

Social youth

Jay Caplan, China Youthology, considers the cultural roles of social media for Chinese youth living in the country's top tier cities compared with those in tier-3 and tier-4 cities

There is no shortage of statistics trumpeting the rise of internet and social media use in China. But for marketers, these numbers raise more questions than they answer. China is a vast, fragmented market with uneven development. What does social media mean to Chinese consumers, and does social media play different roles for consumers in lower tier cities compared with top tier cities?

This article is about the cultural roles of social media for Chinese youth in top tier cities compared with those in tier-3 and tier-4 cities. The insights are based on ethnographic fieldwork in the top tier cities Beijing and Shanghai, and the lower tier cities Jilin, Tangshan, Xuzhou, Zhaoqing, Yiyang and Guangan.

CLOSER IN CULTURE

What are the cultural differences between top tier and lower tier youth? At the very beginning of fieldwork, I approached a group of street-style youth outside a Starbucks in Beijing to ask how they feel about their lower tier peers, and one young man told me: "Only one girl in our group is a native Beijinger. We are lower tier youth."

Even local Chinese marketers often assume there are vast cultural differences between top tier and lower tier youth. But

in many ways, the two groups are growing much closer together. Social mobility in China is on the rise, with many Chinese youth moving back and forth between city tiers for education, employment or shopping. The standard of living in tier-3 and tier-4 cities is also rising fast: lower tier youth buy smartphones, drink coffee and hang out in lifestyle retail centres, just like top tier youth.

So in terms of dividing Chinese youth into segments, city tier may not be the best starting point. Regional clustering, for instance, can be more relevant in deciding factors like internet adoption, social connections, shared topics of interest and cultural nuances.

That said, top tier and lower tier youth have very different social lives, and the differences in how and why they connect with people greatly influence how they use social media.

INTEREST VERSUS INTIMACY

For youth in China's top tier cities, making new connections is an important part of life. Big cities can be complex and overwhelming, with youth facing many choices full of potential opportunities and risks. Lifestyles are hectic and unstable, and young people are under pressure to fend for themselves.

In this context, developing larger social networks can help young people to navigate the possibilities and help them fulfil a wide variety of needs, ranging from career success to learning a new hobby.

Young people from the top tier make new interest-based connections, actively extending their social networks to find friends and resources tailored to what they are interested in.

For lower tier youth, new connections have more dubious value and utility. Lower tier cities are smaller and easier to navigate, with fewer choices. Success and satisfaction most often depend on maintaining good relations with a small group of friends and family. Their lifestyles are more stable and comfortable, with more time to spend together offline. Compared with top tier youth, lower tier youth have stronger interdependence within their core network of close friends and family, with less to gain from investing in new relationships.

Lower tier youth focus on intimate connections, maintaining small, close-knit networks based on offline bonding and interdependence.

How do these differences in social habits influence social networking site (SNS) use? For top tier youth, social media is a crucial tool, and the main channel for valued relationships. For lower tier youth, social media is an entertaining content provider, offering extra channels for enhancing primarily offline relationships.

FILTERING CHOICES

Top tier youth are often overwhelmed by choices and under serious time pressure, so they use social media connections to filter choices and find the best ones. They 'add' social media influencers and curators and

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develop sophisticated networks of influence to get what they want.

Lower tier youth tend not to use social media to filter choices. They have fewer choices and more time, and they enjoy spending longer periods sifting through options for themselves, or turning to influencers within their intimate network.

As an example, let's look at Taobao shopping. Taobao is China's largest e-commerce platform, with C2C (consumer-to-consumer) offerings across a tremendous range of categories.

Top tier youth who shop frequently on Taobao are much more likely to revisit favourite shops, join mailing lists and participate in online forums to find the best deals and choices based on online recommendations.

Lower tier youth who often shop on Taobao mostly start from the home page, searching key words for items they already have in mind. They do not trust online recommendations and draw satisfaction from filtering for themselves. They will also turn to an intimate friend who knows the category - 'the phone guy' or 'the snacks girl' - whose recommendations they trust.

TRIBES AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

For both top tier and lower tier youth, media consumption is an increasingly important driver for SNS adoption.

But top tier youth are more likely to treat media exchange as a conversation, responding and forwarding as a form of community participation. For top tier youth, useful, entertaining or interesting media content is valuable social currency for participating in interest-based social networks, or 'tribes'. Sharing maintains relationships with peers connected by common interests. It helps young people express identity and learn more about lifestyles.

When lower tier youth find media online, they are much more passive about sharing, and are far less likely to care much about participation in online communities. They are unconcerned with the reciprocity of their relationships with strangers who provide content. Media taste is also less important to their identity and social ties - they are less 'tribal' in their social affiliations. They are often content to take whatever more active members of their intimate network are willing to share.

