Linking Psychological Attributes, Gratifications and Social Networking Site Use to Social Capital of the Net Generation in China

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ABSTRACT

How narcissism, communication anxiety, and gratifications impact SNS use and social capital was examined through a survey of Net-geners in China (N=568). Firstly, factor analysis identified four gratifications-sought from SNS: self-presentation, peer pressure, social network maintenance, and information seeking. Then regression analyses showed that narcissism significantly predicted all gratifications and intensity of SNS use, while communication anxiety only related to peer pressure and information seeking motivations. Narcissism, network maintenance motive, and intensity of SNS use were positively related to social capital, whereas communication anxiety and peer pressure motivation negatively predicted social capital. Theoretical implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Communication Anxiety, Narcissism, Social Capital, Social Networking Site (SNS), Uses and Gratifications (U&G)

INTRODUCTION

Social capital refers to the resources embedded in social networks that can be accessed and mobilized (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007). Social networking site (SNS) usage has been extensively documented to be beneficial for social capital (e.g., Steinfield, Ellison, and Lampe, 2007, 2011). However, less attention has been given to how motivations for usage predict social capital differently. Past research suggested that using social media for informational purpose would help increase social capital and that other purposes had a less significant relation to social capital (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela, 2012). These mixed results imply that motivations for adopting social media are important predictors of social capital, yet seldom do studies on social capital include such motivation variables. This study aims to fill this gap. The uses and gratifications (U&G) framework has been consistently tested useful in media use studies. Yet one weakness of the U&G framework is that it only focuses on individual audience while it neglects social consequences brought to the audience by media (Severin and Tankard, 1997). This study, therefore, contributes to the literature by linking U&G with one of the most important social consequences in media studies—social capital. In this
way, this study not only answers whether social media use increases/decreases social capital, it also explores the dynamic of the relationships among gratifications, SNS use, and social capital.

Narcissism, which refers to high degree of extraversion, positive self-evaluation, and high intention of self-presentation (Miller and Campbell, 2008) and communication anxiety, which suggests that people experience tense and terrified feelings when speaking with others (Crosby, Bromley and Saxe, 1980) are two important constructs often used for human behavioral research. Previous studies revealed that SNSs are more appealing to those who have a high degree of narcissism (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008) and those who feel anxious engaging in social communication offline (Campbell, Cumming, and Hughes, 2006; Desjarlais, and Willoughby, 2010). However, most of those studies used samples from Western societies (specifically, the U.S.), and very few have examined the relationships among psychological traits, SNS use, and social capital within the Asian cultural context. Cultural backgrounds are important for this study because media use behaviors, as well as their relationship to psychological characteristics and social capital, vary greatly across cultures. Specifically, people growing up in Chinese culture are believed to have a lower degree of narcissism (Shon and Ja, 1982). They are also believed to take great care of guanxi, an Asian style of handling network contact similar to social capital but with greater emphasis on tactics and mutual benefit (Park and Luo, 2001). As a result, this study does what other studies have not; it integrates the Chinese cultural context with U&G and social capital framework with the expectation of finding a different dynamic than in the U.S. studies.

This present study aims to answer two questions: What is the effect of SNS use among Net Generation users in China? and How does SNS use, along with psychological traits (namely, narcissism and communication anxiety) affect social capital among the Net Generation users in China? It focuses on the use of Renren, a Facebook equivalent, in mainland China. This social media platform was established in 2005 and has developed into one of the most popular SNSs in China, especially among college and graduate students (CNNIC, 2012; CNNIC, 2014). The reason we are interested in the Net Generation is two-fold: they are the emerging generation with growing power, and they are the dominant users for SNSs. To them, SNSs are more than a medium; they are extension of their daily life. As a result, how Net Geners use SNSs, to some extent, will imply a social trend.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Net Generation

The Net Generation is defined by a combination of its demographic cohort, values, and life experiences (Leung, 2004). According to Tapscott (1998, 2009), the Net Generation is the first to grow up surrounded by home computers, video games, and the internet. Net Geners tend to express themselves, look for information, and connect with others via digital technologies (Howe and Strauss, 2000; Leung and Zheng, 2012). As a result, they are identified as globally oriented, emotionally open, strongly principled, quick to learn, and technologically savvy (Leung, 2003, 2004; Tapscott, 2009). Net Geners adopted social networking sites (SNS) to facilitate interpersonal communication very shortly after the emergence of those sites. Their enthusiasm for social media also influences the way they develop and maintain social networks and resources (Ghannam, 2012; Selwyn, 2012; Valenzuela, Gil de Zúñiga, and Zheng, 2014). Many of their offline social ties have been moved online.

Previous research has estimated that the Net Generation represents 30% of the population of the United States (Tapscott, 2009), making it a consumer group larger than the Baby Boomers. In China, about 30% of internet users are between the ages of 20 and 29 (CNNIC, 2014). Given the growing power of this generation, media practitioners, educators, researchers, and marketers must develop an in-depth understanding of the psycho-graphic profile of Net Geners, figure out how members of the new generation use social media to fulfill specific gratifications, and explore the conditions under which social media sites help increase the social capital of these young people.
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