



# Civic engagement among educated Chinese youth: The role of SNS (Social Networking Services), bonding and bridging social capital



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## ABSTRACT

This study conducted a stratified and cluster sampling on Chinese college students ( $N = 654$ ) to investigate how SNS usages and social capital elicit impact on civic engagement. The results of path regression model shows that using SNS to meet new people is positively correlated with bonding and bridging social capital in the virtual world, using SNS to contact existing friends contributes to both bonding and bridging social capital in the real world. Online bonding and bridging social capital are positively related to online civic involvement, but not significantly related to offline civic behaviors. Offline bonding and bridging social capital are positively associated with offline civic participation, but not significantly related to online civic participation. The direct effect of using SNS to meet new social ties on civic engagement is partially mediated by social capital, whilst the effect of using SNS to connect friends on civic participation is completely mediated by social capital.

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## 1. Introduction

SNS (Social Networking Services) are online services that allow users to create an individual profile, connect with other users and navigate through these networks of content (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). With the rapid proliferation of SNS around the world, it has swept over the Chinese Internet market since 2007 (Zhong, 2010). The growing popularity of SNS makes it important to examine the effects of using these services on users' social capital and civic behaviors (Gil de Zuniga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012).

Social capital has drawn considerable attention from social scientists and has inspired a great number of studies on civil society, youth behavior problems, community life and democracy (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Son and Lin (2008) summarized that studies on social capital had emerged in two research traditions. One highlights the utility of social capital for individual actors (e.g. Burt, 1992; Flap & Volker, 2001; Granovetter, 1983) and this level of social capital could be understood as the resources embedded in individuals' social ties. Putnam (1995) grouped individual-level social capital into two categories: bonding from strong ties and bridging from weak ties. Another research tradition concentrates on the utility of social capital for collective actors and often refers to civic engagement (Putnam, 1993, p. 167) which is defined as citizens' participation in voluntary associations, local communities, and political activities (Putnam, 2000).

China is known for the huge population of Internet users and the stringent regulation on the use of the Internet. College students is an important component of Chinese Internet users and they have been criticized for egoism, materialism, declining commitment to social responsibility and spending too much time on SNS websites (e.g. Li, 2013; Li, 2005; Wei & Wang, 2010; Zhang, 2002). As these educated young people are identified as the future of the country and will become the primary actors of political procedure, and as universities are considered as playing a leading role in preparing educated young people into active citizens (Dusi, Steinbach, & Messetti, 2012), this study aims to investigate how college students' uses of SNS are related with their social capital and civic behaviors, and suggestions about the influence of higher education on civil society will be proposed based on the empirical findings.

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This paper is organized as follows. The section of conceptual framework begins with the conceptualization of social capital and civic engagement, considering the influences of the Internet on the concepts. The remainder of this section covers the literature review on the relationship between SNS and social capital and the impact of social capital on civic engagement, hypotheses and research questions about these relationships are addressed. The methodology part (Section 3) elaborates the procedure of the survey and the measurement of the variables. Section 4 describes the details of data analysis and reports the results. Section 5 discusses the main findings of the study and the implication to higher education in China. The last part concludes the study by addressing the limitation and future research directions.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. Online and offline social capital

Individual-level social capital roots in individuals' social ties. A tie between two individuals can be strong or weak, differing in "the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361). Strong ties often refer to family, relatives, close friends and frequent contacts that could exchange affective and reciprocal favors. Strongly tied pairs share similar backgrounds, more self-disclosure and exchange more intimacy and substantial support (Haythornthwaite, 2002). Bonding social capital occurs when strongly tied individuals provide emotional or instrumental support for one another or offer access to scarce resources. Granovetter (1985) noted that bonding social capital, or the help and support gained through strong ties was lowly cost, trustworthy and reliable (p. 490).

Although strongly tied people provide multiple benefits to one another, the close association limits their access to more resources because the resources owned by strong ties are often overlapped. Furthermore, shared identity among strong ties fosters in-group loyalty, as well as produces out-group antagonism (Marschall & Stolle, 2004), therefore may restrict entry to people outside the group (Haythornthwaite, 2002; Portes, 1998). Some researchers (e.g. Coffe & Geys, 2007; Marschall & Stolle, 2004) argued that bridging associations, or weak ties, were more likely to generate positive externalities than bonding networks. Weak ties are individuals with diverse backgrounds and are very likely to have different vision and social networks, therefore they may broaden social horizons or worldviews, open up opportunities for new resources and support connections among disconnected groups (Williams, 2006).

As social capital is built on the basic of social interaction, changes in communication media will bring changes to the patterns of communication and rebuild the whole social networks (Haythornthwaite, 2002). Online social interactions are based on computer-mediated communication (CMC), whereas offline social interactions are grounded on face-to-face communication (FtF). Therefore it is necessary to make distinctions between online and offline social capital (Williams, 2006).

### 2.2. Online and offline civic engagement

Civic engagement is defined as organized voluntary activity focused on problem solving and helping others. Specifically, volunteering, working for NGOs, participating in community services, joining in civic-related organizations, contacting with mass media or government for public affairs, donating money for needy would all fall in the category of civic participation. Some researchers argued that civic engagement could be defined more broadly and it incorporates political participation, such as voting, attending political campaigns and taking part in protest or demonstration (Ehrlich, 2000; Singer, King, Green, & Barr, 2002). Although some studies treated political participation and civic participation separately (e.g. Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Zhang & Chia, 2006), a lot of researchers argued that the two types of participation were closely related in some ways. For instance, Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2008) thought that the distinctions between political, civic and expressive activities were more theoretical than empirical (p. 11). It is not easy to make a clear distinction between public issues and political issues and citizens' civic participation always plays a critical role in enhancing good functioning of the political systems (Valenzuela et al., 2008). Therefore, this study incorporates the concept of civic engagement and political participation together.

Yang (2003) gave a brief historical retrospect to highlight the crucial role of the Internet in China's political procedure. In Maoist China, political participation was strictly guided by the central government, and political dissent was viewed as risky and treasonable. During the reform period since 1978, individualist modes of political participation such as personal appealing took place here and there, but mass political campaigns rarely happened. The Internet inaugurates a new era of civic participation for Chinese people because it gives birth to new repertoires of civic actions in the cyberspace, including citizen journalism and online collective actions (Chan, Wu, Hao, Xi, & Jin, 2012; Liu, 2009; Yang, 2009). The concept of citizen journalism describes the phenomenon that ordinary people play an active role in collecting, reporting, and disseminating news as professional journalists do. Citizen journalism is especially important in China where the mass media are under stern control by the government. Furthermore, radical forms of online actions also occurs, such as signing petition, online voting, organizing offline actions through the Internet, hacking websites, hosting campaign websites, etc. Yang (2009) noted that online activism was a new form of contention in China and the Internet had served to mobilize street protest.

Chinese college students are considered as disengaging with traditional politics (Li, 2005; Zhang, 2002), but few empirical data is available to verify or challenge the stereotype. This study aims to get a clear picture about how they act as growing citizens, thus the following research question will be addressed:

RQ1: What types of civic activities do Chinese college students participate in the offline world and the online world?

Another purpose of this study is to find the effects of online civic engagement on the procedure of civil society in the real world. Researchers (e.g. Green & Brock, 2008; Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino, & Donovan, 2002) predicted that social involvement in online communities might bolster skills and abilities that were necessary to make the move into political life, such as teamwork, leadership, negotiating, public speaking, assertiveness in community and a sense of civic attachment. Therefore, a hypothesis is posed:

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