As an example, let's look at the SNS Sina Weibo. It is a microblogging platform, similar to Twitter but with photo sharing functions. Sina Weibo networks are very open and public. Users can follow microblogs without being followed in return, so there is lots of media content circulating through very diverse social networks.

Top tier youth are much more likely to join conversations on Weibo, forwarding and replying to express themselves and make new connections.

Lower tier youth treat Weibo more like traditional media, browsing content but not forwarding. One lower tier youth we met in Tangshan purchased 3000 fake Weibo followers for a few RMB, but was clearly not as highly involved with the community as this number suggests.

TOP TIER, TOP SPREADERS

Social media marketing relies on users who actively spread content, and it is no surprise that there are more active spreaders in top tier cities. Top tier youth tend to be more involved, sharing media to extend and maintain larger social networks. Lower tier

CASE STUDY: LOWER TIER TRANSITIONS

The differences in SNS use between top tier and lower tier youth can vary considerably depending on the context. There are many nuances in between, and lower tier youth are increasingly adopting top tier habits and expectations of socialising, which is creating interesting tensions.

Xuzhou is a tier-3 city near Shanghai, which is growing so fast that some already consider it a tier-2 city.

Little Xin (21) and Yuan Yuan (20) are Xuzhou natives and best friends. Little Xin and Yuan Yuan are a lot like top tier youth in that they are individualistic and hedonistic, spending a lot of time and money on leisure activities and personal style. They met while teaching at the same school and became friends because they both like the same Korean pop idol.

"Most of the other girls just want to get married and settle down," says Little Xin. "But we both want to try new things while we're young. We like the same things and that's why we are such great friends."

Little Xin and Yuan Yuan stay in touch by cellphone, QQ Messenger and QZone. "That's really enough for us," says Little Xin.

QZone is the largest SNS in China (although the reported number of active users is somewhat dubious). QZone has such a large number of users because it is integrated with QQ Messenger, China's largest instant messenger. QZone automatically ports QQ Messenger contacts into the SNS platform, which



means that for most young Chinese people, QZone is an SNS for socialising with their close-knit contacts.

Most Chinese youth see QQ Messenger and QZone as a platform for private sharing within selective groups. This can take many forms, such as gossip between friends or exclusive information exchange among community participants.

QZone profiles and media sharing are usually intended for a limited audience. However, this means that despite having many active users, QZone has much less media content circulating across much less diverse social networks.

In addition to these platforms, Yuan Yuan spends a lot of time on Sina Weibo and Renren, an SNS similar to Facebook that has many more top tier users.

"There is so much more to find on Weibo and Renren," says Yuan Yuan.

"QZone doesn't have anything."

Yuan Yuan maintains a larger social network than Little Xin and is much more active in finding and sharing content. She collects content related to Korean pop stars on Weibo and Renren, and passes it on to Little Xin through QZone.

Yuan Yuan is also interested in cosplay (a subculture involving costume wearing), and has two accounts on Renren, one just for her cosplay friends, because she feels her social groups are not interested in (and do not accept) the same content.

When Little Xin wants to find more media, she often goes to Baidu Tieba, a popular online forum. She was never attracted to Renren, and tried Weibo for a while before quitting. "It seemed like too much effort," says Little Xin.

"Yuan Yuan gives me everything I need on QQ, so why bother?"

youth tend to be voyeurs, consuming media without forwarding, and focusing sharing within small, dosed networks.

This is changing fast, with an increasing number of lower tier youth growing more active on SNS, pursuing more diverse interests, extending their social networks and spreading new influences to their close-knit networks. Because top tier and lower tier consumption and lifestyle are growing closer, it is easy for influence to spread across tiers.

However, it is important for marketers to understand the different sharing norms for different SNS communities. Top tier youth are more open to online relationships, whereas lower tier youth resist expanding their network past their intimate friends and family.

The challenge for marketers is making brand relationships more relevant to the lives of lower tier youth. For top tier youth, social media relationships can create great opportunities for personal development and community involvement. What is the incentive for lower tier youth to get more involved with social media?

IMPLICATIONS

- Influence does not spread within tiers but across, so there does not seem to be strategic value in targeting lower tier youth as separate communities. Regional or interest-based communities might make more sense.

- Marketers must be sensitive to the sharing norms for different SNS and cannot judge by demographic alone.
- Building relationships and strong lifestyle relevance through social networks is more challenging among lower tier youth and SNS relationships are more like traditional media channels in terms of cultural role.

Right now, building stronger online relationships with lower tier youth means creating more relevance to offline lifestyle and close-knit peer interaction.

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