

BRAND COMMUNICATION VIA MOBILE APPLICATION FOR NEW ENERGY  
AUTOMOBILE: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF NIO BRAND IN CHINA



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### ABSTRACT

Due to the fast growth of the new energy vehicle in global markets especially in China, this study investigated NIO brand and its social media, NIO APP using both quantitative and qualitative content analysis of brand communication via NIO APP collected over 10 consecutive months (January-October 2021). To identify genres and brand communication in terms of business-to-stakeholder (B2S) and stakeholder-to-business (S2B), 154 posts were purposefully selected from the brand's official accounts and 112 posts randomly selected from stakeholders. Data analyses yield that communication in social media is very important for NIO, and that NIO strategically communicated within the APP to increase brand awareness among consumers. Findings not only provide management implications for brand managers or marketers of automotive industry using social media to build positive engagement with their target consumers, but also academic implications in brand communication.

*Keywords: Mobile APP, Customer, Social Media, Brand Communication, Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT)*

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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter provides rationale and problem statement of the study. It expounds the research scope, objective, and significance of the research. It also sets two research questions as research directions and defines important terms.

### **1.1 Rationale and Problem Statement**

With the increasing global energy shortage, environmental pollution and driving safety challenges, the global automotive industry is developing in the direction of new energy, intelligence, connectivity, and sharing. Based on the two aspects of energy security and ecological environment, China regards the new energy automobile industry as an important emerging industry to develop. On the other hand, in the current digital era, based on the electrification reform of global auto companies and the development and technological breakthroughs of human-computer interaction (HCI) and intelligent Internet of Everything, new energy vehicles in Europe and the United States are developing rapidly. At the same time, China's domestically produced independent new energy vehicle brands It has also sprung up rapidly. In this globalized blue ocean market, China's domestically produced new energy vehicle brands have many opportunities, but they also face unprecedented challenges. In the past two decades, China has always lacked a luxury car brand of its own to compete with European, American, and Japanese vehicle brands in the luxury consumer market.

Klotz, Xu, Xie, Gerrits & Zhang (2014) released a survey report on the brand loyalty of Chinese consumers in 2014. According to the report, among the current consumers who use Chinese brands, only 17% are willing to buy existing brands again. Consumers intending to buy other Chinese brands accounted for 25%, while the proportion of consumers who choose to buy joint venture brands as high as 58%. This also means that in the future, more than 80% of independent auto brands will face a "brand loss" situation. In addition to the lack of product competitiveness, other reasons include the lack of brand communication, brand storytelling, and effective marketing strategies. New energy vehicles are different from traditional vehicles in product technology, which makes up for the technical defects of Chinese products. Table 1.1 confirms this situation by showing that sales and growth rate of new energy vehicle in China significantly increased from 2016 to 2018 but dropped drastically two years later.

Table 1.1: Comparison of Sales, Growth Rate, and Proportion of Sales between Total Vehicle and New Energy Vehicle during 2015 and 2020 in China

Year	Total Vehicle		New Energy Vehicle		New energy vehicle proportion of sales %
	Sales /10,000 units	Growth Rate (%)	Sales/10,000 units	Growth Rate (%)	
2015	2459.76	4.71	33.1	-	1.34
2016	2802.82	13.59	50.7	53.2	1.81
2017	2887.9	3.04	77.7	53.3	2.69
2018	2808.06	-2.76	125.6	61.74	4.47
2019	2576.9	-8.23	120.6	-4.0	4.68
2020	1025.7	-16.9	136.7	11.8	13.3

Source: *China Association of Automobile Manufacturers*. (2021). Retrieved from <http://www.caam.org.cn>.

According to the electric vehicle sales and testing website EV Sales Blogspot, the global electric vehicle market share list for the first three quarters of 2020 increased. Among them, the market share of pure electric vehicles is 68%, and the proportion of plug-in hybrid models is 32%. Tesla took the first place in the brand list with a huge share of 18%. The second is Volkswagen Group, the third is BYD Group, and the fourth is BMW Group. Interestingly, all had 6% of sales growth. Tesla represents the United States' new energy vehicles with the highest market share: 26% (2020); 23% (2019); 18% (2018); 13% (2017). It has a strong influence in EV market.

As Japanese brands have been using hybrid technology for a long time, they have absolute influence in the hybrid market. At the same time, traditional European vehicles are also increasing their investment in research and development of new energy vehicles (EV Sales Blog).

According to statistics, the production, and sales of new energy vehicles in China showed explosive growth in 2014, reaching 78,499 and 74,763 respectively, which were both an increase of more than three times over the previous year (Ou et al., 2017). China's new energy vehicle market has a good market space attractive to automobile manufacturers all over the world.

NIO is currently the only one global new energy vehicle company listed on the New York Stock Exchange. Its brand recognition, research and development capabilities, and management level are all ahead of other new energy vehicle brands. In addition, NIO's Internet genes belong to the same technology-based car brand as Tesla. The sales performance and reputation of NIO ES6 in the Chinese market have made capital investment companies very interested in this innovative and revolutionary company.

The uniqueness of NIO lies not only in its disruptive innovations in technology, products, and design, but also in their revolutionary attempts in marketing and communication. Traditional auto companies generally adopt the method of cooperating with dealers. The company does not participate in the dealer business, while NIO's sales channels only adopt offline experience and online purchase strategies. NIO's global experience stores are generally located in the commercial centers of developed cities, conveying the concept of luxury and fashion, and constantly attracting target customers to come to the store for experience. They use



unique sales strategies to reach customers. To a large extent, consumers' purchase and use experience have been optimized. In the case that Chinese consumers have not yet fully accepted new energy vehicles, they have continuously enriched consumers' car experience and quality of life by creating a pleasant lifestyle, so consumers are not only buying tools, but a warm "partner".

In May 2021, NIO entered the Norwegian market, and technological and commercial advancements attracted European capital to invest in China. In terms of environmental protection and urban construction, new energy vehicles have reduced their dependence on fossil fuels. China is an energy consuming country and an energy importing country. According to statistics, China imported 191 million tons of oil in 2019, and its dependence on foreign oil is as high as 72%. From the perspective of oil consumption, more than 65% of the annual new oil consumption is consumed by new cars. New energy vehicles are mainly driven by electricity, which can reduce vehicle fuel consumption and China's dependence on oil imports. The development of technology-based new energy vehicle brands also contributes to lessening carbon dioxide emissions and increasing environmental protection, reducing the construction of high-risk facilities such as gas stations in urban construction. Brand reputation fueled by effective brand communication would raise automobile users' awareness of energy conservation and environmental protection.

China was a big manufacturing country, but it has never been a big brand country. In the past few decades, by helping multinational companies to accumulate experience in production and processing, China has the ability to manufacture competitive products, but the lack of brands that can compete with multinational companies has resulted in product prices lower than product values. Products

manufactured in China are with good quality and good price, but a small number of consumers buy them. The lack of brand awareness has always been the weakness of Chinese companies. With the development of China's information technology and the internationalization of enterprises, this weakness of Chinese companies has begun to be solved. With the improvement of product power, corporate brand communication has more possibilities for China.

From the perspective of brand communication, the research studies on automobile brands were mostly based on brand history, event planning, CSR, and from the perspective of brand communication, the marketing communication research studies on automobile brands were mostly data combing and case analysis. No one has been involved in academic research on the brand communication of new energy automobile brands in the Chinese market. The few research on new energy vehicles are only comparative case studies based on the global development of big data, and technological development.

At present, scholars' research on Chinese brand communication focuses on daily Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) and Chinese cultural related products. There is lack of research on brand development and marketing strategy models in the new energy automobile market, and lack of academic research on brand communication for Chinese new energy automobile brands in the online context. There are still big gaps for exploration based on the analysis of the O2O model of Chinese new energy vehicle brand users based on theory of brand communication. Therefore, the research on brand communication of new energy vehicle brand will provide useful insights for independent new energy vehicle producers to enhance their brand communication in local and/or foreign markets. At the same time, it has

reference value for the brand communication development for Chinese enterprises.

## **1.2 Scope of the Study**

The main research content of this research is to focus on the current development status of NIO new energy vehicles in the Chinese market by analyzing its brand communication to provide insights for creative communication management to establish effective communication with users, break the traditional auto dealership model and relay on new sales model to improve brand awareness. This study is limited to the brand communication of NIO via mobile application in the Chinese market. The case study included posts collected on 10 consecutive months, from January to October 2021 in order to answer research questions based on three different categories of brand communication. This study involves quantitatively analyzing 154 official posts with more than 20,000 unique page views or more than 300 likes, and 112 posts that stakeholder talk with brand via NIO App.

Using a quantitative content analysis as a research method, which allows the researcher to get a better understanding of brand communication on social media and of its relevance for companies and society. this study intends to quantitatively examine what NIO manufacturer communicates his/her brand to target consumers in China via mobile application in terms of business to stakeholder (B2S), and stakeholder to business (S2B).

### **1.3 Objectives of Study**

Based on the scope of the study, this study aims to achieve the following two research objectives:

1.3.1 To examine brand communication of NIO EV in terms of business-to-stakeholder (B2S) via NIO mobile app

1.3.2 To examine brand communication of NIO EV in terms of stakeholder to business (S2B) via NIO mobile app

### **1.4 Research Questions**

This study proposes to find the answer for the following two research questions.

RQ#1: What is the brand communication of NIO EV in terms of business-to-stakeholder (B2S) via NIO mobile app?

RQ#2: What is the brand communication of NIO EV in terms of stakeholder to business (S2B) via NIO mobile app?

### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

This study provides significant benefits to several groups. As for business sector, the two major EV brands in China and the United States (NIO and Tesla) are different from traditional car brands which mostly used IMC (Integrated Marketing Communication) and AISAS model (Attention, Interest, Desire, Memory, Action) to increase brand awareness and reach potential users. This research uses the Internet era as the context to study NIO's brand communication via one of its social media. In particular, it systematically analyzes content of brand communication of NIO via

its mobile app, based on Larson and Watson's model (2011). Findings of this study would benefit the new energy automobile industry by revealing whether brand communication executed by the automobile corporation in China has done well in terms of communicating with their stakeholders. If weaknesses were found, they would be able to resolve those weaknesses and increase effectiveness of their brand communication.

As for governmental sector, findings of this study would allow relevant offices to understand how well new businesses like new energy automobile producers have implemented their brand communication to promote their products. Their success of brand communication would lead to growth of Chinese brands, which in turn, results in the improvement of China's innovation capabilities, promotion of domestic technological development, reducing dependence on foreign technology, increasing employment, and raising taxes.

As for consumers, findings related to two-way communication between the brand and the audience would not only allow the brands to more effectively understand their target consumers' needs and/or pain points but would also allow consumers to get prompt feedback and solutions from the brands in time, which will improve their consumers' experiences.

As for communication scholars, brand communication has always been a popular content of communication research, and related theories about brand communication have been greatly developed in recent years. As far as auto companies are concerned, there are a small number of studies on brand communication, especially those based on Chinese automobile brands. Those studies involved an analysis from a marketing or advertising perspective, which mainly

focused on one-way communication from brands as sender to consumers as receiver. However, this study examined two-way brand communication via social media in three different genres -- B2S, S2B. Findings of this study would provide communication scholars a better understanding on how these three genres were implemented by a Chinese automobile brand, which can inspire other communication scholars for future study related to relative effectiveness of each genre.

## **1.6 Definition of Terms**

This section provides operational definition for the following terms:

### **1.6.1 Brand Communication**

Brand communication refers to the realization of brand value by means of advertising and public relations to deliver the brand image to the target audience through online and offline. The main communication channels include:

1) Traditional media such as TV, newspapers, outdoor advertising, etc. 2) New media such as the Internet, blogs, videos, etc.

### **1.6.2 Brand Communication via NIO Mobile Application**

This term refers to communication of a particular brand via mobile application. This study examined three genres of brand communication via NIO mobile application: 1) Business to stakeholder (B2S). 2) Stakeholder to business (S2B).

#### **1.6.2.1 Business to stakeholder (B2S)**

This term is defined as a communication that is sent from business owner to their relevant stakeholders via various types of online media including product information on corporate's website, advertising (i.e., official application

advertisements, search engine advertisements, and online video advertisements), and public relations (i.e., news release, brand communities, and corporate social responsibility activities).

#### 1.6.2.2 Stakeholder to Business (S2B)

This term is defined as a communication that is sent from stakeholders to business owner via various types of online media. It includes consumers' complaints, comments, and/ or compliments sent via online platforms.

#### 1.6.3 New Energy Automobile

New energy vehicle refers to the use of new power systems, completely or mainly relying on new energy-driven vehicles, including Battery Electric Vehicle (BEV), Hybrid Electric Vehicle (HEV), Plug-in Hybrid Electric Vehicle (PHEV), Range Extended Eclectic Vehicle (REEV), Fuel Cell Electric Vehicle (FCV). In a narrow sense electric vehicles include BEVs and PHEVs that use electrical energy to directly charge batteries.

