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Weibo or Weixin? Gratifications for using different social media

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Abstract. Social media has experienced great changes in recent years. Various social media platforms emerge and develop significantly. Why users choose to use some particular social media becomes a major concern. Through adopting uses and gratifications theory, this study aims to explore gratifications sought from using two popular social media: Weibo and Weixin. Data was collected by eighteen in-depth interviews and content analysis was conducted for data analysis. Results show that, seven gratifications could be sought from using Weibo: information seeking, social interaction, entertainment, pass time, self-expression, information sharing and social networking, while five gratifications from Weixin usage: private social networking, social interaction, convenient communication, high-quality information provided and information sharing. In addition, three general gratifications for usage of both Weibo and Weixin were identified: information sharing, social networking and social interaction. Implications of this study are also discussed.

Keywords: instant messaging, social networking service, social media, gratification, uses and gratifications theory, motivation.

1. Introduction

The use of social media has become more widespread and continues to grow significantly in recent years. Social media is “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technical foundations of Web2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content” [1]. Social media enables users to create and share information, and to communicate with each other. Typical social media platforms include: instant messaging services like Weixin and QQ, social networking services like Renren and Facebook, microblog services like Weibo and Twitter.

CNNIC statistical report mentioned that, as the No.1 Internet application, instant messaging had a continuously rising utilization ratio (from 82.9% in 2012 to 86.2% in 2013), while microblog and other communication-type applications had a continuously declining utilization ratio (for microblog, from 54.7% in 2012 to 45.5% in 2013) [2]. Also, CNNIC research report finds that, there are quick changes for

social applications. Social networking sites located in the first line previously; with the emergence of microblog (also “Weibo”) sites, number of users of social networking has dramatically dropped; however, the emergence and development of Weixin has brought about a complicated competition environment for microblog, as some functions of microblog have been substituted or transferred [3]. Then one question arises: why do users choose to use some particular social media? Specially, for Weibo and Weixin users, why do some users use Weibo, while some use Weixin, and some use both?

The extant studies provide us a new perspective to consider the research questions. That is, when users choose to use Weibo, Weixin or both, they could seek for special gratifications to meet their requirements. So, what type of gratifications do users seek for when using Weibo and Weixin? To answer the question, based on the work of [4] and [5], we try to adopt uses and gratifications theory (U&G theory) as our theoretical background, and use in-depth interview as the method of data collection, so as to explore the general and specific gratifications sought from using Weibo and Weixin.

The paper is structured as follows. First, uses and gratifications theory will be introduced as the theoretical background and related studies will be elaborated. Second, research methodology will be described, including research design and data collection. Then findings about gratifications from Weibo and Weixin will be showed in Section 4. And finally, results will be discussed; implications, limitations and future research will also be presented.

2. U&G theory and related studies

2.1 U&G theory

U&G theory was first put forward by Katz " [6]. This theory explores users' usage motivation from the perspective of individuals, and puts forward that users are active and can meet their requirements to use some particular media with special motivations [6]. Furthermore, Katz considers users' media usage behavior as a chain of causation, i.e., "social factors + psychological factors - expectations for media - usage of media - gratifications sought" [6].

U&G theory has the following ideas: individuals are active media users, individuals use some media for particular aims, individuals meet their social and psychological gratifications through using some media, media should connect users' gratifications with their usage of the media when spreading information [6]. The theory aims to understand users' motivations to use media, to explain how users seek their gratifications through media usage, and to show relationships among users' cognitive needs, motivations and their behavior.

For usage of traditional media, contents that media spread and experience brought to users by media usage lead to users' gratifications sought from media usage [7]. With the emergence and development of various new media, uses and gratifications theory is further improved, referring to, such as, interaction and verified gratifications. In addition, researchers adopt uses and gratifications theory to investigate different types of gratifications users seek from using different new media.

