

**DIALOGIC PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE
THROUGH CORPORATE WEBSITES OF
MANUFACTURING CORPORATIONS IN CHINA**

BAI SHULIANG

UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

2017

**DIALOGIC PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE
THROUGH CORPORATE WEBSITES OF
MANUFACTURING CORPORATIONS IN CHINA**

by

BAI SHULIANG

**Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

January 2017

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Dr. Jamilah Hj. Ahmad. Without her patient instruction and professional guidance, the completion of this thesis would be impossible. During the writing of this thesis, my father-in-law got cancer, my wife and I spent much time looking after him. During the hard time, I had even considered quitting my PhD study. My supervisor's encouragement and support had sustained me through the depression. She spent much time reading my every draft, and gave me sufficient valuable suggestions. I shall remain forever indebted to her.

My sincere gratitude is also given to Dr Wang Chang Song, who gave me plenty of useful suggestions and encouraged me to complete this research. I also convey my sincere gratitude to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Azman Azwan Azmawati and Dr. Bahiyah Omar. Their insightful comments in my proposal presentation help me a lot to improve this thesis.

I am grateful to all the lectures and staff in the Communication School of USM, for their direct and indirect help in my studies.

Finally, my heartfelt gratitude goes to my family, for their unlimited love and understanding. Especially for my son, I did not accompany your childhood, but I will be a good father in your whole life.

TABLES OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENT.....	ii
TABLES OF CONTENTS.....	iii
LIST OF TABLES.....	vii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	viii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	ix
ABSTRAK.....	x
ABSTRACT.....	xii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	
1.1 Background.....	1
1.2 Problem Statement.....	9
1.3 Research Objectives.....	18
1.4 Research Questions.....	19
1.5 Significance of the Research.....	20
1.6 Key Terminology.....	23
1.7 Thesis Outline.....	24
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW	
2.1 Internet and Interactivity.....	27
2.2 Corporate Websites.....	30
2.2.1 Functions of Corporate Websites.....	31
2.2.2 Effectiveness of Corporate Websites.....	35
2.2.3 Public Relations Through Corporate Websites.....	39

2.3 Public Relations in China.....	46
2.3.1 The Evolution of Public Relations in China	46
2.3.2 Current Public Relations Status in China.....	49
2.3.3 Chinese Culture and Public Relations.....	52
2.4 Related Research on Corporate Websites in China.....	57
2.4.1 Importance and Effectiveness of Corporate Websites.....	57
2.4.2 Corporate Websites and Marketing.....	60
2.4.3 Corporate Websites and Public Relations.....	62
2.5 Theoretical Framework	65
2.5.1 Two-Way Symmetrical Public Relations.....	67
2.5.2 Personal Influence Theory	76
2.5.3 Relationship Management.....	83
2.5.4 Dialogic Public Relations.....	90
2.5.5 Situational Theory of Publics.....	108

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Quantitative Method: Content Analysis.....	127
3.1.1 Content Analysis.....	127
3.1.2 Sampling Process.....	129
3.1.3 Coding Scheme.....	133
3.1.4 Intercoder Reliability.....	142
3.2 Qualitative Method: In-Depth Interviews.....	143
3.2.1 In-Depth Interviews.....	143
3.2.2 Sampling Process.....	145

3.2.3 Interview Guideline.....	148
3.2.4 Analysis Process.....	149

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Content Analysis on Content and Design Features of Websites.....	151
4.1.1 Content Features.....	152
4.1.2 Design Features.....	158
4.2 In-Depth Interviews on the Perceptions and Performance of Public Relations Practitioners.....	164
4.2.1 Corporate Websites as Communication Tools.....	165
4.2.2 Corporate Websites as Public Relations Tools.....	180
4.2.3 Corporate Websites in Addressing Various Publics.....	190
4.2.4 Dialogic Characteristics of Corporate Websites.....	211

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Discussion on Characteristics of Corporate Websites in Promoting Communication and Public Relations.....	247
5.1.1 Beneficial Platform for Corporate Communication.....	247
5.1.2 Secondary Communication Tools.....	250
5.1.3 Supplementary Tools for Public Relations	252
5.1.4 Underestimated Effectiveness of Corporate Websites.....	261
5.2 Discussion on Characteristics of Corporate Websites in Addressing Various Publics.....	263
5.2.1 Targeting Various Publics.....	264

5.2.2 Varying Weights on Various Publics.....	266
5.3 Discussion on Dialogic Characteristics of Corporate Websites in Facilitating Dialogic Relationship Building.....	282
5.3.1 Different Perceptions of Dialogic Public Relations.....	283
5.3.2 Design Features to Promote Dialogic Public Relations.....	288
5.3.3 Prominent Barriers to Dialogic Public Relations.....	296
5.3.4 Gap Between Corporate Dialogic Performance and Dialogue Tenets.....	299
5.4 Discussion on Strategies for Corporate Websites in Promoting Dialogic Public Relations.....	305
5.4.1 Value.....	305
5.4.2 Commitment.....	308
5.4.3 Attraction.....	312
5.4.4 Balance.....	318
5.4.5 Strategies and Dialogue Tenets.....	321
5.5 Conclusion.....	327
5.6 Research Implications.....	330
5.7 Limitations of the Research.....	338
5.8 Suggestions for Future Research.....	340
REFERENCE.....	342

APPENDICES

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 2.1: Main orientations of corporate websites effectiveness.....	37
Table 2.2: Four Models of Public Relations.....	69
Table 3.1: Categories of content features.....	136
Table 3.2: Categories of design features.....	140
Table 3.3: List of participants.....	147
Table 3.4: Interview guideline.....	149
Table 4.1: Number of publics addressed by the contents of websites.....	152
Table 4.2: Frequency of public combinations.....	153
Table 4.3: Overall content features for various publics.....	155
Table 4.4: Overall design features to promote dialogic public relations.....	160
Table 4.5: Departments in charge of corporate websites.....	174
Table 4.6: The number of staff in charge of website contents.....	178
Table 4.7: Three modes of corporate dialogic engagement.....	231
Table 4.8: Barriers to dialogic public relations.....	234

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1.1: Top 10 internet users by countries in 2015.....	5
Figure 1.2: Number of Chinese internet users.....	6
Figure 1.3: Statistics of different types of websites in China.....	7
Figure 1.4: Main functions of Chinese corporate websites.....	8
Figure 1.5: Construction of Chinese listed companies' websites.....	11
Figure 1.6: Proportion of interactive services provided by Chinese corporate websites.....	13
Figure 1.7: Construction of corporate websites in different industries.....	17
Figure 2.1: Outline of research framework.....	66
Figure 2.2: Tenets of dialogic perspective.....	97
Figure 2.3: Dialogic principles to promote dialogic public relations on websites.....	102
Figure 2.4: The connections between the situational theory and dialogic principles.....	119
Figure 3.1: Outline of research methodology.....	126
Figure 4.1: Ranking of six publics categories.....	154
Figure 4.2: Ranking of four design features to promote dialogic public relations.....	159
Figure 5.1: The connections between strategies and dialogue tenets.....	322