Table 1.2: New Energy Vehicle Classification by Power System

Power System	Abbreviation	Automobile Brands
Battery Electric Vehicle	BEV	NIO, Tesla, Mercedes-EQ, Audi e-tron
Hybrid Electric Vehicle	HEV	Toyota Prius

(Continued)

Table 1.2 (Continued): New Energy Vehicle Classification by Power System

Power System	Abbreviation	Automobile Brands
Plug-in Hybrid Electric Vehicle	PHEV	BMW 5 PHEV, Porsche Cayenne Hybrid, BYD
Range Extended Eclectic Vehicle	REEV	BMW i3, BMW i8, Li ONE
Fuel Cell Electric Vehicle	FCV	Toyota Mirai

Source: *China Association of Automobile Manufacturers*. (2021). Retrieved from  
<http://www.caam.org.cn>

#### 1.6.4 NIO Brand

NIO is a global smart EV brand established in November 2014. Currently brand has four models on sale and one pre-sale model (see Appendix A for full transcripts). NIO is committed to creating a pleasant lifestyle for users by providing high-performance smart EV and the ultimate user experience. At the beginning of establishment, it was defined as a global technology company, targeting the global market. In terms of research and development, NIO also uses the world industry resources excellently. In addition to establishing its headquarters in Shanghai, they also established multiple R&D centers in international cities such as London, Munich, and San Jose. On September 12, 2018, NIO was listed on the New York Stock Exchange, becoming the first Chinese auto company to be listed on the NASDAQ. In June 2021, NIO officially entered the Norwegian market and entered the



globalization strategy.

#### 1.6.5 NIO Mobile Application

NIO mobile APP is a comprehensive APP developed by NIO that integrates users with social, media, service, and shopping mall. NIO EV customization and payment are all done on the mobile application. Using the mobile Internet, NIO car owners can complete various car-derived information acquisitions on the APP, such as purchasing services, posting exchanges, making appointments to participate in activities, repairs, and maintenance, etc. Non-NIO car owners can also participate in it by browsing, participating in discussions and other behaviors to obtain product recognition and value recognition. As of October 23, 2020, NIO App has 1.2 million registered users, and it is still growing. In February 2021, the daily active users of the NIO App stabilize at 200,000 persons, and different from other car company apps, nearly half of the active users are not NIO car owners, co-users, and deposit car owners, but fans who have not bought a car at all.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter reviews literature on brand communication, brand communication via mobile app, new energy vehicle market communication, external corporate communication, and social media. It also reviews relevant theories and presents the conceptual framework of this study.



#### **2.1 Related Literature Review and Previous Study**

##### **2.1.1 Brand Communication**

Brand concept has existed for a long time, but the history of researching brand as an important content of marketing theory is not long. The definition of brand was first defined from the perspective of brand function. Brand is the symbol and mark of product identification. Maurya & Mishra (2012) defines a brand: a brand is a name, term mark, symbol or design, or a combination of them, the purpose of which is to determine the products or services of a seller or a group of sellers and compare them with competitors' products or services as differentiated. Paul Stobart proposed: "Brands are used to distinguish products from different producers (Stobart, 2016). Ogilvy (1955) gave a more scientific definition of "brand": "A brand is a kind of a complex symbol, it is the intangible sum of product attributes, name, packaging, price, historical reputation, and advertising methods. Brands are also defined by consumers' impressions of their use and their own experience."

The research of brand communication theory mainly focuses on the fields of brand communication and media, brand communication effect research, brand

communication strategy and model.

Brand communication and media discuss the relationship between brand communication and media, mutual influence, future trends, etc. Yu and Shu define brand communication as advertising, public relations, news reports, interpersonal communication, product or service sales and other communication methods to increase brand awareness and customer loyalty. Brand communication is not only to enhance brand awareness and establish a good brand image, but also to maintain emotional contact with consumers to build brand loyalty and influence. (Yu & Shu, 2002). According to Xianhong (2002, pp. 45-48), in brand communication, consumers must be emphasized, and efforts should be made to strengthen the relationship between the brand and consumers.

Research on brand communication effects mostly uses empirical research, focusing on establishing an evaluation system, influencing mechanism, and influencing factor analysis. Shengli (2003) proposed that the integrated effect of consumer product brand communication consists of three factors: consumer product image, consumer communication, and media effectiveness. Liu (2011) believes that the effect of brand communication is relative to the audience or consumers, and it is based on the effect research theory in the field of communication. This theory is a communication mode centered on customer groups, which is widely used in various processes in the process of brand communication. Mao et al. (2020) proposed a conceptual model that combines traffic theory, brand image, brand communication, brand identity and brand personality to investigate purchase intentions.

In brand communication strategies and models, Lynch & De Chernatony (2007) believes a successful B2B brand communication requires sales strategies that

incorporate brand values appealing to the emotional and the rational concerns of organizational buyers. Jiandong (2001), based on the theory of consumer behavior, divides the consumer's purchase process into two types: high participation and low participation. The Internet advertising brand communication strategies for these two purchase processes are studied separately. Gang (2012) proposed the concept of Creative Communication Management (CCM).

The touchpoints between brands and stakeholders condenses the most interesting content and topics that are most likely to cause discussion and attention. Once invested in the digital living space, it will quickly arouse attention and stimulate the sharing and participation of the resident (Gang, 2012, p. 124). Schultz (2015) in "Building the Consumer-Brand Relationships" focuses on the four elements: brand, target audience, communication and content. It is proposed that technology brings more choices, opportunities and resources to users. Users can give feedback, ask questions, make requests, and even challenge marketers' promises. As a result, the media form has become more and more interactive, and push communication is challenged by pull communication. (Shen & Guo 2012, p. 234). Jiaojiao (2018) proposed to study the brand communication strategy of China Volkswagen Joint Venture from the perspective of brand equity. It expands a whole new field of vision for brand communication.

Television is a conventional marketing communication platform. Its coverage is greater than that of digital networks. It is, however, only a one-way communication route. Although, with the advent of digital marketing, marketers no longer as focused on television as they once were, the efficacy of television advertising remains high (Bruhn, Schoenmueller & Schäfer, 2012).

The research of Chang & Thorson (2004, pp. 75-84) found that playing video advertisements on TV and online platforms at the same time can make audiences generate more positive images about products and brands. By comparing online and offline integrated marketing communications, it was found that compared with the combination of online video advertising, store experience and brand community, the combination of TV advertising, store experience and brand community has a wider audience coverage and a higher brand exposure rate. Traditional media can quickly and effectively enhance brand image (Qiang, 2004).

The digital marketing channel is a new digital media channel that allows businesses to create an integrated communications process that allows them to collect input from customers and develop stronger relationships with them. The digital marketing channel facilitates two-way contacts. There are numerous platforms available, including websites, social media, and social networking sites. Social media has become a vital aspect of marketing communication and brand building (Bruhn et al., 2012).

Despite the growing popularity of social media as a platform for communication, little research explores the use of communication within these platforms from both the brand and consumer perspective (Dolan & Goodman, 2017). The aim of Arya, Sethi & Verma (2018) is to understand the relationship of consumers' engagement on social networking sites (SNSs) and their brand attachment behavior in the presence of a mediator, brand communication. (Bowden & Mirzaei, 2021) aim to examine how consumer engagement with branded content is created through consumer-initiated online brand communities (OBCs) and brand-initiated digital content marketing (DCM) communications. Lindic (2006) states that some

marketing methods, such as Internet based media, have the potential to reduce costs and at the same time increase the efficiency of marketing. Harrison, Waite & Hunter (2006) supported this hypothesis and suggested that the Internet should be understood as a channel for information sharing so that all stakeholders can communicate.

### 2.1.2 Brand communication via Mobile Application

Past research on brand communication via mobile APP. Chen proposed a new corporate revolution is taking place in the current Internet era, and companies need to strengthen their creative communication capabilities in a new communication environment to enhance corporate brand value (Gang, 2008). Bernoff & Li (2008) stated that marketing is not limited to the promotion of products and services themselves, but it also includes the promotion of brands and feelings about products and services. In car sales, it was proposed that brand communication in the automobile industry should combine the quality of the car itself with related services for marketing communication, and only in this way can the brand communication strength be better increased (Howell & Hsu, 2002).

Tom DunCan believes that a comprehensive, systematic, and long-lasting integrated marketing communication method should be adopted to automobile business to establish a good automobile brand image and enhance brand influence (Duncan & Caywood, 1996).

Yuanqing (2007) study "Analysis of Automobile Brand Communication Channels" analyzes the brand communication strategies of automobile brands in commercial practices such as automobile advertising, auto shows, motor sports, public welfare, and sponsorship activities. It was found that advertising, auto show, sponsorship. Multiple communication channels for car brands such as public welfare

will create car brands with different personalities. Chinese self-owned brands should abandon low-end price wars and choose the appropriate brand spreading path according to consumers' preferences.

The past studies researched about motivation for users to download and use the app. Yong, Hongshen & Shengxiang (2020) proved APP technology can well meet the needs of both parties. The advantages of APP technology in customer relationship management are obvious. It directly acts on the user terminal, and it has a very strong role in communication, interactivity, portability, user growth, and technology integration. Compared with other media, mobile application users have higher active participation. Users generally download and use the software voluntarily. Therefore, information transfer is very convenient. At the same time, users voluntarily accept the use of information, which cannot be done by other media (Yeqiao, 2017).

Wenxing (2014) concluded by studying the new ways of corporate brand communication on smart phones that smart phone apps have not only changed the current advertising industry pattern, but also have provided companies with an effective advertising platform, bringing them to the company and the advertising industry a great opportunity in terms of brand communication.

### 2.1.3 Previous Studies on New Energy Vehicle

According to the product life cycle theory, the automotive market in emerging countries is still in an introduction stage, and still has a lot of areas for development, this process may take decades to enter the mature development stage (Tomiyaama & Shioji, 2011)

Florenthal & Grossman (2009) conducted a study on the obstacles to the use of hybrid vehicles in a specific group generation Y and found that the environmental

advantages of new energy vehicles did not attract consumers enough, and consumers still had concerns about the performance of hybrid vehicles.

Vilceanu and colleagues studied the brand communication and audience engagement indicators of automakers selling electric vehicles in the United States. They found that compared with brands that promote environmental protection, audience participation is higher for brands that integrate electric vehicles into a stakeholder lifestyle (Vilceanu, Bertelson & Davis, 2020).

Liang (2015) pointed out that the new energy vehicle marketing and promotion strategy adopts three aspects: 1) innovating the concept of dissemination system of new energy vehicles, 2) broadening the channels for brand promotion of new energy vehicles, and 3) enriching the ways of brand promotion of new energy vehicles.

#### 2.1.4 Previous Studies on NIO and NIO mobile App

Shan (2020) found NIO link users through APP and experience store. The self-built content ecosystem in the APP is not only a medium for disseminating content to users, but also a platform for online interaction with users. Consumers can also order models through the APP, and they can choose the customization of the models.

Through statistics, it was found that nearly 700,000 people have registered for the NIO APP and there are 200,000 daily active users. The NIO APP conforms to the needs of Chinese people. Based on functions such as publicity, communication, and problem solving, it also establishes a product ecosystem, optimizes, and enriches the marketing system, which also allows NIO to form an integrated online (NIO APP) to offline structure (NIO House Community) (Li, 2019).



Yong et al. (2020) used CRM model (Customer Relationship Management) to analyze NIO user services. The emergence of NIO APP broke the original traditional customer relationship management methods by putting NIO users in a good social environment and enhancing the user's experience before or after purchase. This new social information sharing model created by NIO will undoubtedly increase the stickiness of the user's relationship with NIO, which is more conducive to NIO's customer relationship management.

It was revealed that the Internet car brand must integrate scattered dissemination information. Compared with the surveys and telephone interviews conducted by traditional car companies, the construction of this data center platform has greatly improved the efficiency of corporate communication, and at the same time, relied on the Internet platform to closely link users and companies across the country (Peng, 2020)

By evaluating social media strategy based on the model of Larson & Watson (2011), public social media is a black box for unstructured information and stakeholder interaction for most companies (Rui, 2012). With the increasing influence of social media on corporate brand communication, customers (and other stakeholders) will collect relevant information about companies (brands) and products through the Internet. On the contrary, the company is interested in collecting information provided by customers and other stakeholders in order to make better brand communication for their products.

## 2.2 Related Theories

This study involves two important theories. The first one is the IMC Theory and the second one is the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT). Review of both theories was provided as followings.

