



# The effect of gratifications derived from use of the social networking site Qzone on Chinese adolescents' positive mood



Vanessa Apaolaza<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jiaxun He<sup>b</sup>, Patrick Hartmann<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, University of the Basque Country UPV/EHU, Bilbao, Spain

<sup>b</sup> School of Business, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing from Uses and Gratifications Theory, this study explores the influence of the gratifications derived from use of the social networking site Qzone on Chinese adolescents' positive mood. 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 Chinese adolescents receive from use of the online social network Qzone, such as socializing, information-seeking, and entertainment are found to have a significantly positive influence on their positive mood. Findings of this study extend the existing theoretical framework on the application of the Uses and Gratifications Theory to social networking sites. In addition, findings are in line with those of a number of authors who suggest that social networking site use may have positive consequences for teenagers. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, online social-networking sites (SNSs) have achieved notable popularity among high school students all over the world. However, while there is a predominance of studies in the literature that deal with the social network Facebook and other social networks in Western countries, there are few studies analyzing the Chinese social networks and the effects of their use on Chinese adolescents. In China, because of government censure, most relevant international SNSs including Facebook cannot enter the country and local social networks have developed such as Qzone, RenRen, and Weibo among others. Although these online social networks are mostly unknown in the rest of the world, they have millions of users in China (Sansone, Moretta, & Bruni, 2012). Qzone stands out among them as the social network most visited by Chinese youth between 15 and 20 years of age. Qzone was created in 2005 by the Chinese company Tencent, and currently has more than 600 million open user accounts, making it the second social network in the world after Facebook, in terms of numbers of regis-

tered users (Millward, 2013a, 2013b). 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. Like other social networks, Qzone is built around the basic information provided upon registration, as well as pictures, comments, videos, etc., posted by users and their friends. Most of the services offered by Qzone, whose cell phone application is also very active, are free paying; however, it is possible to acquire a pass known as “Canary Diamond”, which provides free access to nearly all its applications.

Previous behavioral research on Chinese online social networks has been scarce (Jackson & Wang, 2013; Wang, Jackson, Zhang, & Su, 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. To address this gap in the literature is not only important because of the fact that Western SNSs such as Facebook are currently not present in China, but because there may be significant differences in SNSs user behavior between Western SNS users and Chinese users of local SNSs such as Qzone and Renren.

Indeed, there is significant evidence that American-based SNS culture is more individualistic oriented and Asian-based SNS culture more collectivistic. Qiu, Lin, and Leung (2013) showed that user culture in Renren is more collectivistic oriented than Facebook culture. In particular, sharing practices on SNSs appear to be different between American-based SNSs and Asian-based SNSs. Renren users seem to perform more benevolent in-group sharing than

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Business Administration and Marketing, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, University of the Basque Country UPV/EHU, Avda. Lehendakari Aguirre, 83, 48015 Bilbao, Spain. Tel.: +34 945014489.

E-mail addresses: [vanessa.apaolaza@ehu.es](mailto:vanessa.apaolaza@ehu.es), [vanessa.apaolaza@gmail.com](mailto:vanessa.apaolaza@gmail.com) (V. Apaolaza).

the Facebook community. Asian-based SNSs tend to have tighter social relationships, with their practices reflecting an indirect communication style and less open self-disclosure, whereas American-based SNSs tend to have wider social networks, with their practices reflecting a more direct communication style and bolder self-disclosure. Online cultures seem to embody the corresponding characteristics of the culture in which the SNS is hosted. Further research has observed a greater level of bonding social capital in SNSs among American young users than their Chinese counterparts, but no significant difference in bridging social capital between the two groups of SNS users. Overall, Chinese and American college students also seem to employ different self-presentation strategies in SNSs (Chu & Choi, 2010). Thus, there may be significant differences in some aspects but similarities too (Ji et al., 2010; Tsai & Men, 2012). Consequently, research should not concentrate exclusively on American based social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter, but also encompass Eastern SNSs.

Drawing from Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory, which studies individuals as active agents who use media for their personal needs (Arnett, Larson, & Offer, 1995; DeNora, 2001; Diddi & LaRose, 2006), previous studies in the literature have analyzed the influences of gratifications derived from use of the Internet and social networking sites (SNSs) on different psychological variables, such as the individual's self-esteem, loneliness and subjective well-being (e.g., Apaolaza, Hartmann, Medina, Barrutia, & Echebarria, 2013; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; George, Dellasega, Whitehead, & Bordon, 2013; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011). Lee and Ma (2012) showed that individuals who are driven by gratifications of information seeking, entertainment, socializing, and status seeking were more likely to share news in social media platforms. Nevertheless, although a number of diverse outcome variables have been related with gratifications derived from SNS usage, an important research gap remains, concerning the impact that gratifications stemming from SNS use exert on emotional outcomes such as user mood. To date, there have not been any studies that analyze the role of SNS gratifications in user mood regulation. However, it seems important to analyze the effect of social media gratifications on the user's emotional experiences and states. In the context of the ongoing debate as to whether SNS use has mainly positive or negative consequences for the individual's psychological wellbeing, the emotional consequences of SNS usage gratifications constitute an important research topic.