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CNNIC	China Internet Network Information Center
IABC	International Association of Business Communicators
OPRs	Organization–public relationships
CSR	Corporate social responsibility
CC	Corporate citizenship
SD	Sustainable development
SIC	Standard Industrial Classification
URL	Universal Resource Locator
FAQ	Frequently asked questions
PV	Page views
CSRC	China Securities Regulatory Commission

AMALAN PERHUBUNGAN AWAM DIALOGIK MELALUI LAMAN SESAWANG BADAN KORPORAT PEMBUATAN DI CHINA

ABSTRAK

Laman sesawang korporat memainkan peranan penting di China. Kebanyakan laman sesawang korporat di China memberi perhatian kepada penyebaran maklumat korporat berbanding membina perhubungan awam. Perhubungan awam dialogik terbukti berkesan untuk membina perhubungan dalam laman sesawang. Penyelidikan ini bertujuan mengkaji amalan perhubungan awam dialogik syarikat pembuatan di China melalui laman sesawang. Terdapat empat objektif penyelidikan: (1) untuk menilai ciri-ciri laman sesawang korporat dalam mempromosikan perhubungan komunikasi dan perhubungan awam; (2) untuk menilai ciri-ciri laman sesawang korporat dalam merujuk pelbagai pihak dengan kandungan yang berkaitan; (3) untuk memeriksa ciri-ciri dialogik laman sesawang korporat dalam memudahkan pembinaan hubungan dialogik; dan (4) untuk menyediakan strategi bagi laman sesawang korporat dalam mempromosikan perhubungan awam dialogik. Penyelidikan ini menggunakan kaedah bercampur iaitu analisis kandungan dan temu bual secara mendalam. Analisis kandungan digunakan untuk memeriksa tetapan ketara dan aplikasi laman sesawang korporat. Manakala temu bual secara mendalam digunakan bagi mengenal pasti sebab yang tersirat seperti perwakilan dan persepsi dalaman. Sekitar 100 laman sesawang korporat pembuatan daripada senarai syarikat dalam *Chinese Fortune 500* dipilih secara rawak sebagai contoh bagi analisis kandungan dan temu bual dijalankan dalam kalangan 10 syarikat korporat daripada 100 contoh analisis kandungan tersebut. Penyelidikan ini telah

menghasilkan dapatan yang signifikan. Pertama, walaupun laman sesawang korporat mendapat faedah daripada syarikat komunikasi dan perhubungan awam dalam pelbagai cara, kebanyakannya masih lagi dianggap pilihan kedua dan masih menerima sumber korporat yang terhad. Laman sesawang korporat dinilai rendah oleh kebanyakan syarikat kerana kurangnya keberkesanan laman sesawang. Kedua, walaupun sebahagian besar laman sesawang korporat mensasarkan beberapa pihak awam, mereka memberi perhatian berbeza kepada pelbagai pihak awam. Asas bagi membina perhubungan awam dialogik adalah dengan menyediakan kandungan yang sesuai. Kebanyakan syarikat gagal menunjukkan sikap positif kepada pelbagai pihak awam melalui laman sesawang. Ketiga, kebanyakan syarikat gagal untuk menggunakan potensi dialogik laman sesawang korporat dengan sepenuhnya walaupun mengambil prinsip dialogik. Kebanyakan laman sesawang korporat memberi penekanan berbeza bagi prinsip dialogik yang berlainan dan menyediakan lebih banyak prasyarat bagi dialog laman sesawang berbanding penglibatan sebenar dalam pembinaan hubungan dialogik. Akhir sekali, penyelidikan ini mencadangkan empat strategi berkesan iaitu, nilai, komitmen, tarikan dan imbalan bagi mempromosikan perhubungan awam dialogik untuk laman sesawang korporat. Kesimpulannya, kajian ini menguatkan lagi teori perhubungan awam dialogik dan menyediakan pandangan berwawasan bagi syarikat korporat di China bagi menggunakan laman sesawang dengan lebih berkesan untuk membina hubungan dialogik dengan masyarakat awam.

DIALOGIC PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE THROUGH CORPORATE WEBSITES OF MANUFACTURING CORPORATIONS IN CHINA

ABSTRACT

Corporate website has played an increasingly important role in China. Most Chinese corporate websites pay more attention to disseminating corporate information than building relationships with publics. Dialogic public relations is proved to be effective for relationship building on websites. This research aims to examine the dialogic public relations practice of Chinese manufacturing corporations through their websites. There are four research objectives: (1) to examine the characteristics of corporate websites in promoting communication and public relations; (2) to examine the characteristics of corporate websites in addressing various publics with tailored contents; (3) to examine the dialogic characteristics of corporate websites in facilitating dialogic relationship building; and (4) to provide strategies for corporate websites in promoting dialogic public relations. This research adopted mixed method of content analysis and in-depth interview. Content analysis was used to examine the manifest settings and application of corporate websites, whereas in-depth interview was used to explore underlying reasons for such representation and internal perceptions. Approximately 100 manufacturing corporate websites of Chinese Fortune 500 companies were randomly selected as samples for content analysis, and interviews were conducted among 10 corporations from these 100 content analysis samples. This research has resulted in some significant findings. First, although corporate websites

could benefit corporate communication and public relations in various ways, most of them were still considered secondary tools and received limited corporate resources. The value of corporate websites was underestimated by most corporations for their lack of evaluation on websites' effectiveness. Second, although the majority of corporate websites addressed multiple publics, they paid different attention to various publics. Providing tailored contents to publics is the foundation to build dialogic relationships. Many corporations failed to show sufficient positivity to address various publics through websites. Third, most corporations failed to fully utilize the dialogic potential of corporate websites, although employing dialogic principles. Most corporate websites placed varying weights on different dialogic principles, and provided more prerequisites for webbed dialogues instead of actual engagement in dialogic relationship building. Finally, this research proposed four effective strategies, namely value, commitment, attraction, and balance, to promote dialogic public relations on corporate websites. As a result of the findings, this research enriches the dialogic public relations theory, and provides insightful views for Chinese corporations to utilize websites more effectively for dialogic relationship building with publics.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Internet is one of the greatest technological inventions of the 20th century, and has played a very important role in economic development, social construction, and people's lives. It is reported that there are about 3.5 billion internet users by 30 June, 2016 (Internet World Status, 2016), and 1.05 billion websites by June 2016 (Netcraft, 2016).

