THE IMPACT OF GRATIFICATIONS DERIVED FROM USE OF THE SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE QZONE ON THE DEGREE TO WHICH CHINESE ADOLESCENTS INTERACT WITH BRANDS

ABSTRACT

Drawing from the uses and gratifications (U&G) theory, this study explores the influence of gratifications derived from use of the Social Networking Site Qzone on Chinese adolescents' brand interaction in this social network. Qzone is the social networking site that is most preferred and used by Chinese adolescents. Hypothesized relationships are analyzed by structural equation analysis in a sample of 220 Chinese adolescents aged 14–19 with an online Qzone profile. Gratifications that adolescents receive from use of the online social network Qzone, such as socializing and entertainment, are found to have a significantly positive influence on the degree to which they interact with brands. However, information-seeking gratification does not enhance Chinese teenagers' brand interaction in this social network. The results confirm the opinion of some researchers who suggest that brand communication strategies directed at the adolescent segment in SNSs should not concentrate on providing information about product characteristics, but on creating contents that entertain and help to satisfy these young people's needs for socialization.

1. Introduction

As a recent worldwide phenomenon, online social-networking sites (SNSs) have received particular approval from the college student audience. Most of the studies in the literature on this matter focus on Facebook and other such social networks in the countries of the West, while research into the Chinese social networks and the impact on Chinese adolescents who frequent them is thin on the ground. It must be pointed out that government censure in China blocks the entry of outside SNSs into the country, but highly developed local social networks such as RenRen, Weibo, Qzone and others certainly do exist. Although these go unnoticed by the rest of the world, these networks are enjoyed by millions of users in China (Sansone et al.,

2012). By far the foremost of these is Qzone, which receives the most hits among Chinese youth aged between 15 and 20, when compared to its competitors. The Chinese company Trencent launched Qzone in 2005, and at the time of writing its users number some 600 million, placing it in second position internationally for its numbers of registered users: Facebook holds first place. Similarly to other social networks, the foundations of Qzone begin with the basic information supplied when people register, which is then accompanied by pictures, comments, videos, and suchlike posted both by users and their friends. A good number of the services provided by Qzone require payment of a fee, and this also applies to their highly active cell phone application; on offer too, however, is the option of obtaining a "Canary Diamond" pass, through which one gains free access to almost all of Qzone's applications.

Apart from personal profiles, commercial brands can also be present on Qzone through their websites or by creating events that Qzone users are invited to take part in. In recent years, many brands have created their official pages on this Chinese social network, which seeks an efficient low-cost way of contacting Chinese adolescents through this platform. According to trade publications, the social media today are utilized more often than corporate websites by young consumers wishing to gen up on a company, brand, or product (Dei Worldwide, 2008), and SNSs are reported by recent media surveys to have taken the place of e-mail as the most widely-used online activity, to a point where they are now the primary source of information (Albanesius, 2010; Fuscaldo, 2011). Consequently, it is very important for brands to have a presence in these SNSs and to interact with the teenage audience (Araujo & Neijens, 2012), which is more open to the influence of marketing, the aim being to win its loyalty so that these young users act as brand advertisers through positive word of mouth (Chu & Choi, 2011). In addition, in the social media, brand communicators find openings that never before existed for targeting online stakeholders in their social communities and gaining more personal inroads for establishing bonds with consumers (Gensler et al., 2013; Kelly, Kerr, & Drennan, 2010; Rowley, 2009). The findings of recent studies around consumers' brand-related activities indicate that involvement in brand-related SNS groups and virtual communities shows a positive relation with consumer perceptions of viral campaigns and commercial messages in social media (Chi, 2011; Chu, 2011), along with an increase in brand trust and brand loyalty (Casaló et al., 2007; Laroche et al., 2012; Laroche et al., 2013).

For brand communication strategies to be effective in social networks, it is essential for companies to have a really good grasp of what makes people in this age bracket interact with brands when networking online. However, we have hardly found any studies in the literature to date that have looked at how and why individuals interact with brands on SNSs to cultivate effective relationships with today's net-savvy consumers, and there are even fewer instances for the case of social networks apart from Facebook. One of the few researches we located in this connection is the recent work by Tsai & Linjuan (2013), which analyses users' motivations for using SNS brand pages. They found that respondents typically used a Facebook brand page as a platform to search for discount or sales news, to exchange information with other members, and to have fun and seek leisure. The results of their research show that when users visit or follow a company Facebook page, they are primarily driven by utilitarian reasons, rather than by motivations of gaining social support, managing social identities, or voicing their opinions and expectations.

In consequence, in order to contribute to the theoretical knowledge on the mechanism underlying consumer engagement via social media and to cover this gap in the scientific literature, drawing from the uses and gratifications (U&G) theory, the aim of this paper is to investigate the impact of the main gratifications derived from use of Qzone Social Networking Site (socializing, information seeking, and entertainment) on the degree to which Chinese adolescents interact with this social network. This proposed framework has not been addressed previously in the literature. Moreover, previous research on online social networks in China has been extremely scarce (Chu & Choi, 2013; Jackson & Wang, 2013; Wang et al., 2012), and even more so where Qzone is concerned, in spite of the importance of this network for Chinese teenagers and the time they spend using it. Since there are important cultural differences between Western and Eastern cultures, it would be helpful not to concentrate on the USA and Facebook this time but to carry out investigations around other online social networks in the Eastern countries to arrive at a better understanding of SNS impact on teenager behavior.

2. Literature review

2.1. Gratifications derived from use of Social Networking Sites

Some studies have pointed to the relevance of the uses and gratifications (U&G) theory, in the specific framework of the online environment, because of its effectiveness in prognosticating how individuals behave in SNSs (Lee & Ma, 2012). Substantial agreement exists among

authors that some of the principal gratifications that accompany use of online SNSs are socializing, tracking down information, and entertainment (Chua et al., 2012; Diddi & LaRose, 2006; Dunne et al., 2010; Ko et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2010; Lin et al., 2005; Park et al., 2009), and this even applies to the case of China (Chu & Choi, 2011; Jackson & Wang, 2013; Ku et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2012).

Socializing stands out among the foremost and most-researched gratifications that teenagers derive from SNS use (Boyd, 2007; Chen & Marcus, 2012; Howard & Corkindale, 2008; Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011; LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Lee & Ma, 2012; Liu, 2008; Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008). Ellison et al. (2007), using a set of demographic variables, Facebook intensity, self-esteem, and satisfaction with life, highlighted the bridging, bonding, and preserving of social capital. In a longitudinal analysis of panel data from Facebook users, Steinfield et al. (2008) examining baseline Facebook use intensity in year one, saw that it strongly presignified bridging social capital outcomes in year two. They conclude that the properties of Facebook help to break down the blocks that students with lower self-esteem tend to sense in their off-line relationships. Focusing on social media, Park et al. (2009) noted that college students saw socializing as one of the recompenses stimulating them to participate in Facebook groups. Facebook is a place where users can locate old acquaintances ex-school friends, contact them, and catch up on their movements. Urista et al. (2008), analyzing the most common threads running through focus group discussions, suggested that SNS users frequent them because they can selectively, efficiently, and immediately find scope for their (mediated) interpersonal communication with others, providing a constant and uninterrupted channel for seeking acceptance and endorsement from other people. Dunne et al. (2010) saw the maintenance of relationships as a crucial motive for SNS use. In adolescence, young people need to express themselves and have a sense of group belonging, and socialization brings them into proximity with others, where opinions are exchanged, and where they feel they have a voice.

Secondly, *information-seeking* gratification alludes to the fact that SNSs constitute a useful and timely source of knowledge about what is going on, in terms of fashion, concerts, what is new. These online platforms provide a space where the hottest topics can be shared by youngsters (George et al., 2013; Lee & Ma, 2012; Luo, 2002; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). And previous studies have highlighted the gratification produced both by seeking out

information and then pooling it with other like-minded users (Ko et al., 2005; LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Leung, 2007).

The third category, *entertainment*, covers the role played by social media in offering a service of entertainment and a let-out from stress. It is an emotional gratification rooted in fun, having a good time, mixing, keeping boredom at bay. Many people use SNSs to feel good in their spare time and occupy otherwise dull moments. In this regard, Qzone provides a variety of online games that users can get involved with in the company of their friends. SNSs are not restricted then to the provision and satisfaction of basic information demands, but also offer a space for fun, interaction, discussion, and gossip. From his investigation around pleasure-oriented or hedonic information systems (games, say), Van der Heijden (2004), identified enjoyment and pleasure as motors for 'interacting with a hedonic system' that 'is designed to be an end in itself'. Many researchers have seen SNSs as constituting recreational systems along these lines (Kang & Lee, 2010; Lee et al., 2010; Lin & Lu, 2011; McQuail, 2005; Nov et al., 2010; Sledgianowski & Kulviwat, 2009), because the user is drawn back into their orbit due to the very excitement and pleasurable intensity they sense when involved in social networking.

2.2. The influence of gratifications derived from use of the Social Networking Site Qzone on the degree to which Brands interact with Chinese adolescents

The communication strategies and needs of brands have changed with the introduction of social media environments. Firms attempt to address the adolescent segment, interacting with them through their official brand profiles in a direct personalized way (Kelly et al., 2010; Rowley, 2009). To this end, brands concentrate on providing their potential customers with playful experiences and entertainment, information and active participation, to stimulate interactivity between consumer and brand. Consumers can immediately dialogue with the brand, give their opinion, become acquainted with their new products or campaigns, enjoy different kinds of contents and even advertise products themselves through their personal profiles (Othman-Yousif, 2012).

