

The Social Capital Behind SNS in China — Based on the Example of WeChat

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Abstract: With the increasing number of users on Chinese social network sites and the growing popularity of WeChat, it is essential to study the behaviors and attitudes of SNS (Social Networking Services) users in China to explore the underlying reasons behind them, particularly social capital. While there have been numerous studies on social capital, limited research has focused on its fluctuations in the field of the Internet. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the differences in online and offline social capital by examining people's behaviors and attitudes towards social network sites, using WeChat as an example to explore the inner motivations of SNS users and explain the significance of social capital.

Keywords: SNS; Social capital; WeChat

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1. Introduction

1.1. SNSs and social capital

Social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Myspace, and Friendster, represent the newest trends in electronic technologies and online interaction these years ^[1]. Currently, the relationship between social networking services (SNSs) and individuals' daily lives has grown increasingly interconnected, as the boundaries of time and space are being broken down day by day ^[2]. China now has the largest number of SNS users, due to the popularization of SNSs and the upgrade of the cyberinfrastructure ^[3].

Social networking sites (SNS) have played an increasingly significant role in human communication and have gradually become the dominant method of interaction. Especially among the younger generation, who are accustomed to communicating through SNSs and making friends online. Due to the development of Web 2.0, users' SNS-related habits, and other factors, social media users have more opportunities to create and develop social capital. Currently, WeChat is one of the must-have apps in Chinese daily life and has a significant influence

on daily internet communication among the younger generation ^[4]. As long as a person owns a smartphone and has internet access, they can download an SNS application and converse with friends, family, colleagues, or even strangers. Social capital in the context of the Internet refers to the social relationships a user can utilize through the Internet, whether these relationships are established online or offline.

Currently, social capital, network relations, and friendships have become key topics among SNS users and researchers. These SNSs have provided platforms and spaces for users to publish and share their lives, pictures, movies, and music, making them publicly available. Research on social media now indicates its influence on spreading information, enhancing social capital, and cultivating democratic engagement ^[4-6]. Additionally, they encourage connections among users within the site, prompting them to build and/or maintain groups of friends ^[7]. These online activities enable SNS users to socialize online and thereby establish and sustain social capital through maintaining interactions with family and friends ^[8]. SNS has attracted growing interest in terms of establishing group and community behavior on online social platforms. The increasing number of SNS users has influenced the social communication of broader groups of people. Consequently, some researchers have started to explore social communication and the creation of online relationships among or between different people within these sites ^[1].

1.2. Social capital generated on WeChat

WeChat (Weixin in the Chinese version) is a service that allows users to send instant text and voice messages and enjoy other related functionalities, such as moments and red packets (or lucky money). Traditionally, red packets are given by elders to children during the Spring Festival to express their good wishes. However, on WeChat, both the form and meaning of lucky money have evolved. Currently, WeChat has developed into a feature-rich, comprehensive application, offering functionalities such as channels, official accounts, mini programs, and live streaming, as well as practical tools like translation and search.

Therefore, it is convenient for WeChat users to send and receive messages across mobile platforms ^[5]. WeChat has provided various online settings for users to contact their friends, family, colleagues, and other social relations, such as text messaging, group messaging, voice messaging, picture messaging, emoji, location sharing, video messaging, message translation, WeChat Pay, and moments ^[9-10].

However, although many scholars concentrate on social networks and the derived online relationships and social capital, SNSs have some shortcomings in people's daily interactions. Online and offline interactions do not always correspond. Offline interactions often come with facial expressions, body language, and personal background, while online interactions can be anonymous and invisible. Young adult SNS users consider their friendships with peers crucial not only for building offline benefits in social life, commonly understood as social capital, but also for psycho-social development. Social capital is regarded as a flexible concept to explain the benefits received from relationships and connections with other people ^[11].