Internet was initially used for the purposes of politics and military. Its various applications became popular in the 1990s (C. Liu, Arnett, Capella, & Beatty, 1997). Corporations also benefit from the application of internet to develop business. There are two direct and obvious changes brought about by internet to corporations. Firstly, internet has reduced the transaction costs for customers, enabling publics to interact and negotiate with corporations directly. Secondly, internet-based communication has created workplaces "anytime, anywhere", increasing productivity and efficiency.

One of the most important methods for corporations to enter cyberspace is to establish and utilize their corporate websites (C. Liu et al., 1997). Different from electronic commerce, portal, and other sites, corporate websites mainly provide corporate information to publics rather than transactions and other services (Ozihel, 2011). Corporate website provides publics with a virtual presence of the corporation and its offerings (Ghose & Dou, 1998).

Through websites, corporations can build online identities and conduct business with publics. However, websites mean much more for corporations, which may benefit from utilizing their websites to sell products or provide services, build proper relationships with publics, organize supply and distribution chains, and so on.

Corporations could use their websites to achieve various corporate goals, such as the establishment of a global internet identity, enlarged market scope, promotion of corporate services, and creation of commercial opportunities (Teo & Tan, 1998). Jeremiah (1999) summarized the functions of corporate websites into four aspects: (i) Electronic commerce. It is an important and valid function of corporate websites. Transactions can occur directly between corporations and customers with low cost. (ii) Control of information. Corporate website is an important platform for corporations to disseminate positive information and respond quickly to negative information for image building. (iii) Disclosure of information. Cormier et al. (2009) identified the utilization of corporate websites to disclose corporate performance and confirmed three types information for disclosure: business information, social information, and financial information. (iv) Reduction of communication expenses. Corporate websites could help corporations save cost during the dissemination of information. Corporate website is a cheap and immediate tool for communication between corporations and customers.

It is important for corporations to utilize corporate websites effectively in competitive environment. The effectiveness and performance of corporate websites have major

influences on achieving corporate strategic goals, including those of corporate public relations.

Public relations is about relationship building. The aim of public relations is “creating, maintaining, and repairing strategic relationships” (Heath & Coombs, 2005, p. 4). Public relations can influence publics to form and maintain appropriate attitudes towards organizations and their products (Lindic, 2006). Excellent public relations activities with various publics, such as media, customers, investors, employees, can earn social understanding and acceptance.

Although the importance of internet for public relations was controversial during the early time of internet’s development (Lindic, 2006), it is impossible for practitioners to practice public relations without internet today (Newsom, Turk, & Kruckeberg, 2000). Internet possesses many advantages such as immediate communication, interactivity, and personalization, which traditional media do not have. Therefore, it can significantly improve the efficiency of public relations. Internet could provide a “low cost, direct, controllable communication channel” for organizations to build relationships with publics (Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001, p. 299). Organizations can utilize internet to demonstrate organizational competitiveness and promote relationship building with publics (Hill & White, 2000).

Scholars have tried to construct the role of webbed communication in public relations (Hong, Yang, & Rim, 2010; Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2015; A. Yang & Taylor, 2010). Numerous research have identified the effects of organizational websites in building relationships with

publics (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003). An organizational website is an excellent relationship-building platform to promote the public understanding of organizational products and services (Hyojung Park & Reber, 2008). For organizations, websites work as a controlled channel to communicate with publics; and for publics, websites offer a channel to better understand organizations.

Corporate website is more than a marketing or advertising tool. It is important and beneficial to build proper relationships with publics. To achieve that, the key for corporate websites is the interactive communication, the essence to promote relationships (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006).

Interactivity is a key element of internet technologies, which makes internet distinct from traditional media (Alfonso & Miguel, 2006). Interactivity of websites can provide a perception of social presence “through the availability of open channels allowing for two-way communication” (Dholakia, Zhao, Dholakia, Fortin, & Dholakia, 2001, p. 10). It is identified that interactivity can effectively affect relationship building (Sheila M. McAllister-Spooner, 2008). The degree of interactivity has a positive correlation with public evaluation of websites. Some interactive components like “customer support” influence the possibility of corporate websites being considered as high-quality websites (Ghose & Dou, 1998).

Through interactive communication on websites, corporations could disseminate and collect information from target publics. Without interactivity, the “internet public relations becomes

nothing more than a new monologic communication medium, or a new marketing technology” (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 325). Websites become critical for relationship building when considering the potential for carrying out interactive communication. However, numerous research have identified that plenty of organizations including corporations do not make full use of interactive feature of websites (Alfonso & Miguel, 2006; J. Huang & Yang, 2015; Jun, 2011; Sheila M. McAllister-Spooner, 2009; S.M. McAllister-Spooner & Kent, 2009; Taylor et al., 2001).

Internet in China has rapidly developed since 1994. At present, there are as many as 3.57 million websites, which widely influence the Chinese society. Moreover, as shown in figure 1.1, with approximately 674 million (until November 2015), China has become the country with the most internet users in the world. The number of Chinese internet users keeps growing at a very high speed. Figure 1.2 shows the significant growth from June 2011 to June 2015 (CNNIC, 2015a).

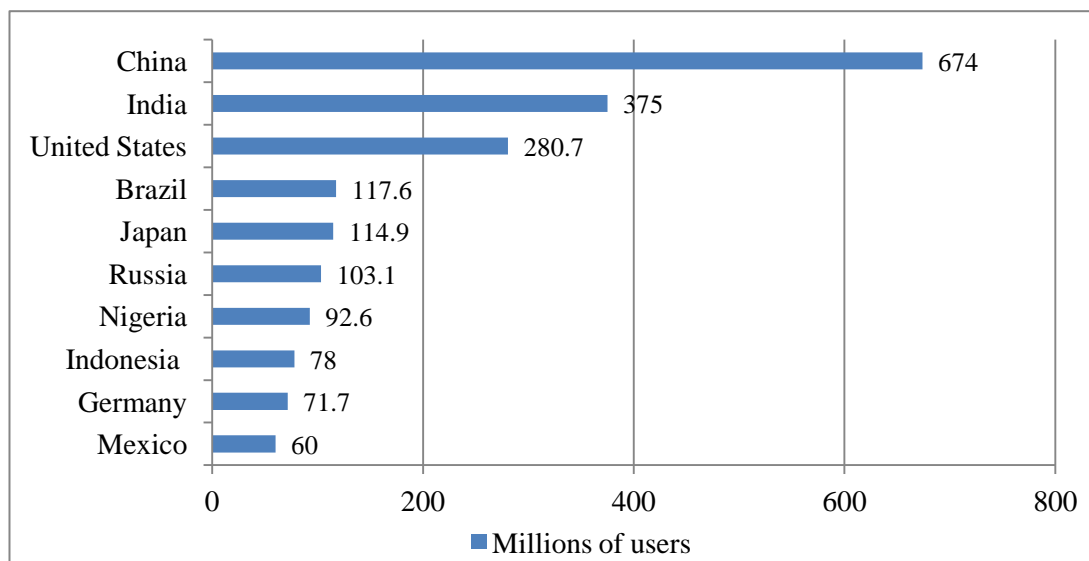


Figure 1.1: Top 10 internet users by countries in 2015 (Internet World Status, 2015)