Despite the efforts being made by the brands, however, some studies indicate that the degree to which adolescents interact with brands through social networks is still quite low (Cooper, 2011; Hadija et al., 2012). It is not a matter of them not liking their advertising messages, but simply that these young consumers do not notice them, for the brand messages pass by

undetected amongst the rest of the information (Kelly et al., 2010). What happens is that the youth focus their attention on other things of greater relevance for them: friends' profiles, videos, photos, etc. (Zeng et al., 2009). Hadija et al. (2012) consider that it is very difficult to reach them unless they are really interested in the brand. Hence the relevance of segmented advertising so that advertising messages effectively hit the target audience (Bhattacharya et al., 2006). And this audience, now won over to the brand, sends on the message to friends, acting as a brand advocate (Othman-Yousif, 2012).

The degree of intrusiveness that users sense, stands as another main block to social network advertising: an advertisement can be termed as intrusive if it aggravates customers or causes their attention to wander (Lee, 2002). Where the traditional media (television, radio, print) are concerned, the consumer takes as read that there exists an implicit social contract with the advertising industry, because there are no-charge or low-price programs linked to advertising activities (Gordon & De Lima-Turner, 1997). Advertising is not understood by internet customers to reflect a contract, however, but rather is seen to be a meddlesome and irksome distraction (Gaffney, 2001; Mathews, 2000).

So, to get round these problems and make brand advertising strategies in online social networks effective, it is necessary to understand not only why people use SNSs, but also how they respond to advertising activities (Rodgers & Thorson, 2009; Zeng et al., 2009). Some authors (Stafford & Schkade, 2004; Stafford, 2008) have found as main motivators for SNS use, factors to do with structure, content (information, entertainment), and socialization (mixing with others, for others). The U&G theory (Katz & Foulkes, 1962), already referred to above, explains that customers are engaged in an active quest for avenues that will satisfy needs and provide gratifications that range from the hedonic to the utilitarian; so they might watch television for the buzz of a thriller, or seek the more sober educational approach of a documentary. Therefore, this theory examines the value of an advertisement through its power to meet customers' requirements in terms of entertainment, escape, fun, or emotional release (McQuail, 1983; Sansone et al., 2012).

On a similar note, concerning the most suitable contents for brand communication strategies in SNSs, for some authors the advertisement becomes relevant just for its informative content, i.e., a content that informs users about the benefits of the product (Rotzoll, Haefner, & Sondage, 1990). Other authors, however, are of the opinion that such an approach would not

constitute the most appropriate advertising discourse for brands in their communication strategies in SNSs (Goldsmith & Lafferty, 2002; Williams, 2010). For these researchers, when brands address the teenage audience, it is no longer sufficient to concentrate on supplying information about product benefits, as used to occur on television; they argue that entertaining contents should also be created to provide some kind of enjoyment or entertainment for the user (e.g. advergames), alongside tools such as forums or chats that allow adolescents to interact and engage in dialogue regarding the brand with friends or other users and thereby satisfy their emotional needs for socialization.

With the afore-mentioned in mind, in this research we suggest that a positive relation exists between the main gratifications stemming from the use of online social networks and the degree of interaction between adolescents and the brands in the social network. Accordingly, we propose that the greater the perception of entertainment, socialization and provision of helpful and timely information in Qzone by Chinese teenagers, the greater is their interaction with brands within the social network.

Therefore, the following hypotheses were developed:

H1. Socializing on Qzone enhances the interaction of Chinese teenagers with brands in the Qzone social network.

H2. Information seeking on Qzone enhances the interaction of Chinese teenagers with brands in the Qzone social network.

H3. Entertainment on Qzone enhances the interaction of Chinese teenagers with brands in the Qzone social network.

2. Method

2.1. Sample and procedure

After obtaining the corresponding permissions from school centers and express parental consent, we conducted self-administered surveys in seven Chinese high schools on a total sample of 220 Chinese teenagers between 14 and 19 years of age (M=16.71, SD=0.931) who possessed Qzone personal profiles; 129 were female (58.6%) and 91 male (41.4%). The study

was carried out between September and November 2013. The teenagers participating were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that their responses would be anonymous.

2.2. Measures

The scales measuring the independent variables were derived from the literature in order to ensure content validity. First, the degree of adolescents' interaction with brands in the social network Qzone was established as a one-dimensional construct: 'I interact with brands on the Qzone social network (e.g., joining and engaging in conversations on Qzone brand pages)' (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007). Response categories for this item ranged from 1 (*Not at all*) to 4 (*A lot*).

The measurements assessing gratifications from information seeking, socializing, and entertainment were adapted from prior U&G research (Lee & Ma, 2012; Lee et al., 2010; Park et al., 2009). All these constructs were measured using multiple items, each measured using a 4-point Likert-type scale. Response categories for this item ranged from 1 (*Not at all*) to 4 (*A lot*).

3. Results

We conducted a structural equation model (SEM) to examine the relationships among the constructs. The adjustment coefficients in the structural model, as well as the results from structural equation analysis of the relation of latent variables, are shown in Table 1. The measures indicate an adequate fit of the model (Bollen, 1989). Structural equation analysis indicates a significant positive influence both of socializing gratification (SRC=0.20, p=0.021) and of entertainment gratification (SRC=0.20, p=0.022) on adolescents' brand interaction on the Qzone social network. Thus, hypotheses 1 and 3 are significantly supported by the present data. Structural equation analysis, meanwhile, indicates the existence of a positive non-significant relation of information-seeking gratification on adolescents' brand interaction on Qzone (SRC=0.05, p=0.54). Therefore, hypothesis 2 is not supported by the present data.

Table 1

Structural equation analysis: regression coefficients (standardized; non-standardized; p)

Factor	
Socializing → Brand interaction	.20; .25; $p = .021$
Entertainment → Brand interaction	.20; .31; $p = .022$
Information seeking → Brand interaction	.05; .06; $p = .54$
Model Fit	GFI = 0.96; AGFI = 0.93; NFI = 0.95; CFI = 0.98; RMR = 0.03; RMSEA = 0.04 Chi-square=44.1; Chi-square/df=1.47

Note: GFI = Goodness-of-Fit Index; AGFI = Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index; NFI = Normed Fit Index; CFI = Comparative Fit Index; RMR = root mean square residual; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation.

4. Discussion and implications

The two main contributions this work makes to the scientific literature are: in first place, an analysis of the role of gratifications derived from SNS use on the degree of adolescents' brand interaction in these online platforms, a subject that the literature has hardly touched on, and in second place an analysis of this phenomenon for the case of Chinese teenagers and of the Chinese social network Qzone. This network, despite being the second largest after Facebook in terms of number of users, has not yet been studied in scientific terms.

The results of this research demonstrate the existence of a significant positive influence both of socializing gratification and of entertainment gratification on adolescents' brand interaction on Qzone social network. And structural equation analysis indicates the existence of a positive non-significant relation of information-seeking gratification on Chinese adolescents' brand interaction on Qzone. So, in contrast to recent findings for the case of Facebook (Tsai & Linjuan, 2013), the results of this research show that when Chinese users follow a Qzone brand page, they are primarily driven by entertainment reasons and by motivations of gaining social support.

These results confirm the opinion of some researchers whose recommendation is not to focus brand communication strategies in SNSs on providing information about product characteristics, but on creating contents that entertain and enable the socialization needs of adolescents (Fosdick, 2012; Kelly et al., 2010; Stafford, 2008; Williams, 2010). In the same regard, Goldsmith & Lafferty (2002) suggest that for brand strategies directed at teenagers to be effective in SNSs, they have to redefine and change their advertising discourse from one centered on the benefits of the product, to a discourse that emphasizes the values and emotional experiences associated with it, trying to entertain, surprise and persuade the user with messages that do more than communicate strict information about the product. To give an example, the different advertising formats that the brand *Coca Cola* employs in its Facebook profile concentrate on the value of happiness, referring to the qualities of love, music or leisure. These social values perform a persuasive function and seek to transmit the need to acquire a particular product and with it, by extension, the value that is set in play, while feeling socially accepted as members who belong to an ideology.

In order to better fulfill users' concerns, desires and interests, advertisers have to grasp what drives users to interact with brands in online social networks. Thereby, they will access the tools which will set off brand engagement in customers, leading to the construction of quality relationships. Concretely, what emerges from the results of this investigation is that when Chinese youngsters have a greater perception of entertainment and of socialization on Qzone, their interaction with brands within the social network increases, in that they are more willing to join in and engage in conversations on companies' Qzone pages. Given that this is the case, therefore, in order to meet the social remit of the Qzone SNS and satisfy young customers' entertainment requirements, brand communicators ought to build into their approach a diversity of content that is entertaining and fun, incorporating riddles and jokes, daily horoscopes, music videos from brand endorsers, and tales of human interest.

In other words, brand communicators should focus on content and Qzone SNS applications that are entertaining and make it possible to satisfy Chinese youth's needs for socialization, through interactivity and active participation with other users, for instance. Future research should discuss the generalizability of the results: a way to do this would be to replicate the analysis in different geographical markets and other SNSs.

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