### 2.2.1 IMC Theory

The theory of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) was put forward by Professor Schultz (1992). It refers to the process of integrating all communication activities related to marketing. IMC integrates advertising, promotion, public relations, sales, packaging, news media and other communication activities that are covered within the scope of marketing activities. On the other hand, it enables enterprises to convey unified communication information to customers. Through the communication between enterprises and customers, according to different communication tools, we formulate communication strategies to meet the needs of customers, and at the same time achieve low-cost promotion and publicity. Duncan believes that effective IMC requires special relationships through two-way symmetrical communication and diverse audiences (Duncan & Caywood, 1996). Ke, Li & Mingyang (2008) concluded that integrated marketing communication needs to pay attention to the establishment and updating of consumer databases and pay attention to the management of contact with stakeholders, especially consumers. Brian believes that the integration of stakeholders should be included, and the stakeholders here include not only consumers but also governments, middlemen and so on (Smith, 2010, pp. 47-57).

On NIO APP, integrated marketing communication is reflected in the integration of NIO APP's internal resources of the brand, including the integration of

corporate brand communication, executive accounts, employee accounts, car owner volunteer accounts, media reprints, etc. The communication content includes text, pictures, videos, audios, etc. NIO Meet the needs of stakeholders through business-to-stakeholder communication (B2S). NIO AOO enables businesses to communicate unified communications to stakeholders.

### 2.2.2 Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT)

The earliest research on the theory of "uses and gratification" can be traced back to around the 1940s, when the printing media had matured (Castells, 2016). American sociologist E. Katz (1974) summarized the audience's media contact behavior as a "social factor + psychological → factor media expectation → media contact → gratifications" or a chain process. He believes that mass media is a tool for individuals to establish relationships with others, and he sorted out 35 personal needs for contact with mass media, and divided them into five categories: cognitive needs, emotional needs, personal integration needs, social integration needs, need to relieve stress (Liu, 2011). McQuail & Windahl (2015), through the study of audience's motivation to watch TV, summarized the media's ability to meet the audience's needs into the following four categories: 1) diversion (evasion or emotional release), 2) personal relations (TV can replace social communication, Provide personal companionship, and can be used to communicate with others), 3) personal identity (use the characters and events on TV as references, explore reality, and strengthen existing values), 4) surveillance (obtain information and news) (Lowery & De Fleur, 1983). Di (2016) analyzed the behavior of college students' WeChat likes based on McQuail's media use demand theory. Likes can not only maintain the normal relationship between people, but also make the information of both parties resonate.

In addition, the act of liking is also regarded as a form of entertainment and entertainment, which provides a way of testing for the construction of an integrated environment.

Overall, the theory of use and gratifications is a theory on the effects and use of mass media in the field of communication. It is relationship between the media and the audience, and it is different from the traditional communication research from the perspective of the communicator. U & G theory believes that the audience is active and individuals with specific needs. Their media contact activities are based on certain specific needs and motives, and the purpose of contacting the media is to "gratificate" these needs and motives.

As a platform for NIO's information sharing and dissemination, NIO APP provides stakeholders with functional experiences such as log, product purchase and use, instant messaging, and community, and meets the needs of stakeholders for information acquisition, social interaction, and stress relief.

1) Acquisition and release of information. The fragmentation, immediacy, and convenience of the NIO APP enable the account to publish its own content anytime and anywhere, and to obtain information from other users in real time, because the NIO APP brings the existing customers and potential customers of the NIO brand closer.

2) The need for social interaction. NIO APP provides users with a new and convenient brand community platform. Users can learn about the topics they are interested in at the first time, and feedback information to the company through likes or comments. The brand officer responds in a timely manner and strengthens the emotional communication between B2S and S2B.

3) The need to relieve stress. Smart electric vehicles are a new product category, and car owners will face a variety of new questions, including concerns about product performance (Florenthal & Grossman, 2009). Potential users also did not purchase for various reasons. NIO APP is a platform for car owners to express their emotions and ease their concerns. NIO APP allows users to express their emotions and vent their dissatisfaction at any time, communicate with the brand officials, and relax themselves. For brands, NIO APP meets the needs of their brand communication. The current topics are related to product sales, problem feedback, travel, modification, lifestyle, and other fields, and these topics are closely related to the NIO brand.

### **2.3 Conceptual Framework**

Larson & Watson (2011), in their study "The Value of Social Media: Measuring Social Media Strategies," elaborated on social media relationships among stakeholder groups. According to the research, companies are interested in letting their stakeholders know about new products or activities (B2C), customers communicate with companies to give product complaints or product innovation suggestions (C2B), and customers communicate directly, proactively, or passively promote brands and products to other customers (C2C).

This research pays attention to information exchanges related to NIO, which is a global smart electric vehicle manufacturer. Based on Larson and Watson's research model of corporate and customer communication in social media (Larson & Watson, 2011), this study investigates official company posts and stakeholder posts.

Furthermore, according to Larson & Watson (2011), company participation in discussions (B2C and C2B) can be separated from no company participation (C2C).

This study collected a large amount of research literature, analyzed, and summarized the following four points: First, the influence of social media communication on brand is increasing, but there is a lack of information on how companies communicated on social media. Second, as the literature analysis shows, there has been some research on corporate brand communication in social media. However, so far, no one has clearly conducted research analyzing brand communication via mobile application of electric vehicle.

Third, based on the model of Larson & Watson (2011), three major categories of brand communication are the focus of this study: 1) Business to Stakeholders (B2S), brand communication initiated by the company and 2) Stakeholder to business (S2B), brand communication initiated by the stakeholders. Larson & Watson (2011) suggested the activities and goals for each of the three categories of brand communication. As these assumptions are very common and have not been verified in practice, NIO's brand communication can be used for further verification and discussion.

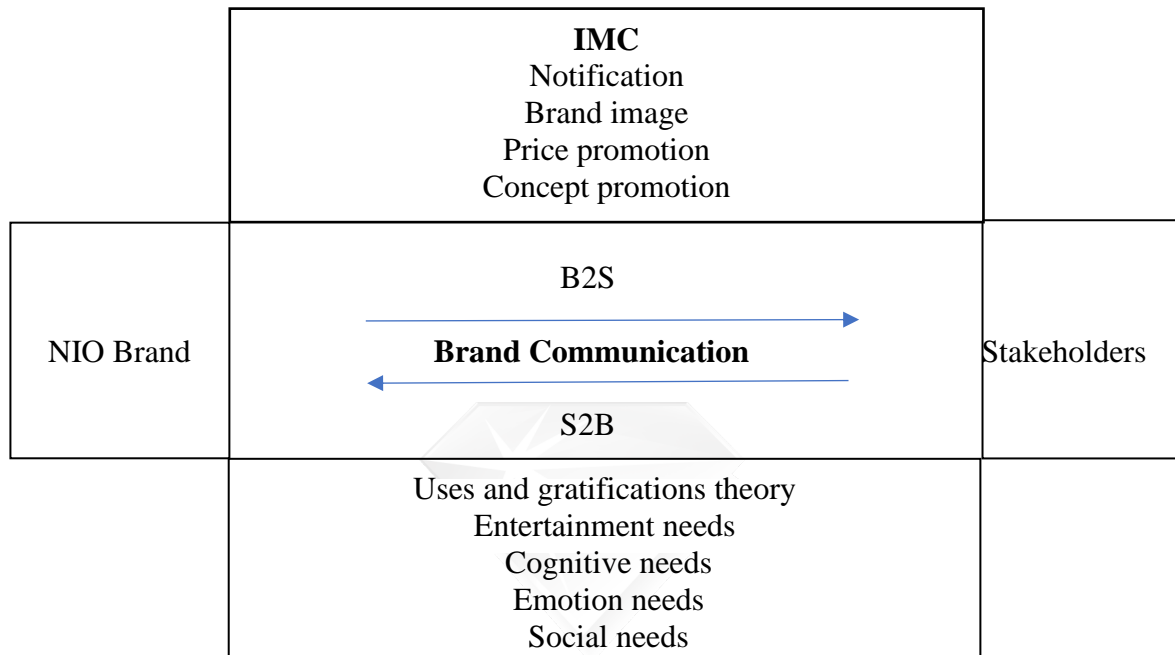


Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This chapter explains research design, population and sample selection, research procedure, research instrument, and data analysis. The validity and reliability of the study was also described.

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study uses mixed method, quantitative analysis, and qualitative content methods, covering 10 months (January 2021-October 2021). In order to investigate NIO's communication strategy, I extracted the communication in the NIO App and built a case study based on the daily communication around the keyword "NIO". According to Larson & Watson (2011), in order to classify posts in different categories (business-to-stakeholder, and stakeholder-to-business) posts, genre analysis was used. By doing this, our goal is to better understand and outline the communication content of the case company on the NIO APP. In order to answer RQ1 and RQ2, 112 posts from stakeholder communications and 154 posts from NIO official accounts with more than 20,000 views or likes and comments more than 500 times were qualitatively analyzed. The number of samples from 112 stakeholders was selected based on the descending order of the popular rankings in the #NIOGOODIDEAS topic.

Five reasons for choosing NIO App are 1) this platform provides the opportunity to download the relevant communication. 2) this platform has large number of active users and posts, allowing to identify NIO official account (The



highest authoritative information dissemination area, released by the corporate brand communication department, synchronized with other social media), NIO employee account (superscript with NIO), stakeholder account (car owner subscript with V). 3) this platform allows the identification of answers and replies (@replies as @accountname). 4) although it is an APP under the management of NIO, it has high transparency. Senior executives such as Li Bin and Qin Lihong directly interact with users. Users can leave their complaints in the app, and NIO officials never delete posts. Although in other media, stakeholders can also express their dissatisfaction, 90% of negative media news comes from NIO's own app (Shan, 2020), this means that the collected samples will not be censored by the NIO to make the data favorable for the NIO. 5) The richness of the media sample type, nearly half of the active users are not NIO product users, co-users, and deposit car owners, but fans who have not bought a car (Wu & Wang, 2021). It is proved that accounts using NIO APP include but are not limited to car owners, fans, potential consumers, etc. It is equally important to collect communications from stakeholders with different identities.

### **3.2 Population and Sample Selection**

According to the genre analysis and Larson & Watson (2011) model, the posts in two different categories (stakeholder-to-business and business-to-stakeholder) are classified. By doing so, we can better understand and summarize the communication content of the case company on the NIO App. To improve the effectiveness of the method, a genre-defined coding scheme was used, and this scheme was used to code the selected posts. In order to answer the research questions (RQ1 and RQ2), stakeholder exchange posts from the NIO App and all posts

published on the official NIO account from January 2021 to October 2021 were selected for data analysis.

The sample number of posts is interactively selected (likes and comments), since B2S type posts tend to have visibility (visible by page views) and accuracy (not arbitrarily deleted or modified), while S2B type posts have a large number, content is repeated, pageviews are not visible, and the poster can delete it at will.

As for brand communication of B2S, selection criteria are the independent posts with more than 20,000 views or more than 500 likes/comments.

In terms of brand communication of S2B, selection criterion is only the post with the hashtag: #NIOGOODIDEAS in the NIO APP (see Appendix C for the explanation of hashtags)



Figure 3.1: Shows the Basic Information Contained in the B2S Communication Samples (a). (The Original Screenshot is in the Appendix D)

Source: *Screenshot from NIO app (a).* (2021). Retrieved from: [https://app.nio.com/app/web/v2/content/1178391062?load\\_js\\_bridge=true&show\\_navigator=false&content\\_type=article&ADTAG=wechatfriend&share\\_uid=POH\\_MhBkN2Umr-0DqqrQMQ](https://app.nio.com/app/web/v2/content/1178391062?load_js_bridge=true&show_navigator=false&content_type=article&ADTAG=wechatfriend&share_uid=POH_MhBkN2Umr-0DqqrQMQ).