Therefore, the research question of this study is to explore the meaning of social capital through the behaviors and attitudes of SNS users in China, both online and offline, using WeChat as an example. A financial report conducted by Tencent Penguin in 2024 revealed that WeChat had nearly 1.4 billion monthly active users worldwide, with the exact number being 1.359 billion. Additionally, 73.7% of internet users visit the WeChat app regularly ^[12]. There are numerous reasons why users choose WeChat as their primary means of interaction.

WeChat users are allowed to send messages in different forms, including video, text, voice, and images ^[5]. The use of social network sites is often linked to the needs of users, and the same applies to WeChat. Lien and Cao found in their survey that there is a positive linkage among WeChat, crucial elements of social network communication, users' attitudes, and their behaviors ^[3]. The research results indicate that the influences of trust, entertainment, and

information are significant on WeChat users' attitudes. In addition, this research has revealed that more than half of WeChat's young users are well-educated, single, and have fewer than 100 WeChat friends. Most of them are long-time and active WeChat users (using WeChat for more than a year and more than an hour a day).

2. Critical views of social capital

The increase in available applications aimed at entertaining users has impacted Chinese SNS users by shaping their online habits and attitudes. Additionally, WeChat is regarded as a useful and convenient method for users to obtain large amounts of timely information. This information can be understood as social capital since users can benefit from timely updates, especially in terms of work. Therefore, social capital can influence users' attitudes and behaviors because they can benefit from it. For example, timely information on WeChat can help an officer learn the latest news about their customers or potential customers, allowing them to be very responsive to customer needs and earn profit. It has been proven that there is a positive relationship between the users' purpose and the influence of information^[13]. Siregar et al. also argue that one of the dominant aims of Chinese SNS users who choose WeChat is social interaction, knowledge acquisition, and entertainment^[13]. WeChat is a beneficial tool for Chinese users to send and receive timely information, regardless of the degree of importance^[3].

WeChat has created a unique way for Chinese users to build their trust online. Trust is an important basis of the usage and interaction of SNS. For example, Hongbao (red packet) launched in 2014 is a specific way for Chinese people to connect with each other and enhance or develop social capital^[14]. WeChat uses these Chinese-style applications to meet the needs of Chinese customers, and users can utilize specific applications such as WeChat Pay to connect social relationships online more easily and conveniently^[15]. Bourdieu has associated social media with power, and in the field of social network sites, social capital can not only be the number of online friends a person has but also the extent to which a person can leverage their online power to engage their friends and achieve something. Similarly, WeChat, as a type of SNS, has comparable power and features in this field.

3. The relationship of online and offline interactions among WeChat users

The attraction and significance of social capital lie in the fact that a person can benefit considerably from social capital, regardless of whether they are less educated, lack money or are weak and sick. For example, middle-class parents in China have a great desire to send their children to top international or elite schools. On the one hand, the teachers, facilities, and reputations of these schools are excellent. Additionally, children can make acquaintances with peers from the same or even higher social statuses, which can serve as important social capital and networks for their future. Moreover, the investment in education and schooling is seen as a way to generate and choose a social network or social status for their children, which these parents believe will determine their children's social status when they grow up.

However, similar but different, the allure of social networking sites lies in their capacity for long-distance, anonymous, and extensive data-driven social interactions. A person can maintain a maximum of 150 friends in real life, while they can have thousands or even millions of friends online. Over 45% of WeChat users have more than 200 friends, and the proportion of users who have over 500 friends is 13.5% which considerably surpasses Dunbar's Number^[16]. Dunbar argued that human intelligence only allows an individual to maintain a social network of no more than 150 people^[17]. Extending one's social network infinitely can be achieved online.

