The Role of e-Commerce in the Economic Empowerment of Women in China

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Abstract
This project was motivated by the potentially powerful role that e-commerce can play in the economic empowerment of women. Specifically the project was interested in the economic empowerment of Chinese women, since deep-rooted gender discrimination against women persists in Chinese culture. 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Chinese women who own an online business. The findings suggest that while improving one's financial situation is the main motivation for women wanting to run an online business, it is the subsequent autonomy that women enjoy through having an independent income, which in turn leads to an improvement in their self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-respect, that is the primary outcome. Therefore the most important benefit that women entrepreneurs derive from their economic empowerment is not financial gain but an improvement in their self-image and their social status at home.

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1 Introduction
Advances in Internet technologies and the rise in social media have changed the digital landscape and contributed to an increase in women’s use of information technologies (IT). In comparison to the Internet, which has traditionally been regarded as a male institution and a haven of masculine culture (Wang, 2012), the majority of social media users are women; with women spending 30% more of their time online than their male counterparts do. 80% of Pinterest users for example are females. Women are also the dominant segment of the population who purchase online and drive e-commerce growth. 77% of Groupon’s customers are females for example. An increasing number of women also run businesses online. For example about 86% of Etsy and more than 40% of Taobao vendors are females. In light of this evidence this project was motivated by the potentially powerful role that e-commerce can play in the economic empowerment of women. Specifically the project was interested in the economic empowerment of Chinese women. Deep-rooted gender discriminations against women persist in Chinese culture and we wanted to know whether the economic empowerment of women via e-commerce could provide Chinese women with an improved self-image, along with greater economic flexibility and autonomy.

2 Literature
2.1 Gender discrimination in Chinese culture
In Chinese culture it is men who have traditionally played the role of provider, chief breadwinner, and head of the family. In comparison the main role of women has been limited to being a wife and daughter-in-law; along with a primary responsibility to maintain their husband’s family line (Ebrey, 2003). However marriage is important to women in Chinese culture and is often regarded as the ultimate achievement for a woman. Traditionally, a woman has also been expected to marry someone who can improve her family’s social or economic position. Once married a woman is no longer regarded as a daughter of her own parents but of her in-laws, and is expected to spend her time looking after her children and her husband’s family. In Chinese culture women are not expected to be high career achievers; and if they are successful at the workplace are expected to give up their career at some time and stay at home to bring up their children. Despite the changing social status of women in modern China some of these deep-rooted gender discriminations still influence societal expectations of how men and women should behave.

2.2 E-commerce and women’s emancipation
Family responsibilities play a crucial role in shaping women’s career development (Greenhill and Wilson, 2005). Those women who do not have access to the help and necessary means to meet the cost of child care are forced to choose between either living at home and being financially dependent on the state and their partner, or finding a part-time job that fits in with their children’s school time and their partner’s work.
To an extent the Internet and IT have changed this situation by providing women with flexibility, autonomy, and self-esteem. This is because "technologies potentially liberate workers from specific places and times" (Robey and Jin, 2004, quoted in Greenhill and Wilson, 2005). At the same time critiques of home telework argue that technical fixes will not be able to solve all of the socio-economic problems. Women still face a conflict between work and home, when family and work activities are mutually exclusive. Additionally while technologies have provided women with choices (e.g. the capacity to work from home, and flexible working hours) the cost of this flexibility is restricted career development and arguably work and family imbalance.

The rise in e-commerce and economic empowerment can potentially impact on women’s emancipation. Economic empowerment can lead to an independent income, which can in turn lead to autonomy, self-confidence, and improved self-esteem, and improved self-respect. Maier and Naier-Reichert (2007) suggest that e-commerce can potentially aid or change women’s status and self-image, by:

- Enabling individual autonomy and financial independence through having an independent
- Increasing self-confidence and self-esteem through self-fulfillment and self-development
- Reaching a market to sell their own goods
- Connecting to society and a wider network
- Balancing work and family

The low start-up costs on e-commerce platforms and their ‘plug and play’ features have also given less tech-savvy women the confidence to run their own business online. The findings of a recent online survey conducted with 4000 sellers on the Etsy platform suggests that more than 86% of sellers are females. Of these many are parents at home looking after children; and many had until Etsy never sold anything before (Etsy, 2015). According to a further study conducted by the Alibaba Group, women entrepreneurs are also as active and as successful as men in the e-commerce domain; with women entrepreneurs on Taobao even moving into markets traditionally dominated by their male counterparts e.g. furniture markets, and digital products.