While much social media research has focused on negative outcomes for the individual (Moody, 2001; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000; Parayitam, Desai, Desai, & Eason, 2010; Thomée, Eklöf, Gustafsson, Nilsson, & Hagberg, 2007) some researchers have recommended a focus on positive outcomes in response to the Internet and the social media (e.g., Apaolaza et al., 2013; Ellison et al., 2007; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). The present study follows the latter approach, centering on potentially positive effects of social media gratifications on user's emotional states, as a proxy for transient psychological wellbeing. Positive moods tend to encourage more self-assurance and buoyancy, and a lack of inhibition (Forest, Clark, Mills, & Isen, 1979; Park, Lennon, & Stoel, 2005). To assess the effects of gratifications on the user's positive mood, this research employs the positive affect (PA) dimension of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) scale (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), a very popular measure for transient emotional states. It is also quite common in the literature, when dealing with mood enhancement processes, to concentrate exclusively on the PA dimension of PANAS (Crawford & Henry, 2004; Johnston et al., 2011; Roehm & Roehm, 2005). Thus, in line with this perspective, the present research centers on the analysis of gratification effects that may enhance psychological wellbeing through an improvement of the positive mood dimension.

On the other hand, given the important impact that SNS use has on younger individuals who are still in a formation and development process, the study of adolescents' SNS use and motivations is particularly relevant. SNSs are also of great relevance for young people, because adolescents are strong consumers of social media and SNSs occupy a significant space in their lives (Dunne, Lawlor, & Rowley, 2010; Lee & Ma, 2012; Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000). Youth is a period of transition in which individuals are faced with successive tests as they grow up, sometimes accompanied by emotional anxiety and a heightened need for the regulation of mood states (Halle, 2003). In this regard, as has been demonstrated for music (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007) and the exposure to specific types of television programs (Bryant & Zillmann, 1984; Christ & Medoff, 1984; Greenberg, 1974), online social media may have the potential to positively improve the mood of adolescents. Since teenagers frequently aim at the simultaneous achievement of various goals (Shah & Kruglanski, 2000), the potential of SNSs for the regulation of mood might lie in their great flexibility in meeting a variety of goals, such as the satisfaction of emotional needs for socialization, entertainment and the urge to exchange information.

Accordingly, we propose that each of the gratifications received from SNS use can enhance adolescents' mood in a positive way. Thus, the aim of this study is to analyze the influence of SNS gratifications on users' positive dimension of mood for the particular case of adolescent users of the Chinese SNS Qzone. The proposed framework has not been addressed previously in the literature. The contribution of this study is threefold: First, the influence of gratifications derived from SNS usage on the emotional outcome positive mood is analyzed. Second, the study focuses on adolescents, as a particularly relevant and sensitive user group. Third, both previous topics are studied for the Chinese SNS Qzone, which has hardly been studied previously, most research focusing instead on Western SNS such as Facebook or Twitter. The conceptual model is tested on a sample of 220 Chinese adolescents aged 14–19 with an online Qzone profile. Hypothesized relationships are addressed using structural equation analysis.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

### 2.1. The Uses and Gratifications approach applied to social networking sites

The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory explains psychological and social antecedents as well as subsequent attitudinal and behavioral effects of media consumption. The basic assumption of U&G Theory is that people actively decide to consume particular media to satisfy specific needs such as information seeking, entertainment, social interaction, and escapism (Diddi & LaRose, 2006; Rubin, 1986). From a U&G perspective, individuals are not passive consumers of media but assume an active role in choosing media to meet their desires and needs to achieve gratification. U&G Theory stems originally from the analysis of traditional media (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973), but since then has been applied to the emerging new media. In particular, a number of studies have recently addressed the use of social media such as SNSs from a U&G perspective, supporting the appropriateness of this approach in the particular context of online environments in terms of its potential explanatory ability to predict individual behaviors in SNSs (e.g., Lee & Ma, 2012; Leung, 2013). Social media may have particular gratifications since they offer individuals the possibility not only to consume media but also to interact and to share personalized media content and information (Diddi & LaRose, 2006; Dunne et al., 2010). For the particular case of MySpace and Facebook, Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) found that socialization, entertainment, self-seeking and information-seeking motivates the use of such friend-networking sites. Most subsequent studies have

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