One Social Media, Distinct Habitus: Generation Z’s Social Media Uses and Gratifications and the Moderation Effect of Economic Capital

Qingqing Hu*, Xue Hu and Pan Hou
School of Journalism and Communication, Northwest University, Xi’an, China

This study aims at contributing to literature by investigating characteristics of Generation Z’s social media uses and gratifications and the moderation effect of economic capital. Specifically, we employed online survey as the main research method to examine the connections between the young generation cohort’s online motivations, social media practices, and economic capital. A total of 221 Chinese Generation Z social media users were recruited in the survey. Results indicated that (1) Generation Zs have different social media engagements depending on whether they were connected for daily routine alternatives or socialization; (2) the young cohorts from upper-mid-income families demonstrated a more instrumental-rational habitus to use social media more frequently as a communicative tool than those from low-income families; and (3) motivations and family income interacted to influence Generation Z’s social media practices (e.g., social capital accumulating and exchanging and self-expression). Findings here provide empirical reference to deepened understandings of the interactions between social media and digital generations, and their connections with digital social inequalities.

Keywords: generation Z, social media, uses and gratifications, economic capital, habitus

INTRODUCTION

Generation Z (Gen-Z) refers to people born between the mid-1990’s and 2009, who grew up with the digital society and view digital technologies as the foundation of their lives (Turner, 2015; Dimock, 2019). Gen-Z belongs to a larger social media user population that has been conceptualized as the digital natives (Prensky, 2001). Digital natives were born and raised in the digital age, and they spend most of their lives surrounded by and using computers, video games, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age (Prensky, 2001). While the rationality of the conceptualization of digital natives is still in debate, a growing number of research has indicated that the younger generations significantly differ from their predecessors in terms of technology-related perceptions, motivations, and behaviors (Hargittai, 2010; Curtis et al., 2019; Hu and Cheong, 2021).

China has ~300 million Gen-Z and 30 million Gen-Alpha (i.e., those born in 2010–2024) Internet users, constituting 1/3 of China’s Internet user population (China Internet Network Information Center, 2021). Most (99.2%) of China’s internet users are also social media users, and about 1/4 of them spend more than 4 h/day on WeChat, one of China’s most popular social media (An, 2021; China Internet Network Information Center, 2021). Previous studies have discussed from multiple perspectives the predictors, characteristics, mechanisms, and consequences of the
social media-user interactions in China (e.g., Sullivan, 2012; Wang et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2016; Gan et al., 2017; Li et al., 2019). However, what has been relatively understudied is the extent to which Chinese Gen-Zs’ social media habitus are associated with their characteristics as being digital natives, as well as how their social media engagements are associated with digital social inequalities (Gentina, 2020; Hu and Cheong, 2021). In this study, therefore, the main objective is to fill these gaps by examining the characteristics of and differences in social media habitus among Chinese Gen-Z users, as well as exploring how their social media uses and gratifications are associated with economic capital using the Bourdieusian approach (Ignatow and Robinson, 2017; Calderon Gomez, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

One influential theoretical framework to approach the social media-user interactions is the uses and gratifications theory (U&G), which highlights the importance of individuals’ social and psychological needs in shaping their motivations and, consequently, their communicative behaviors (Katz et al., 1973; Rubin, 1994; Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000; Abbas and Mesch, 2015). On one hand, previous studies indicated that Gen-Zs differ from their predecessors in many aspects of online motivations, such as being more desired for self-expressing and self-disclosing, online shopping, online enjoyment, memetic engagements, content-generating, and sustainable online behaviors (Hargittai, 2010; Turner, 2015; PrakashYadav and Rai, 2017; Dabija and Lung, 2018; Dabija and Bâbuț, 2019; Vițelar, 2019; Andronie et al., 2021; Hu and Cheong, 2021; Musova et al., 2021; Vătămănescu et al., 2021). On the other hand, the extent to which social media uses can satisfy Gen-Zs’ online motivations depends on their affinances. Social media affinances keep evolving with the development of the technologies and the industry, shifting from a focus on networked communication to the scope of online sociality (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Zhang and Pentina, 2012; Van Dijk, 2013; Choi et al., 2020). There have been discussions on how socialization, as a pivotal social media affordance, plays an important role in satisfying some of Gen-Zs’ online motivations (e.g., enhancing social influence and increasing social capital, Shane-Simpson et al., 2018; Andronie et al., 2021). In this study, we will contribute to the discussions by exploring how Gen-Zs’ social media uses, including both socialization and beyond, connect with their online motivations in the Chinese context. Therefore, we propose our first research question.

RQ1: What are the differences in social media practices between Gen-Zs from low- and upper-mid-income families?

RQ2: How does economic capital moderate Gen-Zs’ social media uses and gratifications?

METHODS

Procedures and Participants
This study employed an online survey for data collection. The questionnaire was adapted from literature and revised based on several pilot studies (van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2002). Participants were students from a large public university in Southwestern China. Participants consisted of 221 Chinese Gen-Z social media users (male = 89, female = 132), and aged between 20 and 24 (M = 22.29, SD = 1.13). Annual family income was coded as low (n = 96, 43.4%) and upper-mid (n = 125, 56.6%) using ¥50,001–¥100,000 (≈$7,455–$14,910) as the threshold (China Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

Measurements
Online Motivations
Ten items were adapted from literature (e.g., Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000; Liu and Li, 2010; Turner, 2015; China Internet Network Information Center, 2017; Andronie et al., 2021), and were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree,” 5 = “strongly agree”). A principal component factor analysis identified two dimensions of the motivations (53% explained variance). Daily routine alternatives were motivations regarding gaining information (0.83), entertainment (0.80),
online shopping (0.61), and doing school- and work-related things (0.70); socialization included seeking help (0.78), sharing with others (0.62), developing/maintaining relationships (0.60), and self-promotion (0.74).

**Social Media Use**

Nineteen items (1–7, 1 = never, 7 = more than three times a day) measured how frequent participants engaged in social media activities. A principal component factor analysis constructed four dimensions (60% explained variance): networked communication (NC) included checking updates (0.76), liking/commenting (0.78), communicating with others (0.67), and checking group-discussion records (0.62); social capital accumulating and exchanging (SCAE) included asking for help (0.74), supporting others (0.77), self-promotion (0.62), and obtaining self-beneficial information (0.63); self-expression (SE) included posting updates (0.69), sharing selfies (0.80), and self-expression (0.67); news watching (NW) included watching news via social media (0.84).

**Demographics**

Participants’ age, gender, education background, urbanness, and annual family income were collected.

**RESULTS**

For RQ1, we used SEM to explore the relationships between Gen-Zs’ online motivations and social media uses, with demographics as covariates. A bootstrapping technique with 5,000 replicates was performed to achieve generalizability beyond the sample. Results indicated that the daily routine alternatives motivation significantly predicted NC and NW, and the socialization motivation was associated with SCAE and SE on social media (see Figure 1).

For RQ2, significant differences in social media practices were observed between low- and upper-mid-income families, when controlling for age, gender, and education background. Gen-Zs from upper-mid-income families used social media for more NC \( F_{(1,216)} = 17.78, p < 0.001 \) and NW \( F_{(1,216)} = 5.01, p < 0.05 \) than those from low-income families, whereas two groups did not significantly differ in SCAE and SE on social media.