3 Research Approach
This study adopted a qualitative approach and conducted twenty-one semi-structured interviews with Chinese women running their own businesses on Taobao and WeChat. These two platforms were chosen mainly because of their size and popularity. Taobao is the largest and most successful B2C and C2C platform in China. WeChat is a popular mobile messaging service that has the capability to allow users to set up shops and sell via the app. Most importantly a large proportion of independent sellers on both platforms are women.

We sent out invitations to those vendors who had had a long history of selling on either platform, and who had received good feedback ratings. Twenty-one sellers replied and agreed to participate in the study. The interview questions focused on three themes: flexibility, autonomy and self-esteem, and changes in oneself and personal life before and after setting up the business. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed in their original language i.e. Chinese. A thematic analysis was conducted on the data, with the initial coding developed in Chinese, so that any sentence-level meanings would not be lost due to the process of translated from the source to the target language i.e. from Chinese to English.

4 Findings
All interviewees perceived e-Commerce as a means of generating additional income. It was also perceived to be a quick, low cost, and low risk way to set up a business. For those young females who did not wish to hold down an office job, e-commerce was also seen as a way of escaping from a ‘boring’ office life and presented an alternative career choice. Some interviewees felt that it was running a business was challenging initially, especially when they did not have any prior experience. However they liked the idea that they had control (i.e. flexibility and choice) over their work, and what they liked and wanted to sell. Those who were married with children agreed that e-commerce had enabled them to be able to stay at home and look after their family, while at the same time have their own business.

All interviewees agreed that their outlook on life had changed as a result of their involvement in e-commerce. The findings confirmed our initial assumption that economic empowerment can lead to improved confidence and self-esteem. Economic empowerment was particularly important to those who
had given up their jobs, become a full time housewife and started a family. These women felt that they had become confident and good about themselves again. They also felt that they had more control over their lives because they were not totally financially dependent on their partner.

“I really changed a lot. In the past, I had nothing to do and I even looked down upon myself. I had no money in my pocket when I saw something I liked, and I was embarrassed to ask for money from my parents or husband. Even though I did, I felt that I was dependent on them, which made me feel extremely sad. But now, I feel extremely pleased since I can buy anything I like without hesitation.” (I 19)

“It has got nothing to do with how much money I can make from my e-business, I just don’t want to be a housewife. Having my own career makes me feel more confident and I feel that I am capable and valuable to do things well.” (I 5)

E-commerce was also described by one single female as providing a sense of purpose and fulfillment in life:

“I felt bored before I started my own business, and idled away my time everyday. The only thing that I could do then was go shopping and hang out with friends, doing nothing to kill the time. But after I started my own business, I felt that I have so much that I have to do in one day and because of that felt my life is fulfilled and positive and I am filled with positive energy.” (I 17)

5 Conclusion

E-commerce can play a powerful role in the economic empowerment of women, due to its creation of an array of opportunities that women would not otherwise have. Of these the most important benefits are an improvement in women’s self-esteem and social status at home rather than any financial gain. The technological barriers that might previously have prevented women from entering the ecommerce domain have now become less significant. Today, low cost, low risk e-commerce platforms that are easy to use are an encouragement to women to take part in ecommerce. The evidence shows that women are not simply acts as passive consumers but are also actively participating in the production and distribution of online goods and services. Without doubt e-Commerce has in many respects changed the life of those whom we interviewed. Further research will be conducted to establish whether these changes are also shared by the entrepreneurial experiences of other Chinese women.

6 References