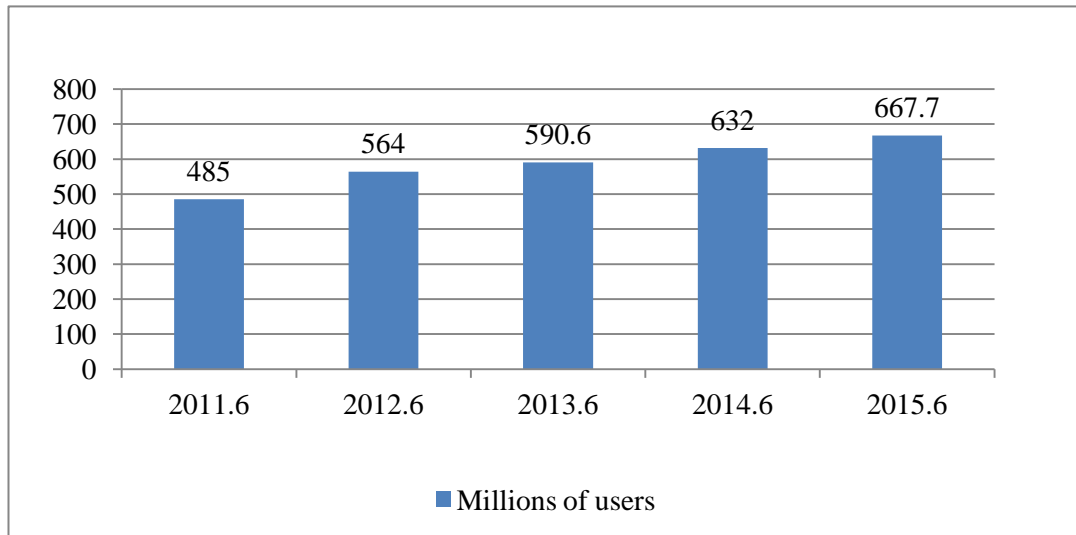


Figure 1.2: Number of Chinese internet users (CNNIC, 2015a)

Internet plays an important role in promoting Chinese economy and social development. Information technology, which includes internet and its industry, has made significant contributions to the rapid growth of the Chinese economy. In 2014, Internet economy has accounted for 7% of Chinese GDP, the percentage of which has surpassed the USA. Internet also boosts the high-speed growth of related industries and markets. Chinese online retail volume has become the largest in the world (CNNIC, 2015c). Internet performs as an important driver of Chinese national economy.

More and more Chinese corporations have built and operated their websites. Based on the last survey report of China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) about the statistics of different types of websites, the number of Chinese corporate websites has accounted for 60.4% of overall Chinese websites by 2006, as shown in figure 1.3 below (CNNIC, 2006). By the end of 2014, about 41.4% of Chinese corporations have built their own corporate websites (CNNIC, 2015b). Furthermore, many Chinese corporations have

confirmed that they will increase the investment and utilization of corporate websites in future (PR Newswire, 2012). Corporate website has played an increasingly important role in Chinese society.

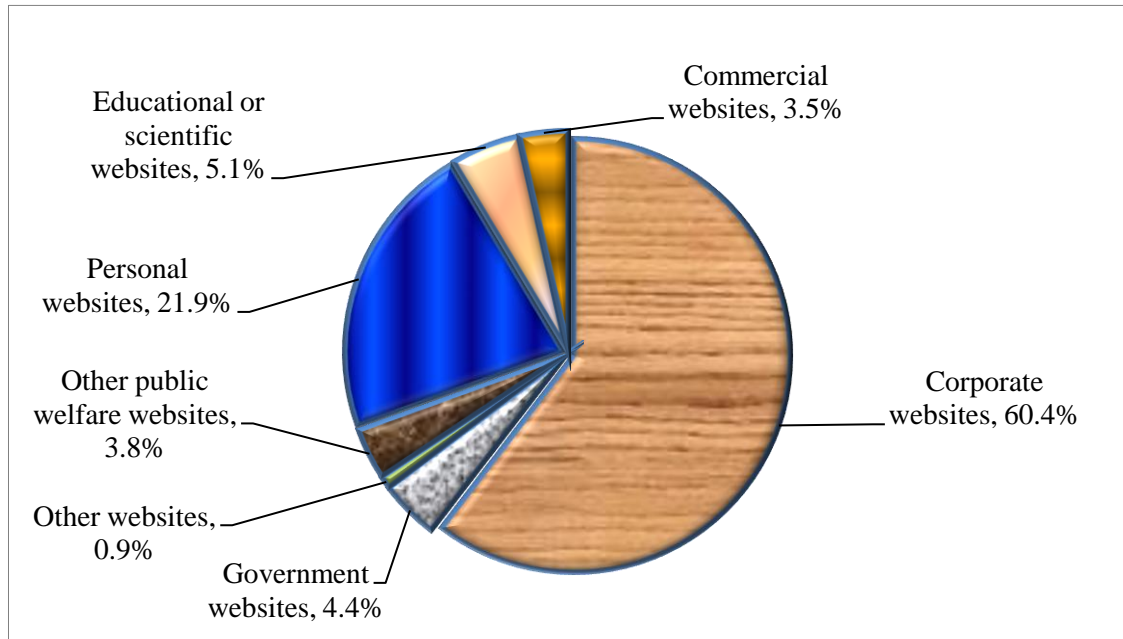


Figure 1.3: Statistics of different types of websites in China (CNNIC, 2006)

Chinese corporate websites have multiple functions such as marketing, sales, propaganda, services, and so on. Chinese corporations pay more attention to the function of marketing and brand propaganda than sales, services, and customer administration on corporate websites (CNNIC, 2011). It seems that many Chinese corporate websites focus on disseminating information and ignore the functions of interactivity and transaction. According to the investigation report of CNNIC (2015b), the main functions of Chinese corporate websites are as below:

