteristics of using social media for your business?

54. Have you done or been interested in crowd sourcing for your design? If you do, how exactly?

55. For which other parts of your business do you also utilize social media? And how?

56. In general, do you think social media is a flash in the pan, or it will/has become an irreplaceable tool to carry out business?

57. Do you think you are managing your social media instruments well or what?