Telematics and Informatics xxx (2016) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Telematics and Informatics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tele

Can online social networks foster young adults' civic engagement?

Jinyun Chen

School of Journalism and Communication, Jinan University, No. 601, West Huangpu Avenue, Guangzhou 510632, Guangdong, China

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 21 July 2016
Accepted 18 September 2016
Available online xxxx

Keywords:
Online social networks
Online civic engagement
Offline civic engagement
Information use
Group incentives

ABSTRACT

The current study aims to determine whether Wechat can have positive effects on civic engagement and how young adults can be influenced. This study not only examines the direct associations between the Wechat social network and two types of civic engagement but also analyzes information use in Wechat and group incentives as mediators in the path model. A total of 297 young adults responded to an online survey questionnaire. The results showed that the size of online social networks was related to online civic publication, while interactions in networks exerted a positive influence on online and offline civic engagement via information use and group incentives. Furthermore, two types of civic engagement were found to be associated with each other. The possible reasons for these findings are also discussed.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Social media are becoming increasingly popular around the world, especially among adolescents and young adults (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008; Pempek et al., 2009). In China, Wechat is the most popular social media platform, attracting 300 million users since its release fewer than two years ago. According to a report by Tencent, by the end of 2015 Wechat had 697 million monthly active users. Wechat has become an essential part of people's lives – especially young people – in terms of education, work and entertainment. Although one popular social media platform in China, Sina Microblog, has been shown to have positive effects on online civic engagement (Guo, 2015), Wechat has not received similar attention. Compared to Sina Microblog, Wechat is driven by relationships (Chen and Liao, 2014). Wechat users have more acquaintances, with whom they have stronger relationships and more frequent interactions than through Sina Microblog. Furthermore, an increasing number of people are trying to become engaged in civic events through Wechat.

Due to the characteristics of social media, which allow individuals to construct, share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content (Kietzmann et al., 2011), researchers have shown great interest in the relationships between participation in social media and civic engagement (see Greenhow and Li, 2013). This has created a heated debate: do social media have a positive relationship with civic engagement because they enable people to become better informed, find common causes and participate more often in public life? Or, on the contrary, do they have negative effects, causing people to become absorbed in interpersonal communication and distracted from civic disengagement, following the "time displacement hypothesis" proposed by Putnam (see Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012)?

E-mail address: evelynchan61@hotmail.com

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2016.09.013
0736-5853/© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Please cite this article in press as: Chen, J. Can online social networks foster young adults' civic engagement? Telemat. Informat. (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2016.09.013

Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) tested whether desirable attitudes and behaviors could be promoted while keeping up with the news using SNS[1] (Social Network Services). Warren et al. (2014) investigated how social media shaped the landscape of civic engagement and the building of trust. Lenzi et al. (2015) proposed a model that linked the informational use of social media with civic competencies and intentions of future civic engagement, treating civic discussions and online news-sharing as mediating factors.

However, most of these studies have lacked theories to support their hypotheses and were seldom theory-driven. Future studies require more systematic and theory-based empirical research designs (Zhang and Leung, 2014). The present study adopts communication infrastructure theory (CIT), which claims that community resources are critical to fostering civic engagement (Gibbs et al., 2004).

There are two major components of CIT[2]. One is the neighborhood storytelling network, in which community organizations, local media, and neighborhood residents have connections with each other and play significant roles. The other component is the communication action context, such as work conditions, schools, and other resources that can affect the strength of the neighborhood storytelling network (Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Wilkin et al., 2010). CIT insists that the critical factor in civic engagement is accessing community storytelling resources, which can be any type of communicative action that addresses residents, whether oral or written, electronic or non-electronic (Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006). The theory provides a useful perspective from which to understand the relationship between the communication environment and communicative actions.

Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006) have also noted that new communication technologies can make a difference to civil society. Wechat is now ubiquitous in China. Not only do individuals use it for many purposes but also media and organizations, both large and small, take advantage of Wechat to exchange information with others. Wechat thus provides a better communication environment for neighborhood storytelling networks.

The key to this study lies in the online social network, a storytelling community encompassing friends and the many types of information they exchange. This paper explores whether such a network can foster civic engagement. If individuals can be influenced by their social networks in Wechat, how, exactly, are they influenced? In trying to answer these questions, this paper adds to the path model two mediators, information use and group incentives.

Young adults' civic engagement tends to be undermined by the large amounts of time they spend on education, work, and/or commuting (see Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006). Given these challenges, does Wechat have the power to convince young adults to participate in civic events?

2. Literature review

2.1. Civic engagement

Civic engagement refers to the participation of individuals in the public sphere, such as in civic, electoral, or political activities. It is typically driven by a sense of duty and respect for authority and aims to bring about changes or improvements to society (Reuben, 2004; Greenhow and Li, 2013; Lenzi et al., 2015). Participation occurs through both direct and indirect interactions (Reuben, 2004); it may range from political to civic acts (Jugert et al., 2013).

As the internet has become increasingly popular, online (internet-based) civic engagement has developed as well (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). This includes online actions such as posting, commenting, discussing, voting, or even clicking to demonstrate one's attention to societal issues (Greenhow and Li, 2013; Liu, 2013; Warren et al., 2014; Guo, 2015). Such actions are costless and simple, helping them to fit into the lifestyles of younger generations. With their passion for and comfort with communicating and sharing online, these young people are more apt than older generations to be e-citizens (Jensen et al., 2007).

Offline civic engagement refers to actions taken in real life for civic purposes, such as volunteering for an environmental organization or communicating with the government (Greenhow and Li, 2013). Some researchers have found that the rate of offline civic participation among young adults is low (Grillo et al., 2009; Chan and Guo, 2013). Because they typically lack the motivation and perceived ability to engage in politics and public affairs in real life, they have few offline civic experiences (see Chan and Guo, 2013). Pattie et al. (2003) found that levels of potential engagement are much higher than those of actual activism. This may be due to the nature of "potential engagement", which is a costless, rather hypothetical type of involvement.

Under these circumstances, using actual activity to measure offline civic engagement is not appropriate because actual participation rates are expected to be low and therefore cannot reveal individuals' true relationships with social media. Instead, intentions of offline civic engagement not only reveal young adults' attitudes toward civic engagement but also strengthen the causal relationship between online and offline engagement, as civic engagement can be predicted by behavioral intentions (Ajzen, 1991). In other words, if we study "intentions" (will do) instead of "experience" (have done), we are more likely to determine how such intentions relate to social media, as people may have their "experiences" before using social media. This variable was also used in a study of Facebook and civic engagement (Lenzi et al., 2015). Behavioral intentions will become actual civic actions once opportunities become available. Online engagement can promote offline

[1] SNS: Short for "Social Network Services".
[2] CIT: Short for "Communication infrastructure theory".

Please cite this article in press as: Chen, J. Can online social networks foster young adults' civic engagement? Telemat. Informat. (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2016.09.013

Download English Version:

https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4957664

Download Persian Version:

https://daneshyari.com/article/4957664

Daneshyari.com