2.2 Related studies

Researchers have already made many efforts to explore reasons on why users use social media or related communication technologies. For example, Whiting and Willians [4] identified ten gratifications for using social media: social interaction, information seeking, pass time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge about others. Ku et al. [5] compared gratifications from usage of three CMC technologies (SNS, IM, and e-mail); results revealed four general gratifications: relationship maintenance, information seeking, amusement, and style; and showed specific gratifications: sociability gratification sought from using instant messaging and social networking sites, gratification of kill time sought from using instant messaging. Through 77 surveys and 21 interviews, Quan-Haase and Young [8] found six gratifications users obtained from Facebook: pastime, affection, fashion, share problems, sociability, and social information; furthermore, differences were revealed that Facebook is more related to having fun and knowing about the social activities occurring in one's social network, while instant messaging focused more on relationship maintenance and development. Raacke and Bonds-Raacke [9] showed that many college students used friend-networking sites to meet gratifications such as keeping in touch with friends, posting/looking at pictures.

In addition, researchers have applied U&G theory to explain motivations for using various social media. Lo and Leung [10] revealed gratifications sought from IM usage: peer pressure/entertainment, relationship maintenance, free expression and sociability. Raacke and Bonds-Raacke [9] found gratifications for using social networking sites: keep in touch with old/current friends, post/look at pictures, make new friends, locate old friends, learn about events, post-social functions, feel connected, share information, academic purposes and dating. Pai and Arnot [11] also identified four gratifications for adopting social networking sites: belonging, hedonism, self-esteem, and reciprocity. The above-mentioned findings by [4] and [5] also adopted uses and gratifications for their investigations.

3. Research method and data collection

3.1 Research method

Applying uses and gratifications theory, we try to explain the reasons why users choose different social media (Weibo and Weixin) although they provide some overlap functions. Three stages were adopted for the research design to achieve the research aim.

First, literature review was conducted so as to acquire a preliminary list of gratifications for using Weibo and Weixin. On the basis of gratifications identified by [4] and [5], we further reviewed articles related to usage of different social media, and established a preliminary list of gratifications: relationship maintenance, information seeking, social interaction, entertainment, and killing time.

Second, we conducted in-depth interview to collect data to validate and modify the preliminary list of gratifications. In-depth interview is suitable because the aim of the current research is to explore why users choose to use a particular social media tool.

After data collection, we adopted content analysis for analyzing the data. The researchers independently read and reviewed responses from interviewees, and extracted possible gratifications based on the preliminary list of gratifications. For those gratifications that did not appear on the list, we listed them as a new group. Also, we discussed the responses that we did not agree with each other. After data analysis, we got the final list of gratifications to answer the research questions.

3.2 Data collection

The interviewees were university students in their second or third year from one university in south China. According to Lincoln and Guba [12], the number of interviewees for interviews should be at least 12. So we choose 18 students as samples. Two pre-interviews were conducted before the final interviews so as to check out the questions. All interviews were conducted Face - to - Face in one of the researcher's office in one month, and each interview lasted for 45 – 60 minutes.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for interview samples. Among 18 interviewees, 9 were female and 9 were male. For their study grades, 9 were sophomore and 9 were junior. All of them were from three majors: library science, archives science and information management & information system. For experience for using Weibo, 5 students had 3 years, 3 students had 1, 2, 4, and 5 years respectively, and only 1 student had less than 1 year. For experience for using Weixin, 5 students had 3 years, 4 students had 2 years, and 3 students had less than 1 year, 1 and 4 years respectively.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the sample (N = 2 + 18)

No	Gender	Grade	Major	Experience of using Weibo	Experience of using Weixin
*	Female	Sophomore	Lirary science	2 years	1 year
*	Male	Sophomore	Lirary science	3 years	2 years
A	Female	Sophomore	Information management & information system	Less than 1 year	Less than 1 year
B	Female	Sophomore	Library science	3 years	2 years
C	Male	Sophomore	Archives science	5 years	4 years
D	Male	Sophomore	Information management & information system	2 years	2 years
E	Male	Sophomore	Library science	3 years	1 year
F	Female	Sophomore	Library science	4 years	3 years
G	Male	Sophomore	Information management & information system	3 years	3 years
H	Female	Sophomore	Archives science	2 years	Less than 1 year

I	Female	Sophomore	Archives science	5 years	4 years
J	Female	Junior	Information management & information system	5 years	4 years
K	Male	Junior	Library science	1 year	2 years
L	Male	Junior	Archives science	1 year	1 year
M	Female	Junior	Information management & information system	2 years	Less than 1 year
N	Male	Junior	Library science	3 years	2 years
O	Male	Junior	Archives science	4 years	3 years
P	Female	Junior	Library science	3 years	3 years
Q	Male	Junior	Information management & information system	1 year	1 year
R	Female	Junior	Archives science	4 years	3 years
Note: The first two samples with * were invited for pre-interviews.					

4. Results

4.1 Gratifications from Weibo

Seven gratifications were identified with respect to the use of Weibo. They will be discussed as follows.

(1) Information seeking. 83.33% (15) interviewees reported using Weibo to seek various information, such as information about social events and news, history events, work and studies. Interviewee C said that “Weibo can provide different types of information, I like topics such as ‘hot topics’, ‘hot post in 24-hour’ and ‘specially focused topics’, so as to quickly seek information on what happened.” Interviewee A further referred to use Weibo for “seeking information about studying abroad, such as introduction of universities and majors, daily study and life on some particular universities.”

(2) Social interaction. 72.22% (13) interviewees mentioned using Weibo for social interaction, i.e., interacting with various users ranging from acquaintances, new friends and even famous people. Interviewee J said that “Weibo can help me quickly know what happens on my friends and communicate with them; also, I can pay attention to those who share similar interests with me.” Also interviewee D mentioned that “I can keep in touch with others, talk anything with them, even we do not meet each other Face-to-Face. Weibo expands my social life online.”

(3) Entertainment. 72.22% (13) interviewees reported using Weibo for entertainment. Interviewee B mentioned that “Weibo brings me much fun. I can always find interesting videos or posts. I enjoy it.” And interviewee Q said that “I like playing games in Weibo platform, especially with friends.”

(4) Pass time. 66.67% (12) interviewees used Weibo for passing time. Some responses from interviewees were “I read posts from Weibo when waiting for bus”, “I log in Weibo when class is boring”, “I use Weibo when I can’t sleep during night”.

(5) Self-expression. 55.56% (10) interviewees mentioned using Weibo for self-expression that they can freely publish whatever they want to, even with one or two words, or just some expression. Interviewee R said that “I like to write down what I am thinking on things that I see or experience. Weibo provides various forms for me to do so, such as words, pictures, music or videos.” While interviewee G mentioned that “I like making comments to others’ posts I am interested in. It is a good place to express whatever you want to.”

(6) Information sharing. 55.56% (10) used Weibo for sharing information. Some responses were “I would like to share my ideas through posts or comments”, “When I read some interesting posts, I will share them with others”, “Through sharing, I could make advertisement for myself.”

(7) Social networking. 44.44% (8) reported using Weibo for social networking. Interviewee P mentioned that “I think Weibo is a good social networking tool. It not only makes us keep in touch with old friends, also give us opportunities to know others in the world.” Interviewee E further said that “I use Weibo to maintain my social networks through sharing, commenting, or playing together with my online friends.”

4.2 Gratifications from Weixin

With respect to Weixin, five gratifications were identified as follows.

(1) Private social networking. This type of gratification was mentioned by 88.89% (16) interviewees. Some responses were “Compared to Weibo, Weixin is more private. Only my friends can read my posts”, “(Weixin) is a private social networking platform, not an open one like Weibo”, “I communicate with my real friends by Weixin, share ideas with them. So I can protect my privacy. I think this advantage is the most one that we choose to use Weixin”.

(2) Social interaction. 77.78% (14) interviewees reported use Weixin for social interaction. Some responses were “I use Weixin to interact with my friends that I have already know in the real life”, “Weixin is convenient for me to communicate with my friends. Most of my friends and classmates use Weixin, and we interact with each other through it”.

(3) Convenient communication. 66.67% (12) interviewees used Weixin due to convenient communication. Interviewee F said that “Weixin is convenient for us to communicate with each other. There are messages and voices. I like the real-time speaking function. It is just like you are talking with somebody using the mobile phone, but without any costs.” Interviewee M further mentioned that “It is indeed a convenient communication tool. It is mobile, so no matter where you are, you can use it to communicate with your friends. Except for words, voices are more intuitive. Even your friends are not online when you talk with them, they can hear from you after logging in and replying to you quickly.”

(4) High-quality information provided. 55.56% (10) interviewees mentioned the high-quality information provided by Weixin. Some responses were “There is not so much rubbish information. Only those I am interested in and focus on can be provided for me”, “It is not the same as using Weibo. Weibo always pushes information that I do not like, such as advertisements. When I use Weixin, I only pay attention to that useful information. And other rubbish information will not come to me if I do not

follow them”, “The information has high-quality, sometimes I think that I am reading a good prose. And there are no advertisements, less rubbish information”.

(5) Information sharing. 50% (9) reported to use Weixin for information sharing. Some responses were “I use Weixin because I can share information with my friends: my current state, what I am doing at the moment, good articles that I ever read”, “When I read some interesting posts, I always share them with my friends. I just click the “share” button and it is done”.

5. Discussion, implications and limitations

5.1 Discussion

Considering Weibo and Weixin as popular social media platforms, users choose to use them for meeting different requirements. For example, for Weibo usage, users seek for diversified information, perceive enjoyment. While for using Weixin, users keep close connections with friends, acquire more valued information. Gratifications sought from Weibo or Weixin further foster users’ regular and continuance usage. Thus, we attempt to adopt U&G theory to explore why users choose to use different social media (Weibo or Weixin), to explain what types of gratifications users can seek from using these social media.

Our research indicates some major findings with respect to the choice of instant messaging services. Results show that users acquire various gratifications to varying degrees when using Weibo or Weixin [5]. For the usage of Weibo, users can receive gratifications of information seeking (83.33%), social interaction (72.22%), entertainment (72.22%); pass time (66.67%), self-expression (55.56%), information sharing (55.56%) and social networking (44.44%). With Weixin usage, gratifications of private social networking (88.89%), social interaction (77.78%), convenient communication (66.67%), high-quality information provided (55.56%) and information sharing (50%) are sought. In addition, results show the general gratifications for usage of both Weibo and Weixin: information sharing, social networking and social interaction. More details about the findings will be discussed below.

For gratifications identified for Weibo and Weixin, results suggest that multiple gratifications can be sought from using Weibo and Weixin. With respect to Weibo, the results are partially consistent with the findings of [4-5]. However, our results also show that users use Weibo for social networking. For Weixin use, gratifications of social interaction, convenient communication and information sharing sought were partially accord with what [4] identified. In addition, private social networking and high-quality information provided are special gratifications that sought from Weixin.

For general gratifications from both Weibo and Weixin, social interaction, information sharing and social networking were identified. As popular social media tools, Weibo and Weixin play important roles in fostering users to interact with others, to share information and to maintain their relationships [10] [14].

5.2 Implications

This research has some implications for academia and practitioners in several ways. For academic, this research utilizes uses and gratifications theory to explain the usage of Weibo and Weixin. The findings could further strengthen the relevance and suitability of uses and gratifications theory in social media research. Also, results suggest specific gratifications for Weibo or Weixin, and general gratifications for both of Weibo and Weixin. For practitioners, this research provides a rich understanding of why users choose different social media. These findings could help them better understand users' different preferences and choose suitable social media platforms so as to meet users' gratifications and effectively achieve their own marketing purposes.

5.3 Limitations and future research

The current study has several limitations that should be considered in the future research. First, the study only focuses on the specific sample of Chinese university students. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to all social media users. Future research needs to explore other types of social media users, such as working staff. Second, this study conducts an exploratory research, and adopts interviews as the main method for data collection. Future research should consider quantitative research and collect data from more samples.

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