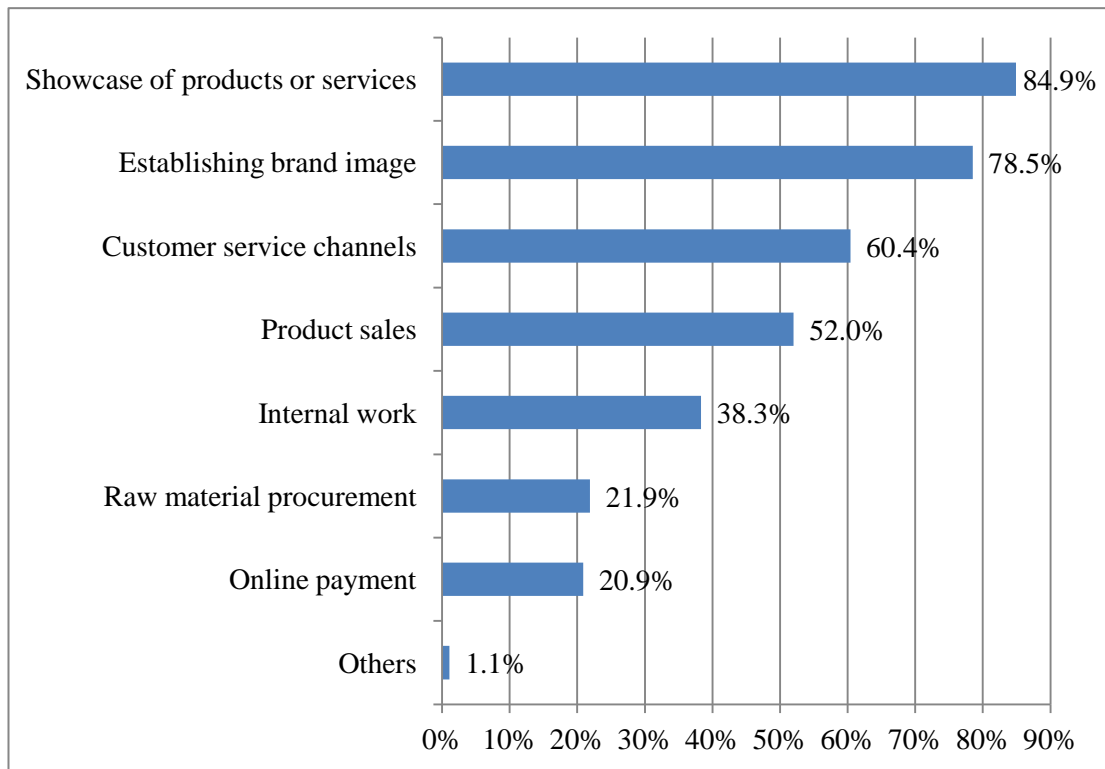


Figure 1.4: Main functions of Chinese corporate websites (CNNIC, 2015b)

Figure 1.4 shows that most Chinese corporations consider showcase of products or services as the most important function of websites. Enhancement of brand image is also a focus of corporate websites. Although 60.4% of investigated corporations pay attention to providing customer service, dissemination of information and corporate propaganda are still more significant functions for corporations to utilize websites.

Although many Chinese corporations consider their websites as important strategic tools for marketing and sales, few corporations pay attention to public relations through websites. The function of public relations through corporate websites is still secondary. Many corporations consider dissemination of corporate information as the main means for public relations through websites (Zhong, Deng, & Li, 2009).

In China, the interactive feature of corporate websites is widely considered as the main advantage from new technology (He, 2008; Sun, Li, & Zhu, 2011; X. Yang & Tian, 2006). Interactive communication through corporate websites is beneficial for corporations to react quickly according to the requirements from publics. It could attract more publics to navigate corporate websites and enhance the satisfaction of visitors (X. Yang & Tian, 2006). Interactivity can also promote direct communication between corporations and publics. Therefore, interactivity makes corporate websites play an important role in corporate public relations, even though many Chinese corporations ignore the utilization of interactive features of corporate websites.

1.2 Problem Statement

The utilization of websites to build relationships with publics has become an important focus of public relations over the past ten years (Sommerfeldt, Kent, & Taylor, 2012). In this field, one of the most significant perspectives is dialogic public relations. In 1998, Kent and Taylor confirmed dialogic public relations as an effective approach to relationship building through websites. They defined dialogic communication as “any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions” (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 325). Dialogic communication is regarded as the higher level of interactivity with more ethical, democratic and effective characteristics. Simple online interactive strategies that promote two-way exchange are not enough to build beneficial relationships. Dialogic communication with open interchange and discussion of ideas or opinions is valuable for mutual understanding and acceptance.

Using dialogic communication to build relationship is the core of dialogic public relations. Dialogic communication can make communicators pay more attention to mutual relationships than self-interest. The inclusion of dialogues in public relations is an “important step towards understanding how organizations can build relationships that serve both organizational and public interests” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 21).

Dialogic public relations has been applied in various website research (Capriotti & Kuklinski, 2012; J. Huang & Yang, 2015; S. T. Lee & Desai, 2014; Madichie & Hinson, 2014; Sommerfeldt et al., 2012). It is confirmed to be beneficial for relationship building. Bruning, Dials, and Shirka (2008) identified that dialogues through websites could positively affect respondents’ evaluations and intended behaviors towards an organization. In another research, A. Yang and Taylor (2010) found that dialogic public relations was effective to build beneficial and long-time collaborations between organizations and publics.

As mentioned in the introduction, corporate websites play an important role in China. Many Chinese corporations pay attention to building and operating websites. Although there is a lack of the changes about Chinese corporate websites’ amount, a survey report shows that the number of Chinese listed companies’ websites has grown steadily. As shown in figure 1.5, until 2014, 96.95% of Chinese listed companies have owned corporate websites (Y. Li & Li, 2014). It is obvious that corporate websites have become an important part of corporate communication in China, especially for large corporations.

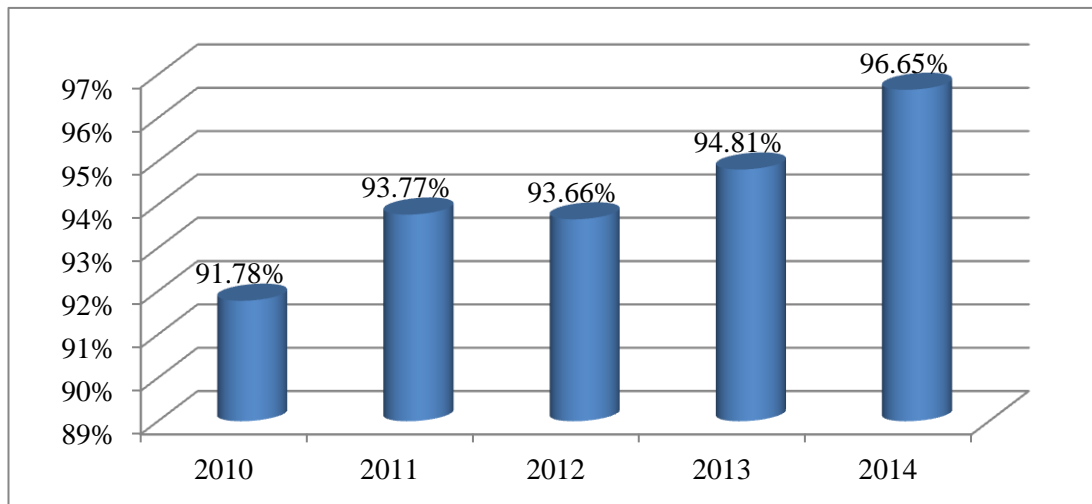


Figure 1.5: Construction of Chinese listed companies' websites (Y. Li & Li, 2014)

In contrast to the high percentage of corporate websites construction, many corporations lack synthetic and multiple utilization of corporate websites. It is believed that corporate website is an ideal platform for communication, image building, and introduction of products (Deng & Yang, 2008). However, the actual usages of corporate websites by the majority of Chinese corporations are limited to marketing and brand building rather than customer service and relationship management (CNNIC, 2015b).

It is necessary and crucial for Chinese corporations to take full advantage of websites during this digital era. According to the three orientations proposed by Soto-Acosta and Merono-Cerdan (2008) to assess websites, Chinese corporations pay more attention to informative orientation than relational orientation and transactional orientation. In addition, there is still a distance in the utilization of corporate websites between Chinese corporations and international advanced corporations. Shi (2012) compared the websites of Chinese state-owned corporations with Fortune 500 corporations and found that Fortune 500 websites

performed better in website utilization, user experience, and customerization.

Although many Chinese corporations tend to improve their websites, there is always a lack of effective guidelines for improvement. For example, some corporations emphasize customers' requirements in order to provide more customizable information (G. Chen, 2010; Shi, 2012). However, the ultimate goal seems to be dissemination of information rather than relationship management. A corporate website is more than a display platform. It is an important communication tool for relationship building.

Corporate websites have many advantages, such as immediate communication, various forms, and comprehensive participation, which can promote public relations (He, 2008; Sun et al., 2011; Zhong et al., 2009). Although there are many platforms on internet to promote corporate public relations, corporate websites are more credible than blogs, social networking, and advertising. China does not have social media with global influences such as Facebook and Twitter. It is a fact that Chinese corporations pay much attention to the fast development of local social media, which are usually influenced by strict governmental restraints and immature online public opinions. Social media are beneficial to promote corporate communication and public relations. However, as stated by Schwartzman, Smith, Spetner, and McDonald (2009), corporate websites should not be ignored. It is not outdated for corporations to utilize corporate websites for positive interactions and relationship building with publics (PR Newswire, 2012).

Interactivity of websites is beneficial to attract publics and enhance public satisfaction. However, many Chinese corporations consider the dissemination of product information and promotion messages on websites as main channels to build relationships with publics. Interactive features of websites are still secondary (Z. Chen, 2009). As a result, many corporations do not make full use of the interactive functions of corporate websites. The argument is confirmed by the figure 1.6.

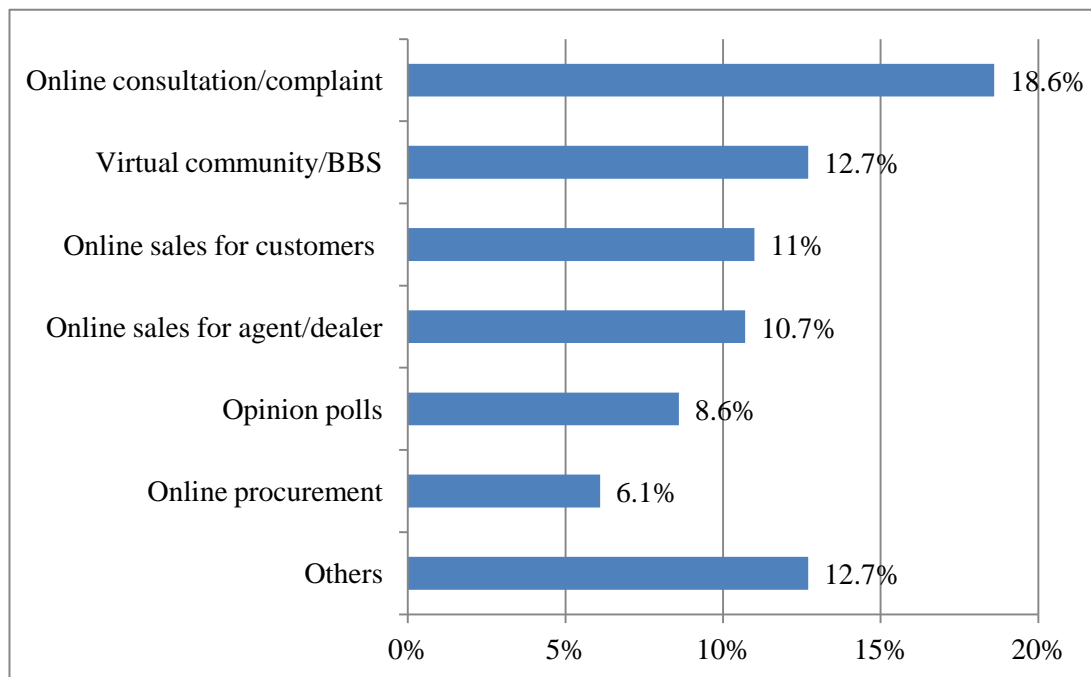


Figure 1.6: Proportion of interactive services provided by Chinese corporate websites (CNNIC, 2005)

As shown in figure 1.6, Chinese corporate websites provide limited interactive services. Few websites provide online consultation or other interactive services. Another survey report of Chinese listed companies shows that many listed companies do not reply public inquiries through the interactive channels on their websites. These interactive channels like E-mail or message board seem to be ornamental rather than valid dialogic tools (Shao & Li, 2011).

As the higher level of interactivity, dialogue is often confused with interactivity in Chinese research and practice (Yimin Zheng & Guan, 2008). The term “interactivity” includes the meaning of dialogue and always attracts more attention. Dialogic public relations remains a new issue for Chinese corporations as well as scholars. As mentioned above, most Chinese corporations utilize limited interactive functions of corporate websites. It is hard to imagine that Chinese corporations carry on valid and ample dialogues with publics through websites. Moreover, in China little evidence can be found on this issue.

Chinese corporations, which focus on dissemination of information and propaganda of image, should apply dialogic public relations to build beneficial relationships with publics. Providing useful information is merely the first step for relationship building. Dialogic public relations, which emphasizes mutual interest and exchange of opinions, is also very important. As a Chinese public relations expert said, “it's like a date. When you go on a date with a girl, you ceaselessly introduce yourself. However, if you do not give the girl a chance to talk to you, she will be unsatisfied with the appointment. If you let her be involved in the dialogue, you may get an opportunity to establish a relationship” (Z. Kang, 2011).

