

Education

Social Interaction of Generation Z in China

Sumei Hu*

Longmiao Junior Secondary School, Shuyang County 223642, Suqian City, Jiangsu, China

*: All correspondence should be sent to: Ms. Sumei Hu.

Author's Contact: Sumei Hu, E-mail: 738391603@qq.com

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Due to the advancement of mutual information technology and the impacts of globalization and cultural pluralism, Generation Z has developed notions of social life and social channels that are significantly different from those of the preceding generations. A thorough understanding of its peculiarities is conducive to our in-depth knowledge of this group. This article is a discussion of populous forms of social interaction among Generation Zers in China, such as Dazi social interaction, circle-based social interaction, and social media-based interaction. These forms of social life are the result of technological development and the advancement of urbanization, emblematic of the emotional needs of Chinese youth and their individual expression. The study also finds that these novel social interactions bring challenges to this generation, such as communication apprehension, information cocoons, cyber violence, and privacy breaches.

Keywords: Generation Z; Chinese Youth; Social Interaction

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GENERATION Z (Gen Z) refers to the demographic cohort born between 1995 and 2010. The growth of this generation coincided with the flourishing of the internet, and their lives have been profoundly impacted by digital technologies. That is why members of Gen Z are also dubbed “digital natives.” Currently, the majority of them have entered their youth and are deemed to have the potential to make significant differences to social institutions, values, behavioral patterns, and developmental trends (Wang, 2021). As a result, Gen Zers’ lifestyles, behaviors, psychological traits, and their variations from

preceding generations have become focuses of research in academia.

Gen Zers, having grown up in a changed living environment and a special historical context, exhibit stark distinctions in social interaction from other generations. New forms of social interaction have emerged, such as casual socializing and light socializing, and have become increasingly popular among Chinese Gen-Zers. To delve into the characteristics of Gen Z’s social life, this study analyzes social behaviors of Chinese Gen Zers and factors influencing their social interaction, as well as

issues with their social interaction, on the basis of existing literature.

Generation Z in China

Western researchers name the generations in the last few decades as baby boomers, Generation X, Generation Y or millennials, and Generation Z according to their distinct social backdrops. In the era of globalization and the Internet, intergenerational variations show certain common features in different countries. In China, Gen Z is often dubbed the “post-1995 birth cohort” or “2000s birth cohort.” Yet, given the special social changes in China in the past three decades, Gen Z in this country displays significant differences from any of the other generations and exhibits distinctive characteristics compared with their counterparts in other countries as well. From the socioeconomic point of view, Gen Zers in China were born and raised in a period of rapid economic growth, which created a social environment abundant in material resources, allowing them the freedom from material scarcity (He, 2022). Furthermore, due to the past family planning policy, the majority of Gen Zers in China have no siblings, and they typically live in a core family instead of a traditional large family. The change in the family structure and material abundance has generated an ideal growth environment for Gen Z, prompting them to pursue individuality and self-actualization (He, 2022). Also, the governmental endeavors to promote educational development in recent decades resulted in Gen Z becoming a better-educated generation (Li, 2022) with broader knowledge horizons as well as stronger learning ability and adaptability to new things.

According to Shen’s (2022; 2023) study of Gen Z’s values, members of this generation have strong senses of citizenship and social responsibility. Most of them exhibit public spirit, ready to participate in volunteer services. In the meantime, they are more tolerant and respectful of differential values as proponents of the coexistence of plural cultures. On the personal level, they place a high premium on the individuality of each person, valuing individual expression and personal particularities. Thereby, they tend to be nonconformists with a strong dislike of rigid formalities. Furthermore, they are more open-minded in sharing their inner world with others. Also, the majority of them pursue interests and hobbies with no utilitarian purposes for spiritual satisfaction.

Behaviorally, Gen Zers in China show exceptionally heavy dependence on the cyber world (Li, 2022; He, 2022; Shen, 2022). Internet use in China began later than in Western countries; the nation’s network interconnectivity was not available until 1994. Hence, the growth of Gen Z almost coincided with the substantive development of internet technology in China. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that Gen Z is the first generation of network natives in China. Online work, recreation, and social interaction are essential components of their life. Also, the growing needs of individual expression of Gen Zers have been supported by the rise of new media, and they become the first builders and promoters of new media-based popular culture in the digital era. Their mastery and application of new media technologies, as well as expression strategies on new media, have increasingly improved.

