ABSTRACT

Across developing countries, the role of social networks and social capital in facilitating women’s access to income is well documented. However, less is known about how networks facilitated by social networking sites (SNS) may transform women’s economic opportunities in these regions. In this chapter, I draw upon a relatively recent phenomenon of the use of SNS as a medium of trade in urban Indonesia. In 2010, I conducted preliminary interviews to examine the dynamics of Facebook-facilitated trade among urban middle-class married women residing in Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia. The interviews highlighted beneficial links between social media, social capital, and productivity – by means of increased personal income. However, this effective link between SNS and income-generating social capital is likely to be a rather distinctive example, as it depends largely on the class, gender, and cultural specificities that shape the nature of online and offline social interactions among my target group.
1. INTRODUCTION

Across developing countries, the role of social networks and social capital in facilitating women’s access to income is well documented (Mayoux, 2001; Molyneux, 2002; Rankin, 2002; Silvey & Elmhirst, 2003). However, less is known about how networks facilitated by social networking sites (SNS) may transform women’s economic opportunities in these regions.

In this chapter, I draw upon a relatively recent phenomenon on the use of SNS as a medium of trade in urban Indonesia. In 2010, I conducted preliminary interviews to examine the dynamics of Facebook-facilitated trade among urban middle-class married women residing in Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia. The interviews highlighted beneficial links between social media, social capital, and productivity – by means of increased personal income. However, this effective link between SNS and income-generating social capital is likely to be a rather distinctive example, as it depends largely on the class, gender, and cultural specificities that shape the nature of online and offline social interactions among my target group.

To develop my argument, I revisit the notion of the middle-class entrepreneurs in developing countries (Banerjee & Duflo, 2008), and reflect upon women’s engagement in informal micro-credit schemes and in petty trading to finance ‘petty consumption’ commonly practiced across many layers of social class in Southeast Asia (Brenner, 1995; Gallaway & Bernasek, 2002; Papanek & Schwede, 1988). I argue that women’s income generating activities through social media and online social networks reflect the culturally prescribed economic role of middle-class women as secondary earners (Utomo, 2012). In turn, these activities are commercially sustained by a) the consumption culture of other urban middle-class women in their online social networks, and b) the socio-cultural dispositions that make Facebook effective in maintaining and forming online and offline social networks among these women. While the case study supports the notion of the gendered web (Hargittai & Shafer, 2006; Wheeler, 2001), it also sheds lights on the transformative potential of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to open up new income opportunities for women in the developing world (Ng & Mitter, 2005).

The chapter is structured as follows. First, I will discuss the societal and cultural context behind the popularity of social media among the urban middle class in Indonesia. Here, against the backdrop of the demographically large cohort of the urban middle class, I consider the intersections between the prevailing social norms and the emerging web culture around social and commercial interactions. The second section details the conceptual framework of the chapter. I present three interrelated hypotheses on why Facebook-mediated trading in urban Indonesia is dominated by women, as sellers and buyers. The third section briefly describes my methods of qualitative data collection. Next, I outline the results of the interviews and online observations. I examine how respondents articulate their motivations to engage in online selling, particularly in the context of their work-family roles. I further reflect the gendered practices of buying and selling via social-networking sites in the context of entrepreneurship and the transformative role of SNSs for the women in my case study. Recommendations for future research along with a consideration of limitations of this study conclude the chapter.
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