

WeChat's Biaoqingbao and Generation Z: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Social and Hedonic Gratifications

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Abstract

Online communication has evolved dramatically with the advent of new media and technologies. Its graphic elements such as emoticons, emojis, and stickers have become prevalent due to their ability to overcome the boundaries of textual interactions, offering both convenience and enhanced emotional expression. While some studies have delved into the use motivations and effects of these digital tools, the influence of cultural contexts on their usage remains under-explored. In China, 'Biaoqingbao', an amalgamation of emoticons and animated GIFs, is particularly popular on platforms like WeChat. However, the underlying motivations for using WeChat Biaoqingbao, especially the significant ones, are relatively scarce. Hence, the main aim of this concept paper is to critically review and identify gaps in current literature to discern the influences of both social and hedonic gratifications on its use. While the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) forms the theoretical framework for the study, the categorization of gratifications derived from diverse media, particularly new media, still needs deeper exploration. Thus, this study introduces social identity and perceived humor as novel dimensions to better grasp the nature of social and hedonic gratifications. Employing a survey method, the study will gather responses from participants spanning three major Chinese cities: Dongguan, Changsha, and Chengdu, targeting 384 valid responses. Data will be processed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0 (SPSS 27.0) and analyzed through Structural Equation Modeling using Partial Least Squares 4.0 (SmartPLS 4.0). The findings of this study are expected to make a significant contribution to the research in the field of mass communication by expanding the application of UGT and its connection to social media activities. Furthermore, the results anticipate offering practical implications for other generations seeking to comprehend the cultural characteristics of Generation Z.

Keywords: WeChat Biaoqingbao, Generation Z, Uses and Gratification Theory, Social Gratification, Hedonic Gratification.

Introduction

Social media has profoundly transformed communication methods, leading individuals to prioritize mobile and online platforms over traditional face-to-face conversations (Green & Singleton, 2007). This shift is most evident among Generation Z, individuals born from the mid-1990s to the early 2010s. They, often referred as the "iGen", represent the internet, and exhibit a pronounced affinity for digital innovations (Twenge, 2017). WeChat, China's counterpart to WhatsApp, dominates among this generation (GKURC, 2022). With over 1.2 billion active users, WeChat stands as a dominant social media platform in the country, offering diverse communication functionalities (Tencent, 2022). It takes the advantages of its user familiarity since most interactions occur between individuals who already know each other offline. This familiarity has been intensified by the utility of smartphones and the surge in mobile internet usage (Skuse, 2014). The platform's emoticon and Biaoqingbao stickers amplify communication by enabling users to convey emotions in a captivating, humorous style (He, 2019).

As digital cultural symbols, memes have distinctive perceptions across cultures. In China, while the term "meme" translates to 模因 (Mo Yin), a more common term for this online visual phenomenon is "Biaoqingbao", essentially referring to "facial expression packages." These can be static or animated, capturing both text and imagery, thereby enriching online communication (Zhang, 2016). Biaoqingbao transcends conventional meme culture, encapsulating unique Chinese characteristics rooted in social and psychological contexts. As Li (2021) observed, Chinese internet slang, a form of these internet memes, paradoxically combines somber messages with humour. This dual expression is attributed to the evolving self-awareness and societal perspectives of the younger generation. Biaoqingbao often carries ironic and contradictory visuals, positioning it as a youth sub-culture tool for rebelling against mainstream ideologies and promoting individual expression (Zhang, 2016; Peng, 2019). Chen and Siu (2017) categorized Biaoqingbao into three groups based on their purpose: emotional, behavioural, or narrative. The nature of these digital expressions effectively aids emotional conveyance, action representation, and information sharing. Generation Z particularly resonate with this visual language (Twenge, 2017). Their explorative nature online intersects seamlessly with Biaoqingbao, leveraging them for expression, humour, and relatability.

Despite the prevalence of WeChat Biaoqingbao among Generation Z, there is a noticeable gap in empirical research addressing this phenomenon and exploring the motivations behind its use. The current studies relating to Biaoqingbao usage are sparse and generally lack statistical support. This research aims to contribute to filling this gap by employing the Uses and Gratifications Theory as a foundational framework, aligning well with the research objective of understanding the varied user motivations.