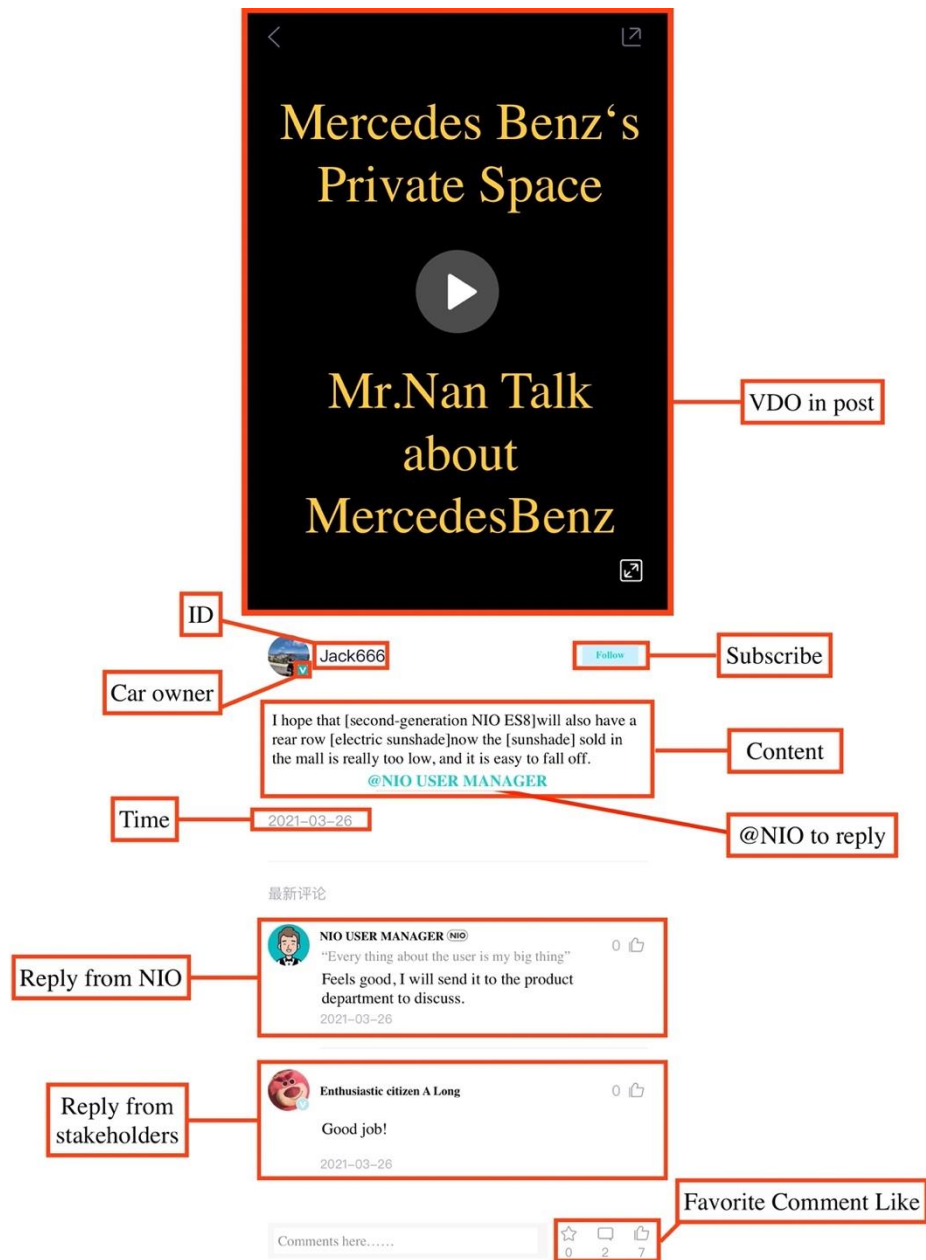


Figure 3.2: Shows the Basic Information Contained in the S2B Communication Samples (b). (The Original Screenshot is in the Appendix D)

Source: *Screenshot from NIO app (b).* (2021). Retrieved from: [https://app.nio.com/app/web/v2/share\\_comment?id=1238379&type=vlog](https://app.nio.com/app/web/v2/share_comment?id=1238379&type=vlog).

### 3.3 Research Procedure

The first phase is data collection. The sample of the research comes from public posts related to the brand released from January to October 2021 in the NIO APP. Within the investigation period, a total of 154 B2S communication posts (more than 20,000 views or more than 500 likes/ comments) were collected from 14 unique official account. From the 7 most popular hashtags, 112 stakeholder's posts were randomly selected, using type analysis to classify posts in different directions (business-to-stakeholder, and stakeholder-to-business) posts. By doing so, the purpose is to better understand and summarize the communication content of the NIO APP. In order to improve the effectiveness of this method, genre-defined coding schemes were used to classify posts. Krüger, Stieglitz & Potthoff (2012) used this coding scheme to research and analyze Adidas' brand communication content in Twitter. \ In order to solve the research areas RQ1, RQ2, a sample of 112 posts from stakeholder communications and all official posts issued by NIO was manually analyzed.

B2S and S2B data set contains the following indicators: V1: unique APP-ID, V2: timestamp, V3: title, V4: Hashtags, V5: complete content. V7: Issue, V8: @reply; V9: Website or other links; V10: Use #1; V11: used#2 and V12: used#3. The difference from the coding of Krüger et al. (2012) is 1) NIO APP articles cannot generate individual links. 2) Posts cannot be forwarded to each other in the APP. Therefore, the coding scheme in this study does not include hyperlinks and forwarding @reply.

In BS2 communication, recording the B2S brand communication goal: Notification, brand image, price promotion, concept promotion. The setting of this

variable is to study the use of NIO's integrated marketing communication (IMC) and understand the integration of NIO's official brand communication objective.

In S2B communication, not only records the use of NIO APP by stakeholders to communicate with brands, but also conducts in-depth mining of the use experience of stakeholders in the sample and makes statistical summary and analysis. By performing manual content analysis, we can gain a deeper understanding of what stakeholders are talking about and their motivations for using the app to talk to the brand. This variable is used to study the satisfaction of stakeholders in the NIO APP. Through statistical analysis to analyze the gratifications of stakeholders from "entertainment needs", "cognitive needs", "emotional needs" and "social needs", it is helpful to analyze the problems in the uses and gratifications of NIO APP in the following chapters.

The third stage is data analysis and summary of results. Identify and count genres by quantitative method. Then analyzed the content of the brand communication information and the needs of the stakeholder through qualitative method.

The posts were divided into posts issued by NIO official accounts and posts issued by stakeholders. Stakeholders include all users who download registered accounts. The clear division of stakeholder groups is limited, because the user can only be judged whether the user is the owner, employee, and others of NIO. But the logical conclusion is that they maintain a certain relationship with the brand, and they are stakeholders.

### **3.4 Data Analysis and Research Instrument**

Brand communication in the NIO APP were analyzed quantitatively and quantitatively. As for the quantitative content analysis, data were coded by the major investigator based on three coding schemes adapted from the study conducted by Krüger et al. (2012). In terms of genre, B2S communication in NIO APP were coded according to 9 genres (see Table 3.1) whereas S2B communication in NIO were coded according to 14 genres (see Table 3.3). B2S brand communication goals were coded according to 4 goals (see Table 3.2). In addition, stakeholders' motivation to use NIO APP were coded according to 4 categories adapted from the UGT (see Table 3.4).

In addition to frequency and percentage of occurrence reported for B2S and S2B communication in NIO, they were later qualitatively analyzed by major investigator. To better understand the motivations for official postings and the needs of stakeholders, 266 sample posts were carefully coded during the data analysis. As some posts contain few words and the content title is clearly visible, it was easy to summarize the author's main idea. According to the scope of cases given in Table 3.2 and Table 3.4, the 266 posts were simply summarized into two themes-B2S Brand Communication Goals, and S2B Motivation to use NIO APP, respectively. There were also situations in which two themes appeared in posts from stakeholders, and the frequency of key information in the post was used as the basis for induction. For example, for stakeholders who wanted to meet entertainment needs while looking for friends (social needs), but only one sentence of the post mentions that they wanted to seek friends, then the post was prioritized as entertainment needs. Relying on the

advantages of qualitative analysis, more precise insights of communication goals and motivation to use NIO APP could be gained from relevant stakeholders.

Table 3.1: Coding Scheme for B2S Genre

	Item NO.	Genre	Keyword
B2S	1	Answer	Usage report/ Statistics user public data/ Instructed a specific user/ Notice to users/ Explain to a specific user/ Brand's participation in conversations/ Directly address a specific user/ Voting result
	2	Question	Vote/ Invite comments
	3	Game	Invitation/ Event/ Award/ Challenge/ Password/ Limited/ Participate/ Random draw/ Surprise/ Share to participate/ Lucky/ Points Reward/ Gifts/
	4	HR	Recommend/ Recruitment/ Join/ Treatment/ Time/ Diploma/ Jobs/ Fellow/ Offer/ Bio/ Duty
	5	Brand-related news	Enterprise-related issues/ Driving resort/ New sponsoring/ Brand news/ Enterprise's strategy/ Enterprise achievements/ Cooperate/ History/ Cross-mediating reprint/ CSR/ Brand development/ Public disclosure/ Financial report/ Announcement

(Continued)



Table 3.1 (Continued): Coding Scheme for B2S Genre

	Item NO.	Genre	Keyword	
			Unit Type	Auto pilot/ EV/SUV Saloon/ EP9/ ES6/ EC6/ ES8/ ET7/ NIO Life/ Power Swap station/ Paid service
B2S	6	Information about product-releases or product lines	Unit Status	<p><u>1<sup>st</sup> (Product)</u>: New products/ Sport EV/ Luxury/ Smart/ Product lines/ Product features/ Performance/ Battery and energy/ Patent/ Re-sale/ Authentication/ Test drive/ Technology</p> <p><u>2<sup>nd</sup> (Price)</u>: Total/ Sales/ Selling Price/ Average Price/ Down-payment/ Transfer Fee/ Common Fee/ Sinking Fund/ Payment process/ Hedging rate</p> <p><u>3<sup>rd</sup> (Place/ Distribution channel)</u>: Dealers / Showrooms</p>
				Answering of questions/ Reference to other media/ Contact information/ Address/ User rights/ Greeting/ Early warning/ After sales/ Support/ Special gifts for user

(Continued)

Table 3.1 (Continued): Coding Scheme for B2S Genre

	Item NO.	Genre	Keyword
B2S	8	Sales promotion	Temporal product discounts/ Special offers (special down payment / 0% interest for loan / free maintenance service)
	9	Others	Keywords that are not fit with item no.1- 8

Table 3.2: Coding Scheme for B2S Brand Communication Goals

Item NO.	Brand Communication Goals Category	Posts Title Example
1	Notification	“NIO ES8 receives five-star safety rating from Euro NCAP”.
2	Brand image	“Join the Blue Dot Program and fulfill the mission of environmental protection”.
3	Price promotion	“February 2021 Limited-time discount car purchase method”.
4	Concept promotion	“0.208d! ET7 creates ultra-low drag coefficient”.

Table 3.3: Coding Scheme for S2B Genre

	Item NO.	Genre	Keyword
S2B	1	Product information	Total/ Sales/ Selling Price/ Average Price/ Down-payment/ Transfer Fee/ Common Fee/ Sinking Fund/ Payment process/ New products
	2	Sales promotion	Temporal product discounts/ Special offers (special down payment / 0% interest for loan / free maintenance service)
	3	Product statement	Design by owner/ Retrofit/ DIY
	4	Brand statement	Thanks for NIO/
	5	Driving statement	Driving feeling
	6	Event statement	Time/ Location/ Interesting/ Boring/
	7	Brand-related news	Enterprise-related issues/ Driving resort/ New sponsoring/ Brand news/ Enterprise's strategy/ Enterprise achievements/ Cooperate/ History/ Cross-mediating reprint

(Continued)

Table 3.3 (Continued): Coding Scheme for S2B Genre

S2B	Item NO.	Genre	Keyword	
	8	Driving question (Dynamic)	Loss of power/ Manipulate/ Out of control/ Auto pilot/ While driving/ Acceleration/ Deceleration/ Fault light	
	9	Product question (Static)	Software	Bug/ Lag/ System/ GPS/ Black screen/ No reaction/ Program issues/ Paid service/ App
			Hardware	Error/ Product defect/ Product confuse/ Noise/ Seat/ Security function/ Air conditioner/ Wiper/ Key/ Shock absorbers/ Buy & Sell/ EV/SUV Saloon/ EP9/ ES6/ EC6/ ES8/ ET7/ NIO Life/ Power Swap station/ Nomi
	10	Brand question	Rights & Interests/ Service problem	
	11	Self-expression	Like/ Dislike/ Talk about.../ Diary/ Life Experience/ Self-story/ Complaints	

(Continued)

Table 3.3 (Continued): Coding Scheme for S2B Genre

	Item NO.	Genre	Keyword
S2B	12	Game	Vote
	13	Comments	Suggestion/ Update/ Opinions/ UI/ Inconvenience/ Add/ Improvement
	14	Others	Keywords that are not fit with item no.1-13

Table 3.4: Coding Scheme for S2B Motivation to use NIO APP

Item NO.	Use and Gratifications	Content Example	Title Example
1	Entertainment needs	Sharing mood and daily life	“Food recommendation, hope to join NIO Life”.
2	Cognitive needs	Getting information	“When will NIO EVE come to mass production?”
3	Emotional needs	Getting care	“NIO Macau Supercharger keeps building but doesn't work”.
		Finding empathy	“The tail makes the most beautiful curve, my EC6 has a soul”.

(Continued)

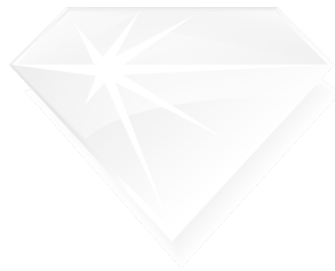
Table 3.4 (Continued): Coding Scheme for S2B Motivation to use NIO APP

Item NO.	Use and Gratifications	Content Example	Title Example
4	Emotional needs	Satisfying vanity	NIO Track Day "First Experience", Experience EP9 with William
		Asking for help	"Accelerator pedal problem!"
	Social needs	Participating in activities	Hot quiz: Who will William vote for?
		Meeting friends	Heilongjiang NIO Club "Thanksgiving Tour of William"
		Sense of group belonging	"Former fashion industry entrepreneur, talk about NIO Fashion Week."

### 3.5 Reliability and Validity of the Study

To ensure reliability of the study, 30 percent (80 posts) of the total 266 samples on NIO App platforms were quantitatively coded by the second coder who is student in Communication Arts. As a graduate student, she has knowledge and ability to serve as the second coder for this research. The inter-coder reliability is 90 percent. Moreover, samples with low reliability and insignificant frequency have been merged or removed, ensuring a high level of validity for genre analysis.

In terms of research validity, this study has construct validity because the genre-defining coding scheme used in this study to encode the brand communication of NIO APP is based on the coding scheme by Krüger et al. (2012), Qiang (2014) on the coding of communication tools in integrated marketing communications, and Li (2019) on the coding scheme of uses and gratification in Tik Tok APP.



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## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

This chapter attempts to report the results of the quantitative content analysis of 154 B2S communications and 112 S2B communications from NIO APP, by using the IMC and the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) as a conceptual framework. In addition to presentation of descriptive statistics of samples, answers for two research questions regarding B2S and S2B communications are presented. Examples [ $Px$ ] of the analyzed data were provided in Appendix C and D.

#### **4.1 Results of Descriptive Statistics on Samples' Characteristics**

In B2S communication, a total of 154 posts were selected as the sample for this study. Table 4.1 presents frequency of the genre of posts in B2S communications that were sampled and analyzed. Brand-related news (35.1%,  $n = 154$ ) and Information about product-releases or product lines (28.6%,  $n = 154$ ) have the most posts in the past 10 months.



Table 4.1: Frequency of Genres of the Selected B2S Communications via NIO APP

NO.	Genres	Frequency ( <i>n</i> = 154)	Percentage
1	Brand related news	54	35.1%
2	Information about product-releases or product lines	44	28.6%
3	Service-and Customer care-issues	18	11.7%
4	Serv/ Ccare <sup>3</sup>	13	8.4%
5	Game	11	7.1%
6	Answer	10	6.5%
7	HR	2	1.3%
8	Question	2	1.3%
9	Others	0	0%
Total		154	100%

In B2S communication, NIO IMC (18.8%, *n* = 154) was found slightly higher than NIO Life (17.5%, *n* = 154) with two of posts; NIO Marketing (11.7%, *n* = 154) marginally higher than NIO Power (11%, *n* = 154) with one of post. The results show an insignificant trend in the direction of official postings. Table 4.2 reports the frequency of NIO official accounts that were sampled and analyzed.

Table 4.2: Frequency of Selected NIO Official Account Posted to Stakeholders

NO.	Account (Number of Followers)	Frequency ( <i>n</i> = 154)	Percentage
1	NIO IMC (38,707)	29	18.8%
2	NIO Life (50,117)	27	17.5%
3	NIO Marketing (65,592)	18	11.7%
4	NIO Power (61,910)	17	11%
5	NIO UD (81,186)	15	9.7%
6	NIO User Operation (43,601)	15	9.7%
7	NIO President Qin LiHong (47,753)	7	4.5%
8	NIO Certified (12,940)	5	3.3%
9	NIO Day & Band (4,748)	5	3.3%
10	NIO CEO William (104,423)	4	2.6%
11	NIO Norway (2,961)	4	2.6%
12	NIO Technology Department (2,865)	4	2.6%
13	NIO CD (30,349)	3	1.9%
14	NIO HR (6,596)	1	0.7%
Total		154	100%

In terms of S2B communication, results indicated that selected posts from stakeholders have obvious UGT features in NIO APP. Through the analysis of the

samples, in the comments of stakeholders to NIO, brand and product upgrade and improvement are the most concerned by stakeholders (36.6%,  $n = 112$ ). The humanization and quality reliability of products are the second most feedback (17.9%,  $n = 112$ ). Analysis results reveal the past problems that emerged in the NIO concentration in 10 months. It should be noted that the statement of gratitude and support for the brand (16.9%,  $n = 112$ ) are second only to comments and product question. The data analysis shows that stakeholders have mixed opinions on NIO, and that the vast majority of types of posts are noticed and responded to by NIO, with a response rate of 86.6% ( $n = 112$ ) across all samples. Among them, product statement (66.6%,  $n = 3$ ) and self-expression (71.4%,  $n = 7$ ) are less frequently replied, which may be due to the fact that stakeholders did not attach NIO in the post, making it difficult to be officially tracked.

Table 4.3: Frequency of the Genres and Reply Rate in Selected S2B communications via NIO APP

NO.	Genres	Frequency ( $n = 112$ )	Percentage (100%)	Reply Rate (100%)
1	Comments	41	36.6%	82.9%
2	Product question (Static)	20	17.9%	90%
3	Brand statement	19	16.9%	94.7%
4	Self-expression	7	6.3%	71.4%
5	Product information	5	4.5%	80%

(Continued)

Table 4.3 (Continued): Frequency of the Genres and Reply Rate in Selected S2B communications via NIO APP

NO.	Genres	Frequency ( <i>n</i> = 112)	Percentage (100%)	Reply Rate (100%)
6	Driving question (Dynamic)	5	4.5%	80%
7	Brand question	5	4.5%	100%
8	Product statement	3	2.7%	66.6%
9	Brand-related news	3	2.7%	100%
10	Sales promotion	1	0.9%	100%
11	Driving statement	1	0.9%	100%
12	Game	1	0.9%	100%
13	Others	1	0.9%	100%
14	Event statement	0	0%	0%
Total		112	100%	Average: 86.6%

## 4.2 General Information of B2S and S2B Communications

### 4.2.1 General Information of B2S Communications

Regarding the NIO APP posted by official NIO accounts, the content genres were identified in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4: Frequency of Content Genres within the B2S Communication

Account (followers)	B2S Content Genres								Total ( <i>n</i> = 154)
	answer	question	game	HR	Brn <sup>1</sup>	Product <sup>2</sup>	serv/ ccare <sup>3</sup>	sales promotion	
NIO CEO William (104,423)	0				3			0	4
NIO President Qin Lihong (47,753)	0	0	0	0	7	0	0	0	7
NIO HR (6,596)	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
NIO Certified (12,940)	1	0	0	0	0	3	0	1	5
NIO Norway (2,961)	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	4
NIO User Development (81,186)	4	0	1	0	7	2	1	0	15
NIO IMC (38,707)	2	0	3	0	10	14	0	0	29

(Continued)

Table 4.4 (Continued): Frequency of Content Genres within the B2S Communication

Account (followers)	B2S Content Genres								Total ( <i>n</i> = 154)
	answer	question	game	HR	Brn <sup>1</sup>	Product <sup>2</sup>	serv/ ccare <sup>3</sup>	sales promotion	
NIO Marketing (65,592)	1	0	0	0	1	2	1	13	18
NIO Life (50,117)	0	1	0	1	7	18	0	0	27
NIO Power (61,910)	0	0	1	0	6	3	6	1	17
NIO User Operation (39,601)	1	0	5	0	5	0	2	2	15
NIO Community Developme nt (30,349)	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	3
NIO Day & Band (4,748)	1	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	5
NIO Technology Department (2,865)	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	4
Total	10	2	11	2	54	44	13	18	154
Percentage	6.5%	1.3%	7.1%	1.3%	35%	28.6%	8.4%	11.7%	99.9%

1. Brand-related news
2. Information about product-releases or product lines
3. Service-and Customer care-issues

The most common genre is "Brand-Related News" (35%,  $n = 154$ ), which includes all tweets related to business-related issues, such as the brand's performance in the last quarter [*P1*] or milestones on the brand's layout [*P2*]. Posts are also genre as types with typical PR content, such as about a new B2B collaboration [*P3*] or a brand's next phase of strategy [*P4*]. NIO officials use external media to communicate, these posts are cross-media brand communication, reprint external KOL articles or other media content, and include links to source media, such as comments from social networks [*P5*] and news reports [*P6*]. It also includes the brand's CSR actions, such as [*P7*, *P8*].

The genre of "product-releases or product lines" (28.6%,  $n = 154$ ), which has the second highest percentage of posts, has a high exposure to products, which is more in line with NIO's identity as a new brand. According to the 3P classification model, the analysis results reveal information about product line, news about product function [*P9*; *P10*], about new showroom address [*P11*], product price and transaction flow [*P12*].

"Sales promotions" (11.7%,  $n = 154$ ) are very similar to the keywords "price and deal flow" in product-releases or product lines where stakeholders are reminded of limited-time car deals or NIO Life Temporary product discounts for online stores [*P13*; *P14*]. In addition, invites to join and purchase cars by existing car owners can also earn rewards [*P15*; *P16*].

The “Service and Customer Care” genre (8.4%,  $n = 154$ ) had high engagement, with 13 posts being read 914,921 times and generating 14,295 comments. It mainly includes three types of content -- the after-sales service of products, NIO is similar to the remote upgrade of smartphones, which weakens the frequent product iterations due to technological progress [P17]. And within this genre, brands are found providing energy support services to users [P18; P19]. This side confirms that the environmental advantages of new energy vehicles in certain groups are not attractive enough to consumers, and consumers are still worried about the performance of electric vehicles (Florenthal & Grossman, 2009). It is therefore assumed that NIO improves user satisfaction by providing users with additional energy support services. In addition, brands communicate care to stakeholders beyond the product, the relationship with the brand may be strengthened and satisfied. For example, the CEO's greeting at a special time [P20], the warning and help when the external environment changes [P21].

To consolidate a relationship to the brand's stakeholders, Krüger et al. (2012) showed in their Twitter research that in terms of the entertaining content, it is possible to raise the number of followers and moreover to make the brand part of the daily communication. In the sample, some brand-initiated game interactions were detected (7.1%,  $n = 154$ ). In the case, NIO launched a game to inform stakeholders about NIO's battery replacement technology [P22]. On this basis, a cross-platform communication strategy has also emerged. The NIO product line has joined the world's famous mobile racing games, and guided stakeholders to experience the NIO product line and other supercar brands in the game [P23].



In addition to using games or entertainment to explain product technology and increase brand awareness, NIO interacts with car owners and users by initiating conversations and setting rewards. If the participants of these games meet the conditions mentioned in the tweet (e.g., Go to the swap station, change the battery and post in the APP [P24]).

The genres of “questions” (1.3%,  $n = 154$ ) and “answers” (6.5%,  $n = 154$ ) are related to business engagement in conversations. "Answer" genre posts include disclosure of usage data to stakeholders, including total miles driven by NIO owners, frequency of autonomous driving usage, and achievements in reducing carbon emissions [P25]; A report on the results of feedback in the "questions" genre [P26]. In addition, in case [P27], it is assumed that most of the stakeholders have not purchased NIO products or are paying attention to NIO, so it is necessary for brands to make B2S representations to potential users. The "problem" communicates directly with all car-ownership stakeholders for the same reasons assumed for the "games" genre.

Finally, posts that can be categorized into the HR genre (1.3%,  $n = 154$ ) were also identified. The corporate account NIO HR published two posts with NIO job postings. At this point, it can be determined that businesses consider candidates among the followers of the NIO brand. And it can be observed that posts from the human resources account NIO HR are heavily commented and recommended for job candidates by stakeholders [P28]. In addition, the case [P29] which a message issued by non-HR department, about to find professional designers among stakeholders to participate in peripheral product design, it is impossible to assess whether this is another channel for finding relevant talents, but it can be assumed that NIO transmits

this kind of information, increasing the Interaction with the target group, as assumed in the "Games" genre.

#### 4.2.2 General Information of S2B Communications

Based on the S2B communication column established by NIO in the APP, the stakeholder account can choose to directly communicate with the brand directly @reply to NIO staff or participate in the hashtag topic. The main conversations took place in #NIOGOODIDEAS and #Faultfeedback, and officials say 400,000 people have participated in the discussion since the topic was created. Since there is no way to view the APP background data, it is impossible to evaluate the standard of official statistics. The following genres were categorized by analyzing four main accounts and two popular discussion boards (see Table 4.5).