Regarding, RQ3, several hierarchical regressions (block 1 = covariates; block 2 = motivations and income, block 3 = interaction effects) were conducted. For Gen-Zs with the daily routine alternatives motivation, income significantly moderated NC, \( B = −0.23, \beta = −1.12, t = −2.67, p < 0.01 \). For those driven by the socialization motivation, income significantly moderated SCAE (\( B = 0.29, \beta = 1.26, t = 3.12, p < 0.01 \)) and SE (\( B = 0.17, \beta = 0.81, t = 1.93, p < 0.05 \)). We used Dawson and Richter’s (2006) approach to probe the interaction effects. As daily routine alternatives motivation became stronger, the low-income participants had a greater increase of their NC on social media (from 4.91 to 5.91) than those with upper-mid-income (from 5.80 to 6.13). When socialization motivation was low, Gen-Zs with more economic capital showed less SCAE (\( M_{low} = 6.00, M_{upper-mid} = 5.69 \)) and SE (\( M_{low} = 4.32, M_{upper-mid} = 4.23 \)) than those from low-income families; whereas when the richer were strongly motivated to socialize online, they would surpass the poorer in both social media practices (SCAE: \( M_{low} = 6.23, M_{upper-mid} = 6.78 \); SE: \( M_{low} = 4.69, M_{upper-mid} = 5.15 \)).

**DISCUSSION**

Results indicated that Chinese Gen-Zs have different social media uses depending on two categories of online motivations: social media as communicative tools and news portals when they are doing their daily routines online; and as platforms for social capital accumulating and exchanging and self-expression during online socialization. The findings are consistent with and extending literature on characteristics of digital natives (e.g., Turner, 2015; Vîtelar, 2019) and indicate different social media uses based on different scenarios. Furthermore, compared to other U&G studies on social media usage (e.g., Turner, 2015; Prakash Yadav and Rai, 2017), our results highlighted an emphasis on social capital throughout social media uses and gratifications, and the integration of social media into daily routines by Chinese Gen-Zs.

Another contribution of this study is that we employed Bourdieusian approach to explore how economic capital influences Gen-Zs’ social media uses and gratifications. We observed distinct social media habitus between Gen-Zs from low- and upper-mid-income families: the latter embrace a more instrumental-rational habitus to use social media more frequently as a communicative tool; whereas the former value the importance of online socialization to increase their social capital, but have no more practices in related social media activities. Finally, Gen-Zs from upper-mid-income families take a more conservative stance in SCAE and SE when their...
socialization motivation is low. This finding is consistent with the literature (e.g., Robinson, 2009; Perrin, 2015) that a higher income is not necessarily associated with more frequent social media practices.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we examined Chinese Gen-Zs’ social media uses and gratifications and found: (1) daily routine alternatives motivation predicts NC and NW, and socialization motivation is associated with SCAE and SE; (2) Gen-Zs from upper-middle-income families employ a more instrumental-rational habitus to use social media as a communicative tool than those from low-income families; (3) Gen-Zs with higher economic income is not necessarily associated with more frequent social media practices.

Gen-Zs. Despite the limitations (e.g., sample representativity, inclusiveness of motivations and uses), our findings shed light on future studies on connections between economic capital, social media U&G, and digital social inequalities among and across digital generations.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

QH was in charge of collecting data and writing manuscript. XH did data analysis and reference check. PH did results report and figure. All authors contributed toward the manuscript.

FUNDING

This work was funded by National Social Science Funding of China, Number: 19BXW060.

REFERENCES

Abbas, R., and Mesch, G. S. (2015). Cultural values and Facebook use among Palestinian youth in Israel. *Comput. Hum. Behav.*, 48, 644–653. doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2015.02.031

An, S. (2021). “China Social Media User Behavior Report,” in *China New Media Development Report*, eds X. Tang and C. Huang (Beijing: Social Science Academic Press), 244–260.

Andronie, M., Lăzăroiu, G., Ștefănescu, R., Ionescu, L., and Cocosatu, M. (2021). Neurormanagement decision-making and cognitive algorithmic processes in the technological adoption of mobile commerce apps. *Occas. Copernic.*, 12, 1033–1062. doi: 10.24136/oc.2021.034

Boyd, D. M., and Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: definition, history, and scholarship. *J. Comput. Med. Commun.*, 13, 210–230. doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x

Calderon Gomez, D. (2021). The third digital divide and Bourdieu: bidirectional conversion of economic, cultural, and social capital to (and from) digital capital among young people in Madrid. *New Media Soc.*, 23, 2534–2553. doi: 10.1177/1461444820933252

Chen, H. T., Chan, M., and Lee, F. L. (2016). Social media use and democratic engagement: a comparative study of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China. *Chin. J. Commun.*, 9, 348–366. doi: 10.1080/17544750.2016.1210182

China Bureau of Statistics (2018). *Annual Report*. Available online at: https://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=S01 (accessed March 25, 2022).