There is a lack of research on dialogic public relations in China. Hu (2007) regarded dialogue as “meta-reasons”, which means that dialogue is the essential requirement of public relations. Hu proposed that it was inevitable for the rise of a dialogue paradigm in public relations from a philosophical angle (Hu, 2007). However, few research can be found to explore this issue in China, particularly the current status and methods to promote dialogic

public relations through websites. There are numerous related research in western countries, but China has her own situations. It is necessary to explore this issue in China in order to provide Chinese corporate websites with a new approach to relationship building.

It should be noted that different types of industries have very different ways to utilize corporate websites for webbed dialogues. For example, the websites of banks are usually more dialogic than the websites of mining corporations. Therefore, this research selects the websites of Chinese manufacturing corporations as research objects to make the research more specific and representative.

Manufacturing is one of the most important industries in national economy. It represents the national productivity level to distinguish developing countries from developed countries. At the upstream of industrial chain, manufacturing is the strategic foundation for various industries, the development of which depends on the level and scale of manufacturing. Therefore, manufacturing is the guarantee for the sustainable development of the nation's economy and society.

Manufacturing is especially significant in China. The "Made in China" labels have become well-known worldwide. It is reported that, globally 80% of air conditioners, 90% of personal computers, 70% of mobile phones, and 63% of shoes are made in China. In 2011, China surpassed the USA and became the largest manufacturing country in the world. In 2014, manufacturing economy has accounted for about 40% of Chinese GDP and contributed to 91% of Chinese export value (Woetzel & Towson, 2014).

Although Chinese manufacturing industry is large scale, the competitiveness of manufacturing corporations remains insufficient (Guo, 2014). Low-quality and low value-added products constitute the greatest proportion of overall manufacturing products. Poor profitability, low-level technology, and weak competitiveness are major problems for many Chinese manufacturing corporations. To some extent, China as the “manufacturing plant” of the world, is essentially a low-end product and cheap commodity supplier. Chinese manufacturing corporations should improve their competitiveness in high-tech products.

China’s manufacturing industry needs to transform and upgrade its operations. In 2015, China’s State Council proposed a ten-year national plan the “Made in China 2025” for transforming and upgrading China’s manufacturing industry. In this national plan, the integration of information technology and industry, and the promotion of service-oriented manufacturing are two important focuses (China’s State Council, 2015). Chinese manufacturing corporations should promote the application of the internet to develop a new manufacturing mode, such as customized production, crowd-sourcing designs, etc. Based on the internet technology, Chinese manufacturing corporations should understand the dynamic needs of customers in order to lead the intelligent production and provide more personalized products to meet the needs of customers fully. The utilization of websites as a corporate platform will encourage manufacturing corporations to provide and improve corporate and professional social services.

Corporate websites play an important role in transforming and upgrading the Chinese manufacturing corporations, which could significantly benefit from the effective utilization of their websites. At present, more Chinese manufacturing corporations build and operate websites to advance corporate development. Compared with other industries, the percentage of corporate websites building is relatively high.

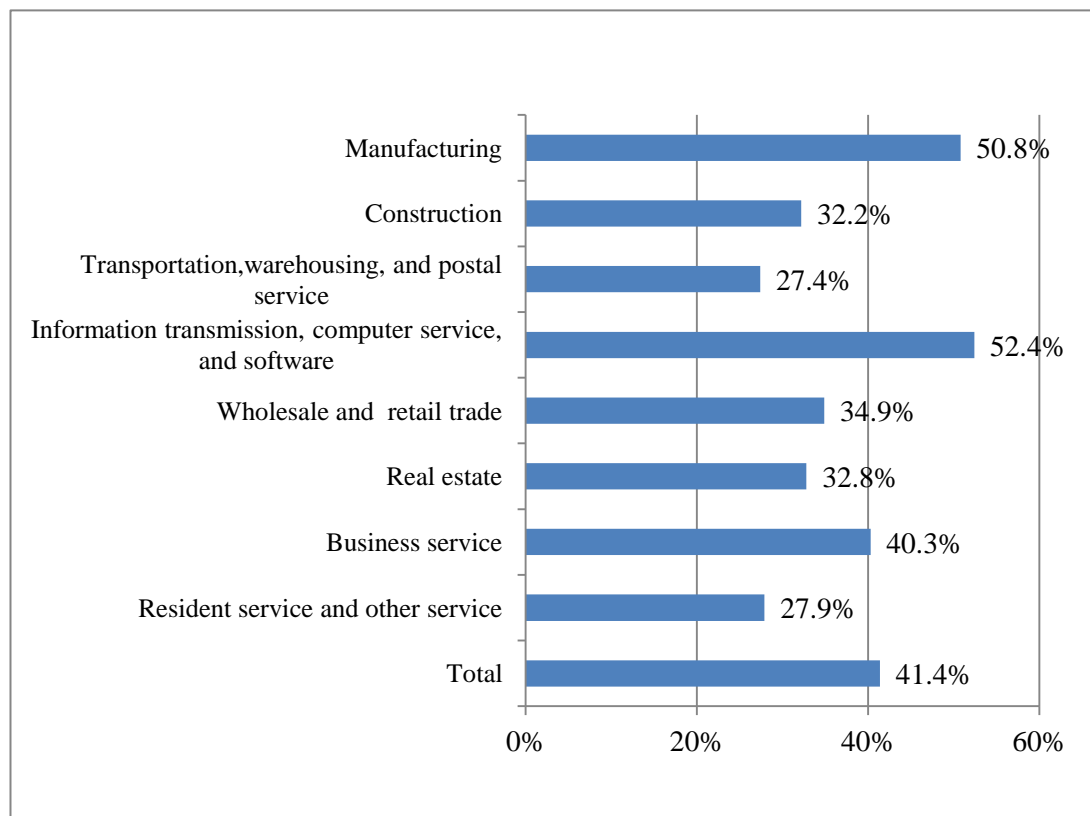


Figure 1.7: Construction of corporate websites in different industries (CNNIC, 2015b)

As shown in figure 1.7, it seems positive for Chinese manufacturing corporations to utilize corporate websites. Corporate websites have become important components of manufacturing corporate communication. However, as mentioned above, most Chinese corporations including manufacturing corporations have not utilized corporate websites effectively to build dialogic relationships with publics. Many manufacturing corporations

operate their websites more traditionally. It is significant to select manufacturing corporations as the research object to explore the characteristics of dialogic public relations through their websites. The effective utilization of corporate websites is essential for the development of Chinese manufacturing. Assuming that most corporate websites might employ insufficient dialogic public relations, the usages of corporate websites for corporate communication and public relations are also examined to extend the scope of dialogic public relations. These issues are closely connected with each other in corporate utilization of websites. As a result, this research is expected to promote corporations to utilize their websites effectively for corporate communication and dialogic relationship building.