Table 4.5: Frequency of Content Genres within the S2B Communication on NIO

S2B Genres									Frequency/ Percentage	Reply/ Percentage
Genre		@CEO William	@ President Qin lihong	@NIO User Manager	@NIO Life	#NIO GOOD IDEAS	#Fault Feed back	#Others		
Genre	Product information	2	1	1	0	0	0	1	5/ 4.5%	4/ 80%
	Sales promotion	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1/ 0.9%	1/ 100%
	Product statement	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	3/ 2.7%	2/ 66.6%
	Brand statement	17	2	0	0	0	0	0	19/ 16.9%	18/ 94.7%
	Driving statement	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1/ 0.9%	1/ 100%
	Event statement	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0/ 0%	0/ 0%
	Brand- related news	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	3/ 2.7%	3/ 100%
	Driving question	0	0	0	0	2	3	0	5/ 4.5%	4/ 80%

(Continued)

Table 4.5 (Continued): Frequency of Content Genres within the S2B Communication  
on NIO

S2B Genres									Frequency/ Percentage	Reply/ Percentage
Genre		@CEO William	@ President Qin lihong	@NIO User Manager	@NIO Life	#NIO GOOD IDEAS	#Fault Feed back	#Others		
	Product question	3	0	8	0	2	7	0	20/ 17.9%	18/ 90%
	Brand question	3	0	0	0	2	0	0	5/ 4.5%	5/ 100%
	Self- expression	1	1	0	0	3	0	2	7/ 6.3%	5/ 71.4%
	Game	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1/ 0.9%	1/ 100%
	Comments	6	1	17	0	16	0	1	41/ 36.6%	34/ 82.9%
	Others	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1/ 0.9%	1/ 100%
Total		38	5	28	1	25	10	5	112/100%	97/ 86.6%

The rest of the S2B conversation uses @reply to directly mention NIO employees. Based on a randomly selected sample of 112 posts based on the above topics, the most mentioned brand accounts and topics were @CEO William (33.9%,  $n = 112$ ), followed by @NIO User Manager (25%,  $n = 112$ ), #NIOGOODIDEAS (22.3%,  $n = 112$ ) and #Faultfeedback (8.9%,  $n = 112$ ).

The study found that "Comments" from stakeholders was the most commonly used genre (36.6%,  $n = 112$ ). These comments are mostly about suggestions and expectations from car owners, and they gave feedback after using the product [P30]. The difference between the two genres of "Questions" and "Self-expression" is that

these comments do not involve product defects and failures and the stakeholders are in this genre.

Stakeholders directly stated the changes they desired from the brand, such as product and service changes [P31]. CEO William being the most mentioned account with (38,  $n = 112$ ) posts mentioning him, "Brand statement" (16.9%,  $n = 112$ ) is where stakeholders expressed gratitude or supports to the brand [P32]. Product information (4.5%,  $n = 112$ ) and games (0.9%,  $n = 112$ ) are rarely seen in S2B communication, proving that this is not their longest-used way to keep in touch with brands [P33; T34]. In addition to expressing gratitude to the CEO, 21% of stakeholder established contact with William [P35] and asked for help [P36], which are distributed in genres of "Product information," "Product statement," and "Brand-related news." In the two genres "Driving question (Dynamic)" (4.5%,  $n = 112$ ) and "Product question (Static)" (17.9%,  $n = 112$ ) there were posts about NIO product defects and failures [P37; P38], which reflects that NIO has not experienced safety failures during driving in the past 10 months, but there are still problems in product quality and reliability.

It must be mentioned that in some cases the @-sign is used together with the #-sign in a post. It is hypothesized that the use of @reply can lead to more direct communication with brands, and if both the @-sign and the #-sign appear in the post, they would be prioritized under the @ symbol. If both posts missing these two signs, data were classified in the "others" category. Therefore, the results presented in Table 4.5 should be interpreted with caution.

### 4.3 Results of Descriptive Statistics on Examined Variables

Based on the data coding of research instrument, combined with the results of statistical analyses, the content and motivation of NIO APP B2S and S2B posts are presented in this section.

#### 4.3.1 Communication Goals

Analysis results reveal that brand communication of enterprises with stakeholders includes four goals--Brand image (55.8%,  $n = 154$ ) was found the most, followed by Notification (22.7%,  $n = 154$ ), Price promotion (13%,  $n = 154$ ), and Concept promotion (8.4%,  $n = 154$ ) (see Table 4.6).

Table 4.6: Frequency and Percentage of NIO APP B2S IMC Goals

B2S IMC Goals	Frequency ( $n = 154$ )	Percentage
Brand image	86	55.8%
Notification	35	22.7%
Price promotion	20	13%
Concept promotion	13	8.4%
Total	154	100%

#### 4.3.2 S2B Usage Motivation Based on the UGT

The content analysis yields that the motivation of stakeholders in NIO APP mainly includes four aspects. Emotional venting (71.4%,  $n = 112$ ) was found the most, followed by individual performance (12.5%,  $n = 112$ ), information cognition (10.7%,  $n = 112$ ) whereas satisfying entertainment and relaxation (5.4%,  $n = 112$ )

was found the least (see Table 4.7).

Table 4.7: Frequency and Percentage of NIO APP Motivation Usages for S2B

Motivation Usages for S2B	Frequency ( <i>n</i> = 112)	Percentage
Emotional needs	80	71.4%
Social needs	14	12.5%
Cognitive needs	12	10.7%
Entertainment needs	6	5.4%
Total	112	100%

#### 4.4 Findings

This section presents answers for the two proposed research questions:

##### 4.4.1 Answer for the First Research Question

RQ #1: What is the brand communication of NIO EV in terms of business-to-stakeholder (B2S) via NIO mobile app?

In regard to B2S communication, NIO brand communication content is mainly divided into four categories: a) integrate communication resources, b) diversified content and concept promotion, c) Community building.

NIO's brand communication strategy in B2S communication includes:

1) Integrating communication resources to improve brand awareness and corporate reputation

NIO leverages its integrated marketing communications to communicate with its stakeholders. The integrated marketing communication in NIO APP is reflected in

two levels: the first level is the integration of internal resources of the enterprise. The research samples are from 14 unique IDs, including departmental accounts, executive accounts, customer service accounts, employee accounts, and the account of the person in charge of each city, etc., and integrated content served the same theme.

Table 4.8 shows the posts about new product ET7 in B2S communication, 5 accounts participated in the content dissemination at least once, including corporate plans, product details, prices and reservation methods. The second level is the integration of APP and other external resources, including traditional media such as newspapers, radio, television, and magazines, as well as interactive platforms such as inviting offline experiences, games, and large-scale events. Among them, brand-related news is the most mentioned content in B2S communications using the IMC.

Table 4.8: NIO's Accounts Participating in ET7 Topics in the Sample

Topic	Accounts	Genre	Title
ET7	NIO IMC	Information about product releases or product lines	Reprinted from <i>Cardaily</i> : "What does a self-driving flagship sedan look like?"
	NIO Technology Department	Information about product releases or product lines	ET7 first production line test prototype completed
	NIO Marketing	Sale promotion	Smart electric flagship sedan NIO ET7 opens for pre-order

(Continued)



Table 4.8 (Continued): NIO's Accounts Participating in ET7 Topics in the Sample

Topic	Accounts	Genre	Title
	NIO User Development	Information about product releases or product lines	NIO's first flagship sedan to be released tonight
	NIO President Qin LiHong	Brand-related news	NIO releases second-quarter financial report and delivers three new models within ET7 next year

2) Diversifying content and concept promotion to meet cognitive needs and emotional needs

Concerns about NIO and product performance also arise in S2B communications. For example, the [P39] stakeholder mentioned in the post: "It used to be convenient to use gasoline vehicles, but the battery life of electric vehicles is too short, it often needs to be recharged, and it feels very dangerous." NIO tries to eliminate users' concerns and prejudices about products and brands in B2S communication. For example, according to P25 NIO users have traveled more than three billion kilometers in total, actively eliminate the anxiety and doubts of stakeholders, to improve brand awareness and product reliability in communication at this stage. Figure 4.1 compares the number of posts mentioning product performance and reliability in B2S and in S2B Communications.

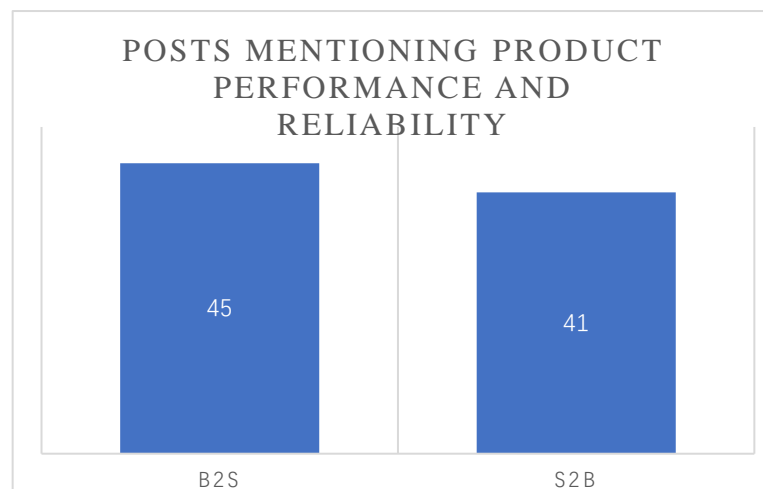


Figure 4.1: The Number of Posts Mentioning Product Performance and Reliability in B2S versus S2B Communications

### 3) Community building of NIO Life fans to meet entertainment needs

@NIO Life connects non-users among stakeholders with brands to build another community besides transportation and energy solutions. @NIO Life is an interesting presence in research. Statistics show that the @NIO Life account has initiated 27 posts ( $n = 154$ ) B2S communications, which is the second most frequently posted among the 14 official accounts, second only to @NIO IMC 29 with posts ( $n = 154$ ). Meanwhile, @NIO Life contains 18 posts about "Information about product-releases or product lines" and 7 posts about "Brand-related news" in the genre category. A further analysis of the sample content reveals that the "products" mentioned by NIO Life are peripheral products (stationery, snacks, clothing, daily necessities, automotive supplies, etc.) designed and manufactured based on the NIO brand style and have nothing to do with NIO's core business. Table 4.9 shows the

distribution of NIO Life's IMC goals in B2S communication. Through the analysis of communication goals, it was found that NIO Life is one of the important platforms to build brand image and to increase brand awareness.

Table 4.9: Frequency of NIO Life's IMC Goals in B2S Communication

IMC Goals	Frequency (n = 27)	Percentage (100%)
Brand image	22	81.5%
Notification	4	14.8%
Price promotion	1	3.7%

There is a lot of interaction in the B2S communication sent by NIO Life, in the example [P14], the brand through the rewards discussion topic #MyFirstNIOLifeItem attracted stakeholders to participate in sharing. It received 83,000 views, 892 likes, and 471 comments. The topic MyFirstNIOLifeSingleProduct received 23,000 participations, obtained an excellent brand communication effect. In addition, NIO Life cooperates with world-renowned designers, artists, and KOLs to improve brand image and reputation, and at the same time actively seeks designers and KOLs from stakeholders to cooperate [P29] to further consolidate the relationship with stakeholders and to satisfy users' emotional needs and sense of belonging.

It is worth mentioning that in B2S communication, the stakeholders covered by NIO Life are also more diverse. Although the findings cannot confirm whether NIO Life is positively related to the increase of female consumers, it is certain that stakeholders recognize the existence of NIO Life, which can be confirmed from the

B2S communication sample of NIO Life. NIO Life also aims to increase the sense of identity, activity and attachment of users and non-users. Allowing people to see that this company has other business reputation in addition to its core business.

#### 4.4.2 Answer for the Second Research Question

RQ #2: What is the brand communication of NIO EV in terms of stakeholder to business (S2B) via NIO mobile app?

In S2B communication, the genres mentioned by stakeholders are mainly divided into three categories: a) dissatisfaction and feedback on product problems or services (product failure defects, quality problems and other special problems), b) suggestions for products or services (no quality problem, but the function and design cannot meet the user's needs), and c) the stakeholders praise the brand or product.

As for S2B communications, NIO's brand communication strategy includes:

1) Keeping interactive communication with audiences, meeting entertainment needs, and enhancing brand loyalty

In the NIO APP, an important goal of NIO is to build relationships with stakeholders. A study of official NIO-related communications in the NIO APP shows that, without any special circumstances (such as a crisis), with a large number of stakeholders talking about the brand's product or image, the brand can still maintain a high level of engagement. The official reply to the messages seriously, feel the thoughts of stakeholders with heart, and can arouse the emotional recognition of users. It is like an exchange between friends, a subtle, lasting, and strong emotional connection over time.

Figure 4.2 shows the response efficiency of NIO in S2B communication, 86.6% ( $n = 112$ ) posts get the official reply from NIO. It should be noted that in the replied post, the NIO reply account is not necessarily the account of the poster @reply. There are two possibilities. One is relevant departments of NIO monitor public opinion and content in real time in the APP and give a rigorous and unified official reply. This situation is concentrated in S2B genres with "questions" and "comments." Another one is NIO employee accounts which are highly active in the APP and actively participate in S2B communication such as encouragement, praise, and soothing behaviors. This reply type is mainly found in the "Brand statement," "Self-expression," and "Brand-related news."