China Internet Network Information Center (2017). *Proceedings of the 2016 China Social Media and User Behavior Report*. Available online at: http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwzfy/hlwzxbq/sqbg/201604/P0201607222551429454480.pdf (accessed March 25, 2022).

China Internet Network Information Center (2021). *The 48th Internet Report*. Available online at: http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwzfy/hlwzxbq/hlwtxjy/202102/P02021020334363480104.pdf (accessed March 25, 2022).

Choi, S., Williams, D., and Kim, H. (2020). A snap of your true self: how self-presentation and temporal affordance influence self-concept on social media. *New Media Soc.* 2020:1461444820977199. doi: 10.1177/1461444820977199

Curtis, B. L., Ashford, R. D., Magnuson, K. I., and Ryan-Pettes, S. R. (2019). Comparison of smartphone ownership, social media use, and willingness to use digital interventions between generation z and millennials in the treatment of substance use: cross-sectional questionnaire study. *J. Med. Internet Res.*, 21:e13050. doi: 10.2196/13050

Dabija, D. C., and Băbuț, R. (2019). Enhancing apparel store patronage through retailers’ attributes and sustainability. A generational approach. *Sustainability*, 11:4532. doi: 10.3390/su11174532

Dabija, D. C., and Lung, L. (2018). “Millennials versus Gen Z: online shopping behaviour in an emerging market,” in *Griffiths School of Management and IT Annual Conference on Business, Entrepreneurship and Ethics*, eds S. Văduva, I. Fotea, L. Văduva, and R. Wilt (Cham: Springer), 1–18. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-17215-2_1

Dawson, J. F., and Richter, A. W. (2006). Probing three-way interactions in moderated multiple regression: development and application of a slope difference test. *J. Appl. Psychol.*, 91, 917–926. doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.91.4.917

DiMaggio, P., Hargittai, E., Celeste, C., and Shafer, S. (2004). “Digital inequality: from unequal access to differentiated use,” in *Social Inequality*, eds K. Neckerman (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation), 355–400.

Dimock, M. (2019). Defining generations: where millennials end and generation Z begins. *Pew Res. Center*, 17, 1–7. Available online at: http://tory-silva.com/eselle/miscstudent/downloadpagearticles/fdgenerations-pew.pdf (accessed March 25, 2022).

Gan, C., Lee, F. L., and Li, Y. (2017). Social media use, political affect, and participation among university students in urban China. *Telemat. Inform.*, 34, 936–947. doi: 10.1016/j.tele.2017.04.002

Gentina, E. (2020). “Generation Z in Asia: a research agenda,” in *The New Generation Z in Asia: Dynamics, Differences, Digitalisation*, eds E. Gentina, and E. Parry (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited), 3–19. doi: 10.1108/978-1-80043-220-820201002

Halford, S., and Savage, M. (2010). Reconceptualizing digital social inequality. *Infm. Commun. Soc.*, 13, 937–955. doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2010.499956

Hargittai, E. (2010). Digital na (t) ives? Variation in internet skills and uses among members of the “net generation”. *Soc. Inf.* 80, 92–113. doi: 10.1111/j.1475-682X.2009.00317.x

Hopkins, E. (2022). Machine learning tools, algorithms, and techniques. *J. Self Gov. Manag. Econ.*, 10, 43–55. doi: 10.22381/jume101203

Hu, Q., and Cheong, P. H. (2021). Understanding digital generations: social media habits, memetic engagements, and digital social inequalities in China. *Int. J. Commun.*, 15, 4503–4524.