Popular Social Interaction Behaviors in Chinese Gen Zers

Dazi Social Interaction

The word “Dazi” originates in the Shanghai dialect, initially meaning the person sharing a card game. In the current Dazi culture among Chinese youth, it means a partner in any type of social activity. There are numerous kinds of Dazi in distinct social scenarios, such as Dining Dazi, Tour Dazi, and Coffee Dazi, to name a few. The Gen Zer picks a Dazi for a specific social need, such as the need for finding someone to play video games with. Their interaction with a Dazi is restricted to a certain activity or task, with little possibility of being developed into an intimate relationship. For instance, they may communicate with a gaming Dazi about the content of the digital game, but the communication ends with the completion of the game. Although the inter-Dazi relationship may evolve into a sort of friendship, it is more likely that it will naturally expire with the change in the life of either party. This relationship focuses on regular companionship, less significant than friendship but more intense than the relationship with an ordinary colleague or a schoolmate. It arises in response to a specific need and maintains a certain social distance (He, 2024). Dazi social interaction is highly popular among Chinese Gen Zers. According to Xiang’s (2024) investigation, nearly 90% of young people are aware of the concept of socializing with Dazis, and the ownership of 2-3 Dazis by each has become a mainstream phenomenon. Shen and Wang’s report (2024) noted that, among the 1431 young people surveyed, over 50% stated that they had a Dazi, while over 95.8% showed interest in socializing with Dazis.

American sociologist Granovetter advanced the strength of ties theory, which classified interpersonal relationships into three categories based on the level of strength of ties: weak, strong, and absent (Granovetter, 1973; He, 2024). Weak ties are more likely to link members of small groups than are strong ones, involving low levels of interaction frequency, emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocal services (Granovetter, 1973; He, 2024). The inter-Dazi relationship is typically deemed a weak tie in the literature, as it is characterized as transient and tentative. In addition, researchers also emphasized that Dazi social interaction was free from the risk of privacy infringement, as the relationship was not based on the exchanges of private information. This makes it welcomed among young people, who have the tendency to present their personal images in accordance with their own wishes or social needs, especially in the online environment (Sun & Zhang, 2023). Moreover, the inter-Dazi relationship bears inherent boundaries, which come with the focus on common interests. Anything outside their shared interests and hobbies is beyond the concerns of Dazis. Such boundaries are beneficial for protecting privacy as well as circumventing troubles that are likely to arise from overly sharing of personal emotions or affairs.

Circle-Based Social Interaction

Circle-based social interaction is another popular form of social life among Chinese Gen Zers. It takes place in a group of people who share identical interests, values, or lifestyles, often in cyberspaces. Members of the circle have close contact with one

another and frequent exchanges of information, ideas, and resources (Zhu & Zhu, 2023). Circle-based social interaction in Gen Zers is also referred to as “interest-based social interaction” (Li & Wang, 2024; Cheng, 2024), in which the members of the circle develop strong emotional ties and distinctive group identity (Wu, 2023), different from the blood-based, or geographic location-based, business-based social relationships in the older generations. This manifests Gen Z’s emphasis on emotional satisfaction and individual expression in social interactions. There are a wide variety of circles among Gen Zers, including but not limited to the anime circle, sports circle, electronic sports circle, pet circle, and Han clothing circle. Members in the circle are familiar with circle-specific culture, codes of conduct, and outlook and actively participate in circle-based events. To some extent, the rules and communication methods followed by the circle are like a set of social codes, helping young people identify their “peers” in the mass crowd, establish close relationships with each other, and unconsciously acquire senses of belonging to the circle. In effect, a Gen Zer’s joining in a certain circle means that they have identified themselves with the behavioral patterns characteristic of this circle (Li & Wang, 2024). The circle culture helps create a stable interpersonal network, where Gen Zers seek emotional support.

Online Social Interaction

As digital natives, Gen Zers have a natural interest in social media platforms and other digital avenues, which have become essential for their everyday lives. Social media platform-based social interaction in Chinese Gen Zers is featured by the following three online behaviors:

Positive Self-Presentation: The Gen Zer is keen on displaying their self-image on social media as a virtual identity as well as an extension of their real-world identity (Cao, 2023). Positive self-presentation predominates in online social interaction. Gen Zers exhibit their colorful lives through posting their photos and sharing their interactions with peers while also purposefully managing their expressions on social media in a bid to showcase positive qualities such as emotional stability and liveliness. Such self-presentation is a sharing-focused interactive behavior, enabling Gen Zers to gain emotional support and recognition of their social ability from peers (Li & Wang, 2024). Through this behavior, they expand their social networks and obtain joyful experiences.