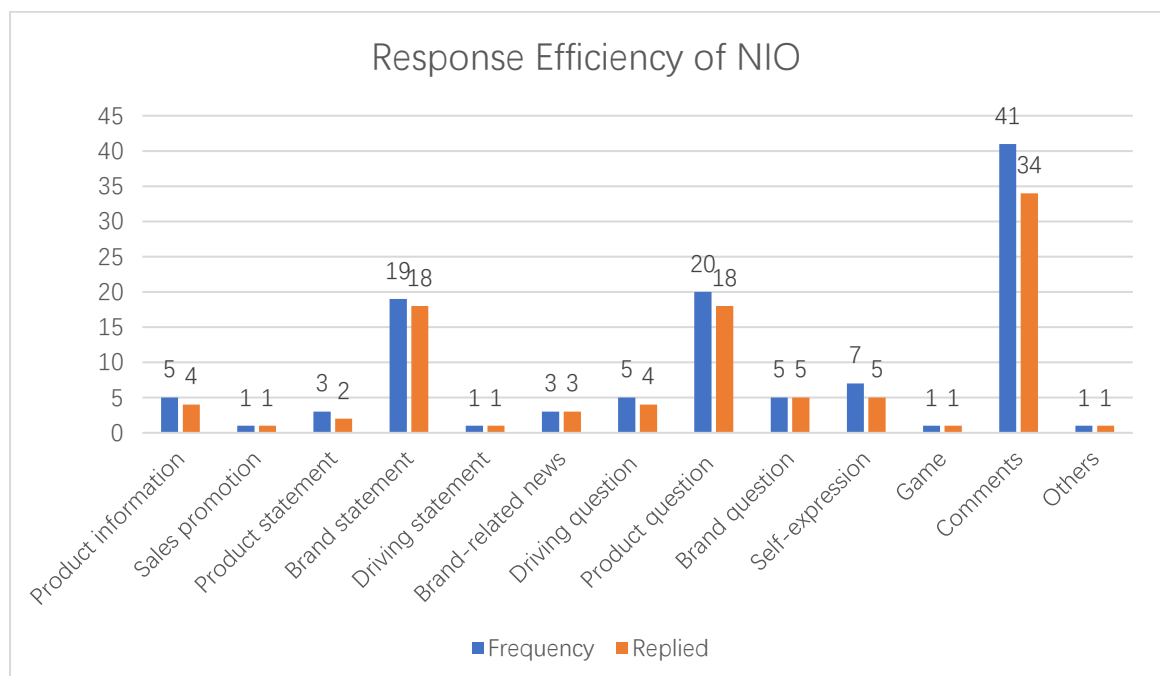


Figure 4.2: The Response Efficiency of NIO in S2B communication

2) Accepting suggestions, giving users choices, and meeting cognitive needs and emotional needs

In the face of stakeholders' suggestions for products or services (the product does not have quality problems, but the function and design cannot meet the needs of users), [P36 *Opinion about car system*]. By qualitatively analyzing the content information of 154 B2S communication posts, it is found that NIO collects comments from stakeholders and responds centrally in the form of B2S posts on a monthly basis, so we can determine that companies regularly screen and evaluate stakeholder proposals and respond to stakeholder demands through R&D and Over-the-Air Technology upgrades. The B2S case [P17 *software update / NIO OS 3.0.0 version release*] correspondingly solved user's suggestions for [P36 *Opinion about cat system*] in S2B communication. For suggestions on hardware upgrades, NIO provides users with options to solve needs or to make changes on next-generation models through accessories.

3) The executive account participates in the interaction to meet the entertainment needs and social needs. Table 4.10 presents the number of posts by CEO and president in B2S and S2B communications.

Table 4.10: Frequency of Posts by CEO and President

Account	B2S (n = 154)	S2B (n = 112)
@CEO William Libin	4	38
@President Qin lihong	7	5

Data analyses reveal that 38 posts ( $n = 112$ ) were directed to @William, whereas 5 posts ( $n = 112$ ) were directed to @President Qin Lihong in S2B communications. NIO's stakeholders are used to connecting directly with brand executives to express the brand's shortcomings and strengths. These communications also received attention and responses from NIO executives, either personally helping users resolve issues or receiving compliments from stakeholders. As far as NIO is concerned, users follow NIO member accounts not only to obtain information to meet their cognitive needs, but also to interact with brands. This can be demonstrated by the fact that stakeholders in S2B communication affirm and praise the brand. These communication strategies (monitoring these participants and integrating them into brand communications, feedback from founders or CEOs, meeting the emotional and social needs of stakeholders) can increase the number of positive brand-related, amplify brand image, and increase brand loyalty.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

This study explores how NIO utilizes integrated communications marketing and audience demand satisfaction to communicate with stakeholders in the NIO APP, thereby increasing brand awareness, building brand image, and maintaining brand loyalty. This chapter discusses findings and limitations. It also provides practical implications and recommendations for the future.

#### **5.1 Summary of Findings**

The study collected 154 samples of B2S communications and 112 samples of S2B communications for 10 months (January 2021-October 2021) and used the genre-defined coding scheme to understand and analyze the samples. By setting the two variables of B2S IMC Goals and S2B Use and Gratifications motivation, we have a preliminary understanding of the communication relationship between brands and stakeholders in NIO APP, and how NIO built "relationship" from its brand communication. Specifically, there are six interesting findings:

##### **1) Integration of internal resources in B2S Communications**

The results show that all internal members of the NIO APP can participate in released information and will be identified in NIO's position or responsible department to clarify the brand communication content of different accounts. Each NIO official account in the samples targets a specific stakeholder group as indicated by the account name. Some accounts target stakeholders within a geographic area. While other accounts appear to target stakeholders with special interest groupings,



NIO has accounts that communicate with stakeholders interested in brands or special product lines.

## 2) IMC Goals in B2S Communications

The results show that the most important purpose of these posts from NIO is to build brand image, inform stakeholders and build relevant brand awareness. In addition, the post attempts to collect the concerns and pain points of stakeholders and propose solutions or alleviate the anxiety of stakeholders in subsequent posts, such as increasing the number of charging facilities to alleviate stakeholders' anxiety about product performance.

## 3) NIO Life in B2S Communications

NIO Life is an interesting sample in the study, as the content posted by this account has nothing to do with NIO's electric vehicle offerings. However, the account has a very high frequency of posting and user engagement, which seems to be another "window" that NIO has opened for non-car enthusiasts, potential users, and young stakeholders to understand the brand, because in the eyes of many consumers, more than from product performance, they pay more attention to appearance design, color, and brand influence. Showing NIO Life products to other participants in the network seems to be easier to get attention than showing cars and integrating NIO's brand concept into the design of daily necessities, even a way of life, which seems to be good for brand awareness. Integrating NIO Life into brand communications has the potential to amplify the brand image by increasing the number of positive brand-related posts.

#### 4) Little mention of price in B2S Communications

The research results show that NIO rarely mentions the issue of price in the APP, and there is no price change in the 10-month period. Except for the monthly car purchase discount, NIO does not seem to deliberately use price to attract stakeholders.

#### 5) Efficient reply in S2B Communications

Research shows that NIO officials are always concerned about the S2B communication that occurs in the APP. Faced with stakeholder's mentions in posts, brands can strategically reply to them, monitor these participants, and integrate them into brand communications through conversational exchanges.

#### 6) Maintain interaction with stakeholders, accept suggestions, and invite users to participate in brand development

The research findings indicate that NIO has multiple continuous dialogues with stakeholders in B2S and S2B communication and tries to invite stakeholders to participate in brand decision-making and product development. Since the B2S sample is screened according to the activity of posts, it can be proved that the brand invites the participation of stakeholders in product development helps to improve the interaction between the audience and the brand, meet the needs of users, improve the efficiency of communication, and increase the emotional connection between stakeholders and the business.

## 5.2 Discussions

In the absence of any special circumstances (such as emergencies), research on the communication related to the NIO brand on the NIO APP shows that members within the brand communicate with stakeholders through their accounts and establish

a sustainable communication model with clear responsibilities and diverse content. NIO APP is the promoter of the NIO brand, providing information to maintain the existing user relationship, dispel the doubts of potential consumers, and develop the brand awareness of young consumers through consumer insights regarding demands of stakeholders. Integrating stakeholders into brand communication is also one of NIO's brand communication strategies.

#### 5.2.1 Consistency of Findings with the Past Studies

Through the classification and statistical investigation of the samples, we found that NIO uses APP to build an online user community, and stakeholders collect information about companies (brands) and products through the Internet (APP). Instead, companies are interested in gathering information from stakeholders to improve their products. Each official account in the NIO APP is responsible for a specific stakeholder group and builds a topical community operated by NIO based on the interests and occupations of stakeholders, which further evolves into S2S communication. This confirms the assumption in their model by Larson & Watson (2011) that “Companies promote virtual brand communities to increase customer awareness of the brand.” Each official account in the NIO APP is responsible for a specific stakeholder group, as well as establishing a topical community run by NIO based on stakeholder interests and occupations, which can further evolve into S2S communication. These accounts have a total of 553,748 followers (it must be mentioned that we did not check whether a single user account follows multiple NIO accounts). The most subscribed brand accounts are NIO CEO William (104,423 followers), NIO User Development (81,186 followers) and NIO Marketing (65,592 followers).

In addition, research can prove that Di (2016)'s statement is correct. Likes and replies can not only maintain the normal relationship between people, but also can resonate the relationship of both parties. By analyzing the content of communications from stakeholders, it can be found that the dialogues initiated by stakeholders have a clear purpose to meet their needs for the NIO APP. Through the study of S2B communication, there are no topics related to new energy vehicles and environmental protection, but more feedback on charging issues, while in B2S communication, NIO's charging solutions frequently appear, alleviating stakeholders' concerns about the car. Anxiety about convenient charging. This indirectly proves the findings of Florenthal & Grossman (2009) that the environmental advantages of new energy vehicles are not enough to attract consumers of Generation Y, and consumers still have concerns about the performance of hybrid vehicles. On the downside, we noticed that while NIO responded promptly to users in S2B communications, subsequent conversations took place in separate chat rooms, where other stakeholders could not see in the public area whether the issue was actually resolved.

### 5.2.2 Findings Reflecting Communication Theories

Based on the integrated communication theory, the UGT, the communication generated by brands and stakeholders in specific APPs was analyzed. APP has a significant impact on the marketing communication activities of enterprises. For automobile enterprises, APP is a high-quality platform for information release and reputation. In the S2B communication, the good interactive communication with the audience can establish an emotional connection and form a secondary communication, thereby enhancing the reputation and brand image of the enterprise. Brands can detect consumer dissatisfaction in time by monitoring comments about

companies and brands in online communities, thereby reducing or preventing the possible brand crisis.

When analyzing the status quo of brand communication in NIO APP, it was found that the integrated marketing communication used in B2S communication is mainly reflected in two aspects of communication content and communication methods. The content includes pictures, videos, texts, reprints, APP external links, etc. The dissemination channels include: 1) Building a user community, 2) Establish an exclusive ID that highlights the characteristics of the brand, 3) Use the executive account to promote the brand image, 4) Use topics and events to expand brand influence, 5) Use the power of celebrities and opinion leaders to create momentum for the brand, 6) Continuously monitor public opinion to avoid brand crisis, and 7) Maintain interactive communication with the audience and enhance brand loyalty.

The UGT is embodied in S2B communication: 1) Stakeholders participate in interactive topics initiated by the brand, and share users' lives, 2) Stakeholders' recognition and gratitude to the brand, and 3) Stakeholders' emotional catharsis and feedback on the brand (including products). Overall, S2B communication starts from the perspective of stakeholders, examines the psychological and behavioral actions of stakeholders towards the brand by analyzing the audience's media contact motivation and what needs these contacts meet.

### 5.2.3 Consistency of Findings with Researcher's Expectations

Some of the findings of the study were in line with my expectations, but others were not. Consistent with the expected value, by studying the communication between the brand and stakeholders in the APP, it was found that NIO's user relationship operation, from online to offline, has made all-round innovation, not

deliberately emphasizing the relationship between the brand and the user, and more focus on building user-to-user links. What deviates from expectations is the existence of NIO Life, which connects to a wider audience and has the potential to later convert into EV consumers, which was not thought of before the study.

### **5.3 Limitations**

This research also has some limitations. First, the research object selected in this paper is NIO APP, which is a new electric vehicle brand established in November 2014. Second, the sampling methods of this study include setting sample standards and random samples. Since it is difficult to collect APP background data, the user information of each account cannot be counted, and can only be integrated through public information, which may have certain deviations. Third, another key limitation is that there is no relevant survey of dissemination content composition, where the type of dissemination information has some influence on the dissemination strategy. Fourth, regarding the limitations of a more customer-centric conversational exchange, the role of NIO APP is too limited. Different from the complex and changeable communication environment of social networks, NIO APP users have relatively simple demands for use, and research on S2B communication needs to be combined with third-party social media. In similar vein, since posts from stakeholders are long, exact descriptions of genres are not given in the content, posts are manually categorized, and genre categories may be biased.