In the existing, limited research, the classification of gratifications obtained from different media remains largely unresolved. There's a specific need to identify the various gratifications associated with the use of WeChat Biaoqingbao and to understand the significant impacts of social and hedonic gratifications, building upon previous studies that have underscored its utility in enhancing social ties and yielding emotional satisfaction (Kuang & Qiu, 2017).

The study hypothesized that Chinese Gen Z users derive both social and hedonic gratifications from Biaoqingbao on WeChat. Generation Z, particularly celebrated for their inventive talent

and content adaptation skills, has deeply ingrained the Biaoqingbao culture, making it an intrinsic part of their digital identity. They carve out a distinctive subculture, setting them apart through shared digital aesthetics and preferences (Peng, 2019). Biaoqingbao meets Gen Z's social and emotional needs, acting as an avenue to affirm their social identity (Li, 2019) and facilitate emotional expression (Kuang & Qiu, 2017). It fosters a sense of community and provides satisfaction through interactive online communication. A strong sense of humour increases their interest and involvement, making Biaoqingbao a source of pleasure and improving their online interactions. Recognizing the pivotal roles of social identity and perceived humour is key to understanding Biaoqingbao's appeal. These elements offer fresh perspectives on the associated social and hedonic gratifications derived from its use. In general, the research provides invaluable insights into Gen Z's digital behaviors, thereby catering to pragmatic needs in the evolving media landscape.

Based on research gaps, this study proposes the following objectives:

- (1) To identify whether there will be a significant impact of social gratifications on Generation Z's use of WeChat Biaoqingbao.
- (2) To identify whether there will be a significant impact of hedonic gratifications on Generation Z's use of WeChat Biaoqingbao.
- (3) To identify whether social identity will be a new dimension for categorizing the social gratifications derived from the use of Biaoqingbao on WeChat.
- (4) To identify whether perceived humour will be a new dimension for categorizing the hedonic gratifications derived from the use of Biaoqingbao on WeChat.

Literature Review

Existing literature on WeChat Biaoqingbao are primarily about their development, functions, and communication impact (Zhang, 2016; Peng, 2019). However, the sources of Biaoqingbao production have been largely overlooked. These emojis can be sourced from various external platforms and subsequently added to WeChat, thereby diversifying users' modes of expression. Additionally, they can be shared and created via the WeChat platform, promoting a vibrant and interactive emoji culture. Furthermore, Biaoqingbao research has been predominantly theoretical. Despite their cultural significance and extensive use, especially among Generation Z, there is a notable lack of empirical studies. Given their importance, it is essential to explore how Gen Z's interaction with Biaoqingbao provides valuable insights into their self-presentation, identity development, and socio-political viewpoints. Through these emojis, they pursue not just entertainment but also a platform to challenge societal norms and articulate their perspectives on the world (Peng, 2019). In essence, Biaoqingbao stands as a powerful communicative tool in the Chinese digital realm, especially among Generation Z. These digital expressions offer a blend of hedonic and social gratifications. However, understanding this phenomenon demands more in-depth empirical exploration, focusing particularly on the usage patterns and behavioral nuances of Generation Z, thereby offering more comprehensive insights into the evolving digital culture of China.

Regarding the gratifications proposed in previous studies on Biaoqingbao usage, they primarily focused on information, convenience, emotion, and entertainment (Kuang & Qiu, 2017; He, 2019). While these aspects are significant, it is important to recognize that WeChat also fulfills users' social needs by facilitating connections with friends. Therefore, it is necessary to consider social gratifications and put more emphasis on its impact when analyzing Biaoqingbao usage on WeChat. Moreover, considering the extensive research on gratification studies on media, various gratifications have been identified with different social

media use, and different dimensions have been classified under these gratifications. For instance, hedonic gratifications include perceived enjoyment and passing time (Li et al., 2015), and social gratifications comprise social presence, social interaction, and peer influence (Menon, 2022). However, the classification of gratifications obtained from specific media remains uncertain and requires further exploration. There is a need to investigate the related dimensions for the gratifications obtained from diverse media forms and technologies. In the context of WeChat Biaoqingbao usage, some potential factors that may highly concern with users' gratifications towards Biaoqingbao use are overlooked, such as social identity for social gratification, and perceived humor for hedonic gratification. Building on the existing research that discovered the associations of social identity (Li, 2019) and perceived humor (Kuang & Qiu, 2017) with WeChat Biaoqingbao usage, this study aims to incorporate these factors as new dimensions for understanding social and hedonic gratifications and examine their relationships.