Reversed Presentation: As opposed to self-presentation, this behavior is about hiding or deleting the traces of one’s social media use, also referred to as “digital disconnection” (Zhu & Lai, 2024). There are several tactics commonly adopted by Chinese Gen Zers for this purpose. First, erase personal information. Youngsters reduce the presence of their past posts on social media by deleting, hiding, and other means. The underlying logic is that erasing the individual’s digital footprints assists their progress and growth by separating them from the information about past events (Zhao & Hu, 2023). The content Gen Zers choose to delete from the social media platform includes information about adverse life events, negative comments from others, and other distressful memories. Second, restrict visibility of personal information. It is about reducing the visibility of their social media content by setting visitor limits and time lim-

its as well as lowering the frequency of updating. That means Gen Zers are alert to the risk of over-disclosure of privacy despite their keen interest in self-presentation. Third, reduce access to online information. Due to social fatigue and self-image management fatigue (Cai, 2024), Gen Zers may choose to avoid information from the internet by blocking message notifications or closing this feature, or even to suspend the use of social media for the time being (Zhu & Lai, 2024).

Platform-Swinging: Gen Zers use this social media technique to meet their diverse needs for social interaction. They may swing between different accounts on the same social platform or switch between different social media platforms. Often, they register two accounts on one platform, with one as the “chief account” for positive self-presentation and the other as the “covert account” for the release of negative emotions. Also, they use various social media platforms for different social needs. For example, in WeChat Moments, they tend to share positive content because, on WeChat, they communicate with their family, friends, colleagues, and classmates, and the circle of friends on the platform highly corresponds to their social circle in actual life. Yet, on Weibo or Little Red Book (similar to Instagram, mainly for socializing with strangers), they allow themselves more freedom of expression. Generation Zers classify social platforms into private spaces, interpersonal communication spaces, semipublic spaces, and public spaces according to their different purposes (Zhang, 2024). With the awareness that each platform has a distinct audience, they adeptly swing between different social media platforms or different accounts on one platform and adopt different self-presentation strategies when facing different audiences (Pu & Tang, 2024). On social platforms where they maintain strong ties with others, they may behave cautiously in self-presentation and interpersonal communication; on platforms where they keep weak ties, they will create more private spaces for emotional expression and modulation. To sum up, platform-swinging behavior in Chinese Gen Zers manifests their efforts to strike a balance between integrating into society and maintaining their individuality (Dong & Zhang, 2023).

Factors Influencing Gen Z’s Social Interaction

The formation of social interaction patterns is often the result of the interaction between the social structure and individual action needs (Sun & Zhang, 2023). Gen Z’s social interaction behavior is the product of the integration of information technology and culture as well as an important vehicle for their individual expression and emotional satisfaction.

Socioeconomic changes are a major factor in the development of the social behavior of Gen Z. As a result of the advancement of information technology, internet-based social media has become the paramount channel for interpersonal communication, enabling individuals to get away from the spatial constraints existing in traditional social communication, and thus creating more possibilities for Gen Z’s social life (Zhao & Hu, 2023). Furthermore, with the accelerated urbanization in China and increased population mobility, the traditional “acquaintance society” is disintegrating, and individuals are becoming more atomized and isolated as well as independent (Wu, 2022; Sun & Zhang, 2023). In this context, weak ties that suit

the “stranger society” get more popular in social interaction. In addition, China underwent a transition from an agricultural society to an industrial one, leading to the change in the structure of interpersonal relationships. The development of the internet, particularly, instigated a shift from a hierarchical structure to a flattened, decentralized one in social interaction. In Gen Z’s time, any individual can be the center or non-center in the social network (He, 2022). The structural changes have resulted in differences in social interaction patterns between Gen Z and preceding generations.

The purpose of Gen Z’s social interaction is a determinant of their social behavior. Gen Zers have grown weary of the traditional social purpose (He, 2024), which is primarily about “networking,” and have focused more on the emotional value of social life (Cheng, 2024; Xiang, 2024). Therefore, the social circle of Gen Z is mainly based on shared interests rather than utilitarian purposes. According to Li and Wang’s (2024) analysis of Gen Z’s emotional pursuit in social interactions, Gen Zers have experienced a structural transformation in social relationships and become paradoxes who desire both emotional connection and autonomy. Therefore, they have a propensity for Dazi social interaction and online social interaction, in which they enjoy both companionship and reasonable social distancing. In addition, compared to other generations, Gen Z is better equipped to keep certain amounts of traces of lived social life. They can serve the purposes of emotional compensation, identity definition, and emotional support (Chen, 2023). In the meantime, the content shared on social media platforms can also serve as a personal profile. These digital traces may prompt Gen Zers to reflect on their past experiences, draw lessons from them, and move on more confidently (Pu & Tang, 2024).

Challenges of Gen Z’s Social Life

Despite the convenience it brings to Gen Z’s social life, the internet technology also causes certain problems for this generation. First off, internet-based social interaction may exacerbate Gen Z’s communication apprehension in the real world. As per Dou’s (2023) definition, communication apprehension is the fear or anxiety generated by an individual’s actual or expected communication with others. It seems that communication apprehension is more prevalent in Gen Z than in other generations. Whether or not they do have symptoms of this problem, many Generation Zers label themselves as such to avoid social activities that possibly make them feel stressed. Dou’s study finds that communication apprehension is positively correlated with social media dependence in Gen Zers. Communication apprehension prompts youngsters’ tendency to withdraw from in-person communication, while social media-enabled online communication can meet their needs for non-face-to-face interaction (Wu Lei, 2023). Yet, after they adapt to online communication, their intention of engaging in face-to-face social interaction will further weaken, and their communication apprehension will worsen when they have to make in-person communication. Moreover, on the social media platform, young people adopt texts and emojis instead of oral language for communication, and instant response is replaced by delayed response. As a result, Gen Zers may gradually develop the difficulty making instant reactions required in real-world social communication, further hampering

their social development. Additionally, online digital identity may lead to biased comparisons of a Gen Zer with their peers. As the majority of social media users tend to showcase their desired images online, the Gen Zers can develop a strong sense of inferiority when comparing themselves with the somewhat refined images of others, which could cause inordinate anxiety, exacerbating their tendency of evading real-world interactions.

Furthermore, circle-based social interaction may cause the issue of information cocoons in Gen Zers (Shen & Wang, 2024). Despite their having greater freedom to decide on social circles, Gen Zers are faced with the risk of constraining themselves to information provided by the circle, which caters to their interests and preferences. Circle-based social interaction can potentially create diverse communication environments, but it may segregate the communication space and set up unnecessary boundaries, making it difficult for the “outsiders” to participate in communication and diffusion within the circle (Wu, 2023). On the other hand, the “insiders,” due to self-isolation, confine themselves to an environment where similar content is repeated and reinforced.

In addition, the formation of an online social circle is not necessarily the result of young people’s autonomous efforts but may also involve algorithmic recommendations from the social media platform and latent marketing by businesses. The profit-driven principle of businesses and the manipulation of consumerism may underlie the seemingly precise, real-time, and heartwarming social interaction in the circle. Often, it is the young person’s wishful thinking to expect pure companionship and emotional support in such a virtual environment (Li & Wang, 2024).

On top of the said issues, online social interaction and circle-based social interaction can possibly cause worse ones like online violence and privacy breach (Cai, 2024). There are more temptations to make aggressive comments or even malicious defamation in the virtual cyberspace due to its anonymity. Online violence like this not only causes great psychological hazards to the victims but may also instigate broader social problems. According to Xiang’s (2024) investigation, social media can negatively impact the mental health of Generation Zers, with over 40% of respondents reporting that the internet-based social life makes them feel lonelier, stressed, and emotionally deprived. In the meantime, with the widespread use of social media platforms, the security of users’ personal information and privacy faces more severe challenges. The users’ personal information can be exploited for commercial or other illegitimate purposes, which also exacerbates the risk of encountering misleading information and privacy breaches in Generation Zers (Chu & Li, 2024). Hence, it is important for Gen Zers to enhance the awareness of the risks of online social life to better protect their private information and circumvent cyber violence.

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of the rapid development of the internet in China, the social life of Chinese Gen Z has been heavily impacted by digital technologies and shows distinctive characteristics differentiating it from other generations. Dazi social interaction, circle-based social interaction, and online social interaction

are the chief forms of social life of this generation, manifesting their pursuit of individual expression, emotional satisfaction, and senses of belonging. The popularization of social media has made their social life more active and convenient, but it may also prompt a variety of issues such as increased communication apprehension in their real-world social life, the information cocoon effect, online violence, and privacy breaches. These challenges not only compromise the social experience of Gen Z but may also pose long-term hazards to their mental health and social adaptability.

Gen Zers need more effective guidance to address these issues. It is important to develop more healthy social channels

for them to alleviate communication apprehension and social isolation caused by the information cocoon effect. Also, the guiding role of mainstream social values should be emphasized to help Gen Zers reach sensible moral judgments and behavioral choices in the context of cultural pluralism. At the same time, institutional measures are also important for the development of safe and secure social environments for Gen Z, including strengthening regulation of digital network technologies, cracking down on illegal activities such as online violence and privacy breaches, improving legislation for the protection of Gen Z's rights to legitimate social interaction, and more. ■

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