## 5.4 Recommendations

Recommendations are given for different groups as followings:

### 5.4.1 Recommendations for Further Application

Studying the communication between social platform brands and stakeholders can help companies better integrate user needs in the practice of brand image communication, and at the same time integrate the brand information disseminated by various communication tools. According to the research results of this paper, the following suggestions are provided for new energy vehicle brands and brand planners:

First, we must pay full attention to the brand communication operation of social platforms. For automobile companies, social media is a high-quality platform for information release, and its value lies mainly in the promotion of core communication information such as brand information, corporate culture, company dynamics, and promotional activities, thereby enhancing the visibility of the company. The person in charge of the brand should have good interaction and communication with the audience, establishes emotional connections, and forms secondary communication, thereby enhancing the reputation and brand image of the company. Any member of the enterprise has the obligation to monitor the conversations about the enterprise and the brand on the Internet, to detect the dissatisfaction of consumers in time, so as to reduce the probability of crisis.

Second, based on the user's "use and satisfaction" theory to analyze the user's needs, the company can occupy the user market better and faster. Through S2B communication, brands can better understand the demands of stakeholders, and then integrate and respond to these contradictions through B2S communication. At the

same time, the content quality of B2S communication should be improved, and product performance should be proved by data, test results, scientific principles, etc. While the content is diversified, the influential brand property expands the scope of brand communication while meeting the needs of users.

Third, the dissemination of brand APP is limited, because the media richness of this medium is naturally lower than other social media such as WeChat, especially in terms of information flow. In addition, due to the stable composition of brand APP users, the brand has absolute control over the APP. Although NIO said that it only monitors and manages bad speech, it is still not the only information acquisition platform for stakeholders. Brands should also enrich communication media to gain more voices from stakeholders.

#### 5.4.2 Recommendations for High-involvement Products and Consumers

For high-involvement products, potential consumers tend to refer to product reviews from various reliable sources, such as their friends, relatives, or reviews on Google, before making a final purchase decision. In an open communication environment, the words of car owners often have important informational value as a reference. Therefore, potential consumers can refer to the information in the APP to assist their decision-making. For consumers who have purchased products, they should actively participate in the construction of user's communities, actively give feedbacks regarding product problems, and establish good communication with brands, which is conducive to promoting product updates and technological progress.

#### 5.4.3 Recommendations for Governmental Offices or Policy Makers

As for the recommendations for governmental offices or policy makers directly involved in the promotion of the auto industry, they need to affirm the



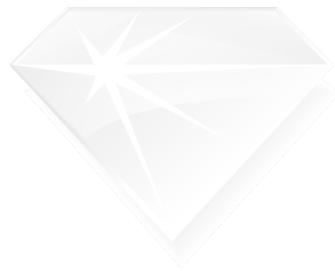
importance of replacing traditional fossil energy with clean energy and adhere to a policy of sustainable development. They should also provide support to enterprises and consumers from the following aspects: 1) Give enterprises research and development funds, reduce enterprise loan interest rates, and reduce enterprise taxes to encourage enterprises to innovate and develop efficient and reliable energy solutions, 2) While promoting clean energy for environmental protection, it should also solve consumers' concerns about the reliability of new energy products, invest in infrastructure construction, and meet consumers' demand for charging, and 3) Encourage and support consumers to purchase new energy vehicles, and provide subsidies in terms of taxation, loans, and after-sales services.

#### 5.4.4 Recommendations for Future Research

By conducting this case study, the first step was taken for Chinese EV brands to provide data on brand communication experience in social media. The types of communication in social media initiated by stakeholders and the company itself were identified. Future research needs to further analyze whether product type, brand image, or other factors influence the strength of brand-stakeholder communication. This summarizes what strategies companies can develop to communicate with and engage their stakeholders.

Future research should focus on communication between stakeholders, and the communication effect of the consumer perspective should be considered, such as word-of-mouth marketing to promote the mass audience to participate in the brand's marketing communication. In the Chinese or other markets, further exploration of brand communication strategies such as brand awareness, brand image, and brand reputation will provide valuable discoveries for marketers and communicators.

Cultural factors such as individualism versus collectivism or masculinity versus femininity may be added into the investigation when studying this topic. In addition, future research may compare B2S and/or S2B communication between different car models under the same brand or between competing brands to identify success cases for further application.



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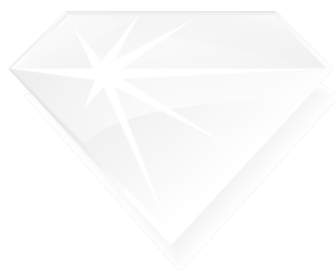
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### Appendix A: Products of NIO (Sort by time to market)

Time to market	Product	Position	Introduction	Price (USD)	Competitor
Nov. 2016	EP9	Sport EV	Break the boundaries in design. Breaking six world records, one of the world's fastest electric cars	1.48M	Ferrari Lamborghini
Dec. 2017	ES8	Full-size SUV	High-end full-size SUV, suitable for business and family travel	94,783	Tesla Model X BMW X5 Lexus RX
Apr. 2018	ES6	Mid-size SUV	Fashionable and sporty, Exquisite, and technological interior	75,000	Tesla Model Y BMW X3 Audi Q5
Sep. 2020	EC6	Mid-size SUV	ES6 coupe Edition	77,000	Tesla Model Y BMW X4
Q1. 2022	ET7	4-door sedan	Smart & Luxury sedan	89,200	Tesla Model S Mercedes EQS Mercedes E BMW 5 & 7 Volvo S90

## **Appendix B: Components of NIO's service system**

### NIO Fellow

The Staff who work in NIO HOUSE & SPACE. In NIO's O2O model, NIO fellow is the user's partner, responsible for solving user's problems, leading users in offline links to experience NIO products, introducing, test driving, guiding users on online customization and payment, and finally delivering the car to users

### NIO House

A new type of user-centered space that subverts the exhibition halls of traditional auto brands. NIO plans and lays out NIO HOUSE according to the user scale of the city in which it is located. In addition to basic product sales and brand display functions, NIO HOUSE emphasizes user connection and community. The construction of NIO reflects NIO's thinking and reshaping of user experience in the automotive industry. Each NIO HOUSE located in a prosperous part of the city, designed by world-renowned designers, with high-quality visual presentations. Let users fully experience the connotation of brand culture. When a brand communicates with users in an offline digital living space, the brand's communication purpose and the user's experience gain are qualitatively unified. Since 2017, NIO has opened 22 NIO Houses in China, many of which have become new landmarks in their cities.

### NIO Space

Small-scale brand experience stores set up in the CBD and large shopping malls have a smaller area than NIO HOUSE and are mainly used to enhance brand awareness and user experience.

### NIO Day

The annual brand launch conference, as the core project of brand strategic marketing, is carried out in different cities every year with the release of the latest models and latest technologies, supplemented by "user party + celebrity concerts". At the same time, through the participation of NIO Fellow and users, a continuous positive event dissemination has been formed in major Internet media.

### NIO Life

NIO LIFE focuses on high-quality peripherals and has good auxiliary sales and brand IP building functions in the marketing system.

### NIO Radio

NIO radio is a sound-based online community of NIO. It penetrates the user's driving time by way of car radio, enabling users to share their experience and listen to real user life stories across the country through voice at any time while driving.

### Appendix C: Official Explanation of Hashtag

#NIOGOODIDEAS #蔚来好想法 370,000 joining: When the same people gather on the road, age, industry, and gender are no longer important. What is important is mutual recognition of values, thinking about the value of product experience, and empathy for service and experience. Please continue to explore, continue to search, great innovation comes from your inadvertent. (NIO APP, 2021)

#UserCreativeGala #我是蔚来创意官 174,000 joining: This is a carnival stage exclusively for the creative photographers of NIO users. Use the camera to speak and show the most beautiful moments of your NIO car. Your work will have the opportunity to become NIO's global communication images. The NIO brand is created by you!

#Ihaveastory #我有故事 128,000 joining: Everyone is a luminous planet, and our gathering can make a little bit of starlight converge into a galaxy. Welcome to add the topic #Ihaveastory# to share the true story in your life, as long as the story touches people's hearts, you can get points rewards.

#NIOBOOK 62,000 joining: NIO BOOK is a video guide for NIO car owners. We sincerely invite all drivers to create together. The event is effective for a long time. Bring NIO BOOK and related topics to publish a small video within 60 seconds. Use text to explain the main knowledge points of the shooting. We will power you up!

#TalkaboutBaas #我来说说BaaS 12,000 joining: The BaaS NIO battery rental service launched on August 20, 2020 is an innovative battery rental model for car owners. Users can choose BaaS service to realize the separation of car and electricity to purchase cars and can flexibly realize battery upgrades. For your experience, welcome to talk about your feelings about BaaS services.

#NIORoadtrip #自驾路书 80,000 joining: The "Road Book" solicitation activity is open, and everyone is invited to share the dry goods content and pleasant experience of the self-driving tour. If you like to drive Wei to travel everywhere, if you are good at planning and like to share, welcome to share with topics!

#FatewithNIO #说说我和蔚来的缘分 170,000 joining: Story with NIO.

**Appendix D: Screenshot of B2S and S2B communication post inclusion elements  
in NIO APP**







### Appendix E: Examples of such posts

- [P1] NIO delivered 8,083 units in June to a new high, positive growth for 5 consecutive quarters.
- [P2] NIO connects the first Qinghai-Tibet charging route in the country, with an average of one charging station or swapping station every 170 kilometers.
- [P3] Deepening cooperation Hefei City and NIO jointly build a world-class intelligent electric vehicle industrial park.
- [P4] Hello Norway, NIO Norway strategy will be released soon.
- [P5] Yan Yupeng: Is it the responsibility of the "high-level sense" of Chinese brands?
- [P6] "People's Daily" praised the NIO road service team, let's take a look at the day of NIO's road service staff photographed by reporters from "People's Daily".
- [P7] NIO donated RMB 15 million to help Henan Province. We also remind our users and friends of NIO to pay attention to safety. Your safety is the most important thing. If you have any need, please feel free to contact us, we will do our best to help you.
- [P8] Join the Blue Dot Program and practice environmental protection. Through the "Blue Dot Plan", NIO will better implement the original intention of the user enterprise, so as to jointly promote green and sustainable development with users.
- [P9] The Secret of ET7 Autonomous Driving Black Technology | Ultra-long-distance high-precision LiDAR.
- [P10] 2021 NIO annual color release, EC6 & ES6 Aurora Green allowed to pre-order.

[P11] NIO Space | Harbin Central Street, the northernmost cow house warmly opened.

[P12] Intention payment, deposit adjustment.

[P13] "Spring Outing" limited-time car purchase package is online!

[P14] Spoiler | You have a NIO Life 3rd anniversary benefit to be checked

[P15] One hundred thousand offline, welfare online! 100,000 offline, benefits online!

From now on, invite friends to test drive, you can receive surprises, points, and boutiques, 100% courtesy!

[P16] National Day welfare, listen to the arrangement of the junior sister, invite friends for a test drive, and get tickets for the auto show!

[P17] Software Update | NIO OS 3.0.0 release.

[P18] Power North free charging benefits are available.

[P19] The total number of NIO charging stations exceeded 1,000, and charging benefits are available for a limited time.

[P20] Happy New Year to everyone!

[P21] NIO owners start to apply for emergency window hammer.

[P22] 400 battery swap stations!

[P23] Everyone! EP9 joins the world's top racing game "Asphalt 9"!

[P24] Ding! The Summer Blind Box is a new surprise, the super "lineup" is not to be missed, participate in the #topic interaction, and randomly collect 5 lucky partners!

[P25] The accumulated mileage of NIO users exceeds 3 billion kilometers.

[P26] News | NIO Day 2021 Candidate Cities Announcement.

[P27] Buying Guide | Do you know all the common problems before buying NIO?

[P28] A "recommendation" get win-win | High points are waiting for you to pick!

[P29] Blue Sky Lab | Looking for "NIO Life User Designer".

[P30] 360-degree camera recommendations.

[P31] Suggestions after getting the car.

[P32] NIO's "first experience" on track day, experience EP9 with Brother Bin (CEO William).

[P33] Hot quiz: Who will Brother Bin (CEO William) vote for?

[P34] NIO's second-generation ES8 flagship SUV guess.

[P35] William, would you like to say a few words about the car advertisement?

[P36] A little opinion on the car system @William.

[P37] Navigation problem feedback.

[P38] It took a month and a half to pick up the car. The first time I drove halfway, there was no network. After restarting, the parking image disappeared.

[P39] Buy ES8's first post in half a year, dedicated to Model Y

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