Besides, based on the characteristics of WeChat Biaoqingbao and the usage patterns of Generation Z users, the study hypothesizes that social and hedonic gratifications play a role in the usage of WeChat Biaoqingbao among Chinese Generation Z users. While currently there is no related research identified the gratifications that strongly impact Generation Z users' behavior in using WeChat Biaoqingbao, related research on WeChat usage, internet meme usage, and Generation Z (Chen & Siu, 2017; He, 2019; Peng, 2019; Sun, 2016; Zhang, 2016) have highlighted the significant role of Biaoqingbao in facilitating social interactions and relationships among Generation Z users within the WeChat platform. These factors, namely social presence, social interaction, social identity, and peer pressure, significantly influence their social gratifications. Furthermore, the enjoyment and humor perceived through Biaoqingbao characteristics contribute to users' pleasure and enjoyable experiences, suggesting a strong association with hedonic gratification. Therefore, we anticipate that social and hedonic gratifications will have a significant influence on Generation Z's use of WeChat Biaoqingbao. By anticipating that social and hedonic gratifications will play a substantial role in WeChat Biaoqingbao use, it allows for a better understanding of the motivations and behaviors of Generation Z users in using WeChat Biaoqingbao. Additionally, this assumption sets the groundwork for future research and exploration into the specific effects of social and hedonic gratifications on the utilization of WeChat Biaoqingbao.

Theoretical Perspectives

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) serves as a theoretical framework explicating the selective use of media by individuals seeking to satisfy specific needs for gratification. Conceived by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch in the 1970s, this theory aims to comprehend why individuals opt for certain media options over others, aiming to fulfill their varying needs (Katz et al., 1973). It offers a user-centered approach to unveil the socio-psychological factors influencing individual media utilization (Leung & Wei, 2000). Within UGT, the communication process initiates by addressing the audience's social and psychological needs and subsequently investigates the implications of media exposure. For a visual representation of Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch's theoretical framework, refer to Figure 1 (as adapted from Zimmer et al., 2018).

As a contemporary mass communication theory, UGT has been developed under the consideration of media audience research at the beginning of twentieth century. In exploring of media functions and the influence of audience needs and expectations on mass

communication behaviour, the related studies underlying the UGT are normally asked what people do with mass communication, such as newspaper, radio, and television, highlighting the active role of audience (Klapper, 1963). Rubin (2002) further developed the theory by suggesting that individuals have inherent needs that can be met through media consumption, indicating that people seek gratification and that was achieved by using media sources that match their expectations and meet their needs. This emphasized the active role of individuals in seeking out their preferred media rather than passively receiving it (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 2007; Baran & Davis, 2015; Wang et al., 2008). Hence, the theory implies that audience members play an active role in selecting and engaging with media content that aligns with their interests and gratification needs, making their media consumption a purposeful and intentional act driven by their individual needs and desires.

However, as Sundar and Limperos (2013) argue, the emergence of numerous media technologies offering diverse services calls for a more nuanced understanding of gratifications in new media forms that were not fully addressed in the original concepts of uses and gratifications that developed from the traditional media. Therefore, an increasing number of studies have utilized the UGT to investigate users' activities within the realm of social media, including microblogging (Gan & Wang, 2015), Twitter (Coursaris et al., 2013), Facebook (Hsu et al., 2015), social network games (Li et al., 2015), and social networking sites (SNS) (Chaouali, 2016). Numerous studies have confirmed that these different gratifications, including content and process gratifications, social gratification, hedonic gratification, and utilitarian gratification (Dimmick & Stafford, 2000; Venkatesh et al., 2003; Li et al., 2015) have an impact on user behaviour within the context of social media. For instance, Xu et al. (2012) found that both utilitarian and hedonic gratifications can predict social network usage. Li et al. (2015), reported that hedonic, utilitarian, and social gratifications are significantly linked to the intention to continue using a social network game. In this stance, while the UGT has laid a theoretical foundation for understanding the motivations underlying media use, it is important to acknowledge that the gratifications derived from various media forms are diverse and continually evolving, particularly within the context of new media (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Therefore, there is a pressing need to further explore and expand the application of UGT in the realm of new media.