1.3 Research Objectives

It is valuable for corporations to build beneficial dialogic relationships with publics. The main purpose of this research is to examine and analyze the dialogic public relations practice of Chinese manufacturing corporations through corporate websites. Meanwhile, the utilization of corporate websites for corporate communication and public relations is also examined to extend the scope and background of dialogic public relations. Based on the results, some effective strategies will be proposed to promote dialogic public relations through corporate websites. The main objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To examine and analyze the characteristics of Chinese manufacturing corporate websites in promoting corporate communication and public relations.

2. To examine and analyze the characteristics of Chinese manufacturing corporate websites in addressing various publics with tailored contents.
3. To examine and analyze the dialogic characteristics of Chinese manufacturing corporate websites in facilitating dialogic relationship building.
4. To provide strategies for Chinese manufacturing corporate websites in promoting dialogic public relations.

1.4 Research Questions

According to the objectives of this research, four research questions are developed and confirmed. The questions are shown in below:

RQ1. What are the overall characteristics of Chinese manufacturing corporate websites in promoting corporate communication and public relations?

RQ2. What are the overall characteristics of Chinese manufacturing corporate websites in addressing various publics with tailored contents?

RQ3. What are the overall dialogic characteristics of Chinese manufacturing corporate websites in facilitating dialogic relationship building?

RQ4. What are effective strategies for Chinese manufacturing corporate websites in promoting dialogic public relations?

The first research question is to examine the utilization of corporate websites for corporate communication and public relations. The role of corporate websites in corporate communication and public relations would be confirmed. Based on the findings from the first research question, the first research objective would be achieved. The second research question is to examine how manufacturing corporate websites address various publics with specific contents. The websites' content features for targeted publics would be summarized and analyzed to attain the second research objective. This research utilizes the third question to examine the dialogic characteristics of manufacturing corporate websites for dialogic relationship building. Websites' design features that employ dialogic principles and corporate actual performance to promote webbed dialogues would then be examined. The results would fulfill the third research objective. The last research question is to suggest some effective strategies for corporate websites to promote dialogic public relations. Based on the findings and results of the first three research questions, some useful and practical strategies would be proposed to accomplish the last research objective.

1.5 Significance of the Research

The findings of this research have significant implications for public relations research and practice.

First, this research extends the theory of dialogic public relations to Chinese corporate websites. Although there are plenty of research about dialogic public relations through organizational websites in western countries, dialogic public relations remains a new issue in

China. The research focus on corporate websites is usually marketing rather than public relations. As a result, in China there are limited dialogic public relations research, most of which discuss dialogue from a theoretic or philosophical perspective without empirical identification. It is far from corporate public relations practice. Dialogic value of corporate websites remains potential rather than actual. It is thus necessary and valuable to provide new avenues for Chinese corporations to promote public relations through websites.

On the other hand, few research in China have examined dialogic public relations with dialogic principles of Kent and Taylor (1998), which are fundamental for dialogic public relations research. It is necessary to examine dialogic public relations with popular theories. This research would examine and enrich the dialogic public relations theory, as well as related theories to provide insights for Chinese corporations to utilize websites more efficiently and effectively.

Second, this research summarizes and analyzes practical factors that influence dialogic public relations through corporate websites. There are abundant content analyses to examine the presence or absence of dialogic principles on organizational websites (Capriotti & Kuklinski, 2012; J. Huang & Yang, 2015; S. T. Lee & Desai, 2014; Madichie & Hinson, 2014). However, few research have explored the actual factors that can influence dialogic public relations. It is necessary to examine the status of dialogic public relations through websites. However, it is more important to find and summarize practical factors that influence dialogues. This research seeks to explore key factors in corporate dialogic public

relations. The crucial factors to promote or hinder dialogic public relations would then be summarized. As a result, this research would propose some useful suggestions for corporate websites to improve dialogic relationship building.

Third, this research explores public relations practitioners' perceptions to make a deeper understanding of dialogic public relations. It is a fact that many organizations fail to fully utilize websites to practice dialogic public relations. Public relations practitioners are always criticized for underutilizing the dialogic potential of websites (Sommerfeldt et al., 2012). It seems to be an important reason for the lack of webbed dialogues. In fact, there are not enough research to investigate and analyze the practitioners' perceptions about dialogic public relations. It is rather significant to explore practitioners' perceptions, which could promote the utilization of organizational websites.

From the analysis of practitioners' perceptions, the dialogic public relations theory could be further connected with public relations practices. It is also an important goal of this research. With in-depth interviews of public relations practitioners, this research would explore practitioners' actual perceptions and performance for corporate communication and dialogic public relations through websites. As a result, the real reasons for the representation of dialogic public relations would be explored and summarized. It is very meaningful to analyze dialogic relationship building from the practitioners' angle. Based on the results, dialogic public relations would be better promoted in corporate communication.

1.6 Key Terminology

1. Corporate websites: different from electronic commerce, portal, and other sites, corporate websites mainly provide corporate information to publics rather than transactions and other services (Ozihel, 2011).
2. Online interactivity: “the extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time” (Steuer, 1992, p. 84).
3. Two-way symmetry model: a public relations model which uses communication to negotiate with publics, resolve conflicts, and promote mutual understanding and respect between the organization and its publics (J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984).
4. *Guanxi*: *guanxi* is the Chinese individual network of social connections and friendship, which means “establishing connections, creating obligations and favors among interactants, and enjoying privileges through relationships” (N. Chen & Culbertson, 2009, p. 280).
5. Public relations: “the management function that identifies, establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends” (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1985, p. 4).
6. Relationship management: “the practice of public relations as an exercise in identifying mutual interests, values, and benefits between a client-organization and its publics” (Hutton, 1999, p. 208).

7. Dialogic communication: “any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions” (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 325).

8. Dialogic public relations: the utilization of two-way dialogic communication to build and maintain beneficial relationships between organizations and publics.

9. Microsite: microsite is an individual webpage or a small cluster of webpages, which supplement primary websites or offline activities (Hudson, Roth, & Madden, 2012). Microsites are always used for releasing thematic contents, which concentrate on some special topics or issues, such as organizational products and activities (Sommerfeldt et al., 2012). Microsites can have their own domain names or subdomains.

1.7 Thesis Outline

This research consists of five chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of this research. It introduces the overall background, problem statement, research objectives and questions, research significance, and some key terminologies. The second chapter reviews some important literatures related to this research. It offers a detailed review on internet and interactivity, corporate websites, public relations in China, and related research on corporate websites in China. On the basis of these literatures, five important theories (i.e., two-way symmetrical public relations, personal influence theory, relationship management theory, dialogic public relations theory, and situational theory) are further introduced and discussed in this chapter. These theories are adopted as the theoretical framework for this research and