



Does social capital affect SNS usage? A look at the roles of subjective well-being and social identity



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ABSTRACT

This study views social capital as a precursor of SNS (Social Network Service) use, which departs from the previous thoughts that considered social capital as the outcome of SNS activities. Drawing upon the theoretical premises regarding network-based social capital, this study examines the roles of subjective well-being and social identity in terms of their moderating as well as mediating influences on SNS use. This study sought to sub-categorize social capital and SNS use with a view to providing more refined theoretical and practical implications. The study's main objectives are three-fold: First, the study verifies whether social capital, categorized into bridging and bonding capital, influences one's SNS use as measured by qualitative use and quantitative use. Second, the study aims to confirm whether subjective well-being mediates between social capital and SNS use. Third, it examines whether social identity moderates the relationship between social capital and SNS use.

The study result indicates that bridging capital only had a significant impact on qualitative use. However, subjective well-being did not mediate the relationship between social capital and SNS use. Finally, the cognitive identity caused significant difference in the effect of social capital on quantitative SNS use, whereas cognitive and affective identities caused significant differences in regards to the effects of bridging capital on qualitative SNS use.

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1. Introduction

The review of literature on social capital reveals that the majority of research concentrated on social network, trust, civic participation, life satisfaction and others (Coleman, 1988; Newton, 2006; Putnam, 2000). The core concept of social capital centers around availability of resources that are obtained through social interactions (Putnam, 2000), and a predominant view has been that people with strong ties and diverse networks possess greater social capital than those without them. To maintain a desired level of social capital, one needs a social mechanism that links one with others to build relationships. Today, social network service (herein-after SNS) provides a social mechanism that allows people to create rational or emotional connections and share knowledge and information online. Thus, the primary motives for joining SNS may be to make social contacts and strengthen ties with friends or acquaintances. According to a study which researched motives for taking part in SNS, people desire to maintain and promote social network and they make investment in social network to increase trust and reciprocal norm, which facilitates group-oriented behavior (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Thus, from this

viewpoint, social network may be considered a prerequisite to collective behavior through collaborative engagement in issues requiring reciprocal trust (Putnam, 2000). In sum, the human capital which is obtained through trust and network plays a salient role in making people participate in collective behavior.

Contrary to the rationale aforementioned, the past research on the relationship between social capital and SNS activity has taken a view that SNS is only one of the tools to promote social capital (Ellison et al., 2007; Ryberg & Larsen, 2008; Koh, Hwang, & Ji, 2010), and no studies so far have conceived social capital as a precursor of SNS usage. The previous literature, by and large, conceived that SNS promotes ties among the members with little cost and much convenience so as to help nourish social networks that underpin social capital. And a few studies which viewed social capital as a causal agent to elicit collective behavior mostly focused on civic or political activities that take place in local communities (Howard & Gilbert, 2008).

Therefore, it is the main thrust of this study to view SNS not as an instrument to generate social capital but as one of the behavioral manifestations of social capital. This view is consistent with the core premises of social capital theory which viewed civic or political activities as behavioral outcome of social capital (Coleman, 1988; Newton, 2006; Putnam, 2000). Hence, this

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research rationale seems tenable since the use of SNS, just like participation in civic activities or political activities, