Mediated Hook-Up: Gratifications and Psychological Attributes as Predictors of Chinese College Students’ Hook-up Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the uses and sought gratifications of MoMo—a location-based real-time app, among Chinese college students seeking for hook-ups. The results show that MoMo users were motivated by two gratifications—sexual freedom and online inclusion. Results from regression analysis illustrated that loneliness was a strong predictor of both gratifications. Additionally, loneliness, self-esteem, and to a lesser extent, both gratifications significantly predicted patterns of MoMo usage for hook-up. This study has filled the research gap between the examination of youth-hook-up app relationship in China and the exploration of heterosexual college community’s gratifications-sought from MoMo use.

KEYWORDS

Chinese College Students, Mediated Hook-Up Behavior, Momo, Psychological Attributes, Uses And Gratifications

INTRODUCTION

“Online hookup devices” (Race, 2015) have exploded in recent years. Apps such as Tinder, Grinder and MoMo have facilitated sex seeking, particularly based on location awareness of others (Choi et al., 2017; Licoppe & Inada, 2010; Liu, 2016). These apps allow interactions with strangers by “typically displaying photos of nearby users, which can be clicked to reveal a more detailed profile and initiate immediate interaction via text chat” (Birnholtz et al., 2014, p. 1). As these apps have millions of active users worldwide and one of their pervasive uses is oriented towards casual sex (Licoppe et al., 2016), it is worthy to understand the uses and their effects from the socio-psychological perspectives. Why do people, especially the youth, become so obsessed with sexual encounters through these apps? Despite a few studies found certain motives and gratifications (ibid; Landovitz et al., 2013), the way in which online hook-ups and offline sexual possibilities are related to psychological traits has not been explored, as well as nuanced gratifications. Meanwhile, previous research mostly focused on homosexual group (Miller, 2015; Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014). These perspectives however largely attribute risky behaviors and dangerous outcomes (e.g. HIV spreading) to hook-up devices use (Bauermieister et al., 2011; Mustanske et al., 2011). It is thus worthwhile clarifying ‘positive’ reasons behind such use among heterosexual groups, and the gratifications they seek.
Additionally, despite hook-up is a widespread phenomenon in Western society, particularly among college students (Bogle, 2008; Garcia et al., 2012; Monto & Carey, 2014), hook-up in China is considered culturally and morally degenerate (Liu, 2011). Chinese youth’s sexuality has also long been suppressed under the Party’s leash (e.g. sex education) (Aresu, 2009). Yet, changes occurred. For example, studies have found an increased percentage (from 10.7%, 1991 to 32%, 2006) of college students in premarital sex (Pan, 2007). One also witnesses a more receptive attitude towards nuanced and complex sexual behaviors among the youth (Zheng et al., 2011). Furthermore, China currently has ranked first for smartphone users (CNNIC, 2015). The domestic hook-up apps are flourishing and show strong market performance (see MoMo Inc. and the U.S. NASDAQ, 2014). Not much academic attention has yet been paid to investigate the behavioral patterns of Chinese hook-up devices users.

This study would therefore fill the research gap between examining heterosexual-youth-hook-up app relationship in China and identifying specific gratifications sought from MoMo, a popular computing first designed and developed for strangers to hook up under China’s context (Liu, 2016). In explaining mediated-communication behavior and its origins, examining the objectives and the underlying assumptions of uses and gratifications perspective seems to constitute a good approach. What motivates users to hook up online, and how gratifications and psychological traits affect the initiation and accomplishment of online hook-ups are important research topics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory

U&G assumes that audiences are actively selecting media and accordingly differentiating media behaviors (Rubin, 1983). Certain media use is associated with personal needs and expectations, such as information seeking, entertainment, personal identity, and companionship (Leung and Zhang, 2016). The needs derive from their social and psychological origins, “which generate expectations of the [mass] media or other sources, which lead to differential patterns of media exposure, resulting in gratifications and other consequences” (Katz et al., 1974, p. 20). Gratifications are further distinguished between sought and obtained (Rubin, 2002). Gratifications-sought are the antecedent anticipations, while gratifications-obtained link to the actual gains experienced after media use (Sundar and Limperos, 2013). As audiences’ social and psychological needs usher different choices of media use (De Wiele and Tong, 2014), the degree of media exposure and involvement vary and shape gratifications; conversely, gratifications may affect personal wants too (Poon and Leung, 2013).

Explaining the uses and gratifications on computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools, such as email, texting and SNSs (Dunne et al., 2010; Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000; Leung, 2009, p. 1329) is appropriate (Grellhesl and Punyanunt-Carter, 2012; Stafford et al., 2004). In terms of the ‘updated’ gratifications on the latest platforms, mobility, immediacy, and instrumentality are the strongest predictors of mobile phone use (Leung and Wei, 2000). As for Facebook/MySpace users, the urges are to make new friends and locate old friends (Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2008).

As to apps use, motives are even sophisticated. In general, Lin et al. (2014) developed a typology, including social benefits, immediate access & mobility, entertainment, self-status seeking, pursuit of happiness, information seeking, and socializing, to explain apps adoption. While the instrumental use motives are news seeking and web surfing (Wei, 2008), the maximum gratification on mobile application is relaxing and relieving stress (Ho and Syu, 2010). In a cross-cultural context, Latinos enjoyed most about communication (“keeping in touch”) and instrumentality (“helping to plan your day”) (Albarran, 2009). For certain specialized apps, for example, social mobile games are mainly for the purposes of enjoyment and social interaction (Wei and Lu, 2014).

So far, only a few studies have examined the gratifications associated with hooking up via mobile apps. For instance, Licoppe et al. (2016) analyzed the use of Grindr, a gay social network app, and revealed that online hook-ups were positive rewards for these marginalized people to release sexual
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