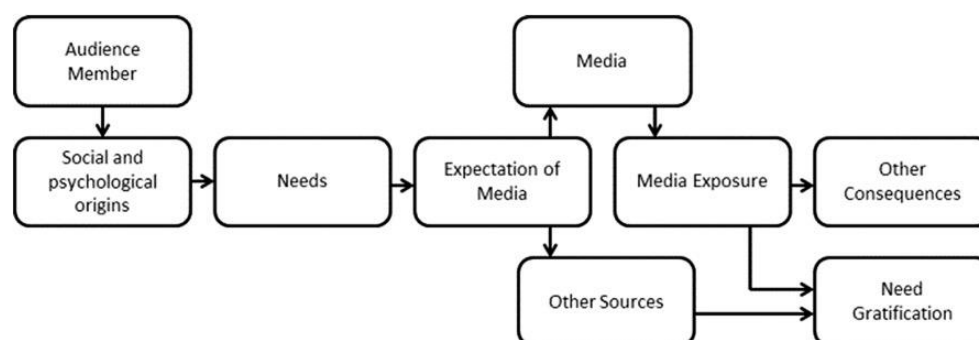


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch. Adapted from Zimmer et al. (2018)

Social gratifications

Social gratifications arise from fulfilled motivations for social interaction within specific media (Liu et al., 2015; Gan & Li, 2018). Such engagements allow users to interact, fostering connections that lead to meaningful social outcomes (Gan & Li, 2018). Menon (2022)

classified social gratification into three dimensions: social interaction, peer influence, and trend influence. He determined that these dimensions of social gratification primarily drive users in India to share photos on Instagram. Moreover, Li et al. (2015), examined how social gratification, derived from social interaction and social presence, influences an individual's intention to continue engaging with a social network game. Likewise, Gan and Li (2018) explored the impact of social gratifications, particularly social interaction, and social presence, on the continued intention to use WeChat in China.

While Western cultures often exhibit an individualistic orientation, Chinese culture is more collectivist in nature (Steele & Lynch, 2013). This cultural framework suggests that individuals in China are inclined to use social media primarily to foster relationships, partake in social interactions, and for entertainment. Given that a significant portion of WeChat users are personally acquainted, the platform's tools, such as emojis and Biaoqingbao, intensify their inclination to maintain existing social networks. These tools not only enhance social connections (Riordan, 2017), but also make communications more vibrant and expressive. The lively visuals in stickers and emojis can help overcome language barriers, making conversations more comprehensible. This, in turn, proves instrumental in reinforcing digital age social relationships. For this study, the study defines social gratification as the psychological rewards and satisfactions derived that Generation Z users derive from online interactions and relationships. Factors such as social presence, social interaction, peer influence, and social identity are identified as key drivers of social gratifications obtained from WeChat Biaoqingbao use among them.

Social presence

Social presence refers to how a communication platform allows for genuine, interpersonal connections between individuals (Lee, Kozar & Larsen, 2009). Previous studies demonstrated that social presence played a crucial role in shaping user behaviour within the media contexts (Mantymaki & Riemer, 2014). The sense of presence facilitated by Biaoqingbao on WeChat is largely due to its visual representation, allowing users to perceive a stronger connection with others (Liu, 2017).

Social interaction

Social interaction refers to the sustenance and establishment of personal connections (Dholakia et al., 2004; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2016). It is a key factor motivates WeChat usage, catering to individuals' social gratification needs (Gan & Li, 2018). Recent research suggests that Biaoqingbao aids in relationship-building significantly by providing a medium for expressive communication (Church et al., 2023; Kuang & Qiu, 2017).

Peer influence

Peer influence is the effect an individual's social circle has on their behaviour or thoughts, which includes friends and peers (Laursen, 2018; Menson, 2021). Previous research demonstrated that users from different social media, such as SNS, Instagram and Facebook, were influenced by the gratification of peer influence, prompting them to conform to trends or become part of peer circles (Dhir et al., 2017; Menson, 2021). Within the realm of WeChat Biaoqingbao, peer influence drives university students to adapt to the widespread Biaoqingbao culture, making its use a means of following the trend (Kuang & Qiu, 2017).

Social identity

Social identity, rooted in one's association with a group, impacts online behaviours (Tajfel, 1978; Dholakia et al., 2004). Social media platforms, like WeChat, amplify this by facilitating interpersonal connections, encouraging users to engage based on shared identities (Sun, 2015). University students often use such platforms to mould their social identities (Fujita et al., 2018). Biaoqingbao, widely used on WeChat, particularly by younger users, embodies this shared identity, creating "cultural communities" that span geographies (Peng, 2018). These symbols enhance group cohesion and foster shared experiences. This study aims to discern how Biaoqingbao on WeChat influences individuals' alignment with specific social groups.

Hedonic gratifications

Hedonic gratifications involve the experience of pleasure, relaxation, self-determination, and the fulfillment of socio-psychological needs originating from the utilization of media (Xu et al., 2012). Hedonic factors were confirmed as strong predictors in shaping user behaviour during social media engagement, encompassing elements like enjoyment, affection, and fantasy (Li et al., 2015, Xu et al., 2012). Gan & Li (2017) confirmed that individuals use WeChat may experience hedonic pleasure for entertainment and passing time.

In this study, we define hedonic gratifications as the pleasurable and enjoyable experiences that Generation Z users, derive from using Biaoqingbao on WeChat, and assume perceived entertainment and perceived humor are two first-order factors significantly influencing Gen Z users' motivation in using Biaoqingbao on WeChat.

Perceived entertainment

Perceived entertainment is crucial for user engagement on social media platforms (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gan & Li, 2018). Specifically on WeChat, diverse Biaoqingbao offerings heighten user enjoyment. These vibrant and animated stickers, often inspired by popular TV characters, provide a lively means for users to express emotions, elevating the conversation's fun factor. Consequently, the gratification derived from Biaoqingbao interactions bolsters users' intent to continue engaging with them, suggesting that the entertaining nature of these stickers' augments user commitment to the platform.

Perceived humour

Humour is a propensity to recognize or relay amusing content, evoking emotional reactions like laughter, while perceived humour is described as an individual's personal joy from finding something amusing (Martin & Ford, 2007). Humour has a profound effect in persuasion, simplifying message comprehension (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992) and capturing audience attention, especially in advertising (Eisend et al., 2014). It facilitates message acceptance (Strick et al., 2013) and evokes affective responses (Zhang, 1996).

Barta et al. (2023) highlighted humour's role on TikTok in enhancing influencers' impact. Humour is also prevalent in advertising, influencing consumer attitudes and intentions (Hameed et al., 2019). Martin et al. (2003) identified four humour types: self-enhancing, affiliative, self-defeating, and aggressive. Biaoqingbao on WeChat, visualizing emotions, lets users convey these humour types, enhancing social ties. With humour's role in Biaoqingbao's popularity and cultural messaging, perceived humour significantly drives Biaoqingbao use on WeChat, offering hedonic gratification.

WeChat Biaoqingbao use

WeChat Biaoqingbao use refers to the practice or behavior of Chinese Gen Z users engaging with WeChat Biaoqingbao. It will be accessed in two dimensions: (a) the intensity of WeChat Biaoqingbao uses and (b) the frequency of WeChat Biaoqingbao uses. Prior studies on the utilization of other social media platforms, such as SNS and Weibo, generally consider these two elements (Chan et al., 2012; Chen, 2016). Notably, Chen (2016) also established a connection between WeChat use and gratification seeking, contributing to the understanding of WeChat usage patterns. Therefore, for this study, the dimensions will be adapted from the WeChat Use Intensity Scale used in Chen's research (2016), known for its high reliability for each dimension (Cronbach's alpha of .91 for use intensity and .81 for frequency of WeChat use).

Research Framework

Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual framework, which is based on the Uses and Gratifications paradigm's assumption that understanding individuals' media use requires analyzing the gratifications they derive from it. The study defines social and hedonic gratifications as independent variables and WeChat Biaoqingbao use behavior among Chinese Gen Z as dependent variable. Accordingly, this study identifies two types of gratifications and introduces new dimensions, that are social identity and perceived humor, to further understand the gratifications obtained: social gratifications (social presence, social identity, social interaction, and peer pressure), and hedonic gratifications (perceived entertainment and perceived humor). To capture the different types of gratifications and their connections with Gen Z users' Biaoqingbao use on WeChat, the conceptual framework incorporates constructs derived from previous research findings.

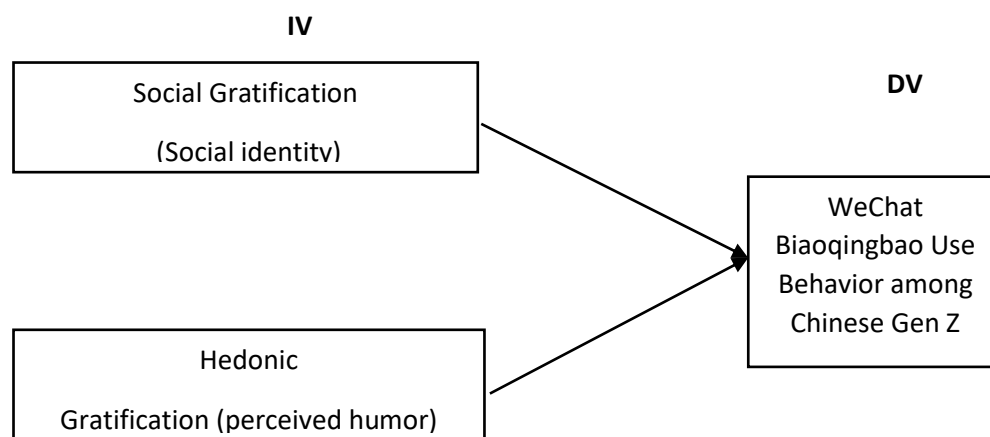


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

The research will employ quantitative research to investigate the patterns of WeChat's Biaoqingbao utilization among Generation Z in China, with an emphasis on discerning the influence of hedonic and social gratifications. A sample of 384 participants will be systematically selected from three distinct cities, namely Dongguan, Changsha, and Chengdu,

representing diverse regions of China. The sample size was determined in accordance with previous research methodologies and demographic data on Generation Z's population in China. The survey instrument will be administered electronically with the assistance of Credamo, a reputable survey company.

The survey will be categorized into three sections. Section A seeks to describe respondents' usage patterns of WeChat and Biaoqingbao. Section B employs a 5-point Likert scale to identify participants' attitudes and perceptions. Section C is dedicated to collecting demographic information, encompassing age, occupation, and other pertinent details. The survey items were derived from established instruments in prior studies and modified to the specific context of this research. To ensure the survey's reliability and clarity, a preliminary pilot test was conducted on 40 participants who were not included in the final survey to assess the reliability of the construct and the clarity of the instrument (Rossi et al., 2013).

For data management and preliminary analysis, SPSS 27.0 software will be utilized. Subsequent in-depth analyses, particularly structural equation modeling, will be conducted using SmartPLS 4.0. The analysis aims to ascertain the extent to which hedonic and social gratifications shape WeChat Biaoqingbao usage. The adopted methodologies are consistent with established research practices (Bassellier & Benbasat, 2004), facilitating a comparative analysis with extant literature.

Conclusion and Contributions

This paper constructs a model that integrates two independent variables and one dependent variable to assess the profound influence of social and hedonic gratifications on Chinese Gen Z's engagement with WeChat Biaoqingbao, as depicted in figure 1. Drawing from previous findings about the gratifications associated with social media consumption, this research introduces four facets for social gratification and two for hedonic gratification. It also posits that aspects like social identity and perceived humour, emerging from the use of Biaoqingbao on WeChat, can influence the platform's appeal among Chinese Gen Z users.

This research provides valuable contributions to the field of media studies both in theoretical and contextual dimensions. From a theoretical perspective, it expands the application of the Uses and Gratifications Theory, addressing a research gap by investigating the diverse gratifications derived from WeChat Biaoqingbao usage. Moreover, it introduces novel dimensions for understanding gratifications obtained from media engagement, thereby broadening the scope of the Uses and Gratifications Theory. On a contextual level, this study enhances the understanding of internet memes and their roles, with a particular focus on Biaoqingbao as a visual representation of memes with distinctive Chinese characteristics. Such insights hold particular relevance for media studies, particularly within an Asian context. Furthermore, the in-depth exploration of Generation Z's interaction patterns with WeChat Biaoqingbao provides valuable insights into their digital worldviews and behaviors. These findings can play a pivotal role in shaping policies and strategies aimed at promoting responsible and constructive social media habits among emerging adults. In summary, this research enriches discussions by scrutinizing the gratifications associated with WeChat Biaoqingbao, delving into the study of internet memes, and illuminating Generation Z's digital engagement in the social media landscape.

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