Chapter 9
Virtual Ties, Perceptible Reciprocity, and Real–Life Gratifications in Online Community Networks:
A Study of QQ User Groups in China

Zixue Tai
University of Kentucky, USA

Xiaolong Liu
Guangdong Pharmaceutical University, China

ABSTRACT

QQ has been a leading force of China's social media revolution both in terms of its user reach and its socio-cultural impact. This chapter offers an analysis of QQ groups based on semi-structured in-depth interviews of 33 users with a particular emphasis on participants' rationales, motivations, and communicative behaviors as displayed in different types of groups. This is accomplished through interrogating a multiple set of individual, collective, social, and contextual factors that shape group dynamics and individual participation. It also discusses the implications of the findings for the scholarship on online communities in general, and the understanding of Chinese online groups in particular.

INTRODUCTION

While the Internet has been a leading force of sociocultural transformation in the past two decades in China, a variety of blossoming platforms of social media have been pushing grassroots-led user-generated communication to ever-new territories. Although Social Networking Service (SNS) sites modeled after Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in China are as earth-shattering as found anywhere in the world (albeit not without significant twists and turns in their processes of adapting to the Chinese soil), one particularly notable hotspot that has defined China's new media culture is the popularization of QQ, an Instant

Messaging (IM) service developed by Tencent. By far the leading IM service provider in China, QQ allows users to chat, email, file-share and engage in activities resembling conventional online forums or bulletin-board systems (BBS) and more via not only the conventional Internet but mobile phones, PDAs, and other emerging platforms of communication as well.

Contextualized in current strands of theoretical deliberations on virtual communities, this chapter scrutinizes one particularly popular aspect of QQ applications known as QQ Groups. The QQ Groups service allows users to create tiered levels of user groups catering to specific interests, purposes or needs of communication, and the size of QQ groups varies from 200 to 2,000. QQ groups can engage in members-only communicative tasks, and have effectively created an exclusive virtual communal space. Lately, more and more groups in China have utilized this QQ capability to organize contentious action or other public events.

The chapter starts with a brief overview of the historical development of QQ and its role in China's Internet industry, and then goes on to examine the dynamics of QQ user groups against the overall backdrop of Chinese cyber culture. This is followed by an analysis of our own qualitative data based on semi-structured in-depth interviews of QQ group members on the rationales, motivations, and communicative behaviors as displayed in different types of groups. Special emphasis is placed on the individual, collective, social, and contextual factors that shape group dynamics. It ends with a discussion on the implications of our findings for the research of online communities in general, and the understanding of Chinese online groups in particular.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE: SOCIAL SUPPORT AND COLLABORATIVE ACTION THROUGH VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

The human desire for social bonds and interpersonal relationships has been of perennial interest to various disciplines in the social science tradition. In their seminal article aptly titled "The Need to Belong," Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggest that "human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497). As Baumeister and Leary point out, this basic drive can be met by two criteria: first, we need "frequent personal contacts or interactions" with others; second, the relationship or personal bond must be marked by "stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future" (p. 500).

Besides primordial networks (e.g., family), the basic need for social connections manifests itself in the human hunger for variegated groups and community-oriented affiliations in social life. It is no surprise that the role of community for fulfilling human values and development has garnered considerable interest in social theories from classic writers such as Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel to present-day intellectual thinkers. Traditionally, community sentiment has been conceptualized in terms of attachment to place (Hummon, 1992). Our sense of community, however, does not need to be locale-bound. Gusfield (1975) noted two prevalent usages of the term "community": one is territorial in nature and is rooted in "location, physical territory, and geographical continuity" (p. xv), and the other is relational in essence, focusing on "the quality or character of human relationships, without reference to location" (p. xvi). People grouped together based on spiritual orientations, professional followings, and personal interests, therefore, can be understood as particular types of relational communities. Indeed, as Durkheim (1984) and Parsons (1951) observed, more communities develop based on professional skills and personal

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