Moreover, to what extent can this kind of social network become real social capital and benefit

individuals? If social capital is a collection of actual or potential resources, these resources are related to the social network that consists of social relationships, either by default or recognized ^[18]. Coleman argued that social capital contains three main forms: (1) the form of social interaction and trust; (2) a social network; and (3) a shared value system ^[19]. Therefore, social networking sites align with this concept of social capital. Achieving the transition of social capital from online to offline enables users to obtain more benefits or may lead to harmful consequences, and this needs to be considered in depth or vice versa. In this part, the results of the interview will try to illustrate the flow of social capital, taking WeChat as an example.

3.1. Offline social power has decided online social capital

Although WeChat has become the main method of social communication, individuals still place most of their focus on social relationships built offline. Meanwhile, the form of online relationships is shaped and decided by offline social capital. People who have power in real life may have more power on social networking sites within a group. In terms of WeChat chat groups, people who have more social power, such as a team leader, are more likely to receive more replies or raise the focus of group members.

This kind of online situation can be explained by Bourdieu's theory that social networking site (SNS) users are the main subjects in generating and diffusing "Internet memes" ^[20]. A group can offer social resources by itself; meanwhile, it is identified as the source of influence, hierarchy, and value ^[21]. Offline social statuses and relationships determine and shape the pattern of online interaction. As Bourdieu argued, powerful people always control the right to speak. In the realm of the internet, users continue their habits, such as respect for power and social status.

3.2. Online social power can create and develop offline social capital

Some online social interactions have helped in generating and extending offline social capital. For example, the trend of internet celebrities can be regarded as an explanation to some extent. The process of how internet celebrities become popular and attract attention is equivalent to the conversion of online social power to offline social capital.

In this study, some of the interviewees are quite famous on SNS. They have a large number of fans online and can be regarded as internet celebrities to some extent. They have established numerous social relationships through the internet and transferred them to real life. Moreover, these online social relationships have helped them in various ways, such as providing emotional support and fostering real friendships.

Researchers can deduce from the interview that online social interaction has some positive effects on offline social relationships, and this transformation can become social capital to some extent. Initially, these interviewees were afraid of communicating with strangers, but eventually, they became internet celebrities and made many close friends who could offer a helping hand.

Apart from internet celebrities, other participants also have similar experiences in transferring online social relationships to offline social capital. Based on the interviews in this study, online social relationships can transfer to offline social interactions, but only when the construction of intimacy is complete. According to Bourdieu's theory, the behaviors of individuals indicate their social status and are determined by their field of life. Therefore, when they can offer or share social resources on the same scale, understood as a social network, they can exchange social resources within this network (or field). Participants in this study share common interests and benefit from online social relationships with strangers who, after communication, become close friends. They then choose to extend these online relationships, which suggests that their online relationships have transformed into offline social

interactions and are regarded as social capital.

Moreover, the role of trust is of considerable importance in transforming online strangers into offline social capital. Many participants distrust online relationships and have shown a strong sense of skepticism toward them. Individuals may be conservative when adding strangers to WeChat, which may be partly due to the privacy features of WeChat. However, trust can change this situation. The experiences of the participants indicate that only when trust is established in online social interactions can offline social capital develop. Trust is a necessary process in generating social capital, especially in the field of the Internet. Trust is one of the most dominant elements in sustaining social capital^[11]. Maintaining online communication without trust will be easily interrupted, and individuals are more resistant online than offline.

To conclude, it is much easier for high-quality social relationships to transfer from offline to online. However, for strangers, online relationships may continue and transfer to offline only when trust is built.

4. Retrospect and prospect

Combining social capital with SNS has become a trend in the age of the internet. WeChat has connected offline social behavior with online interaction, thereby integrating daily life with the internet, even though it is only a social network platform.

However, some adverse effects of SNS need to be addressed. People may find it difficult to concentrate on real life and become “couch potatoes.” Therefore, it is hard to decide whether WeChat has brought individuals closer together or alienated them. Relying on the internet and online social networks while ignoring the people around seems to have a negative influence. Furthermore, minorities may feel constrained by mainstream society, which should raise the attention of policymakers, social workers, SNS companies, and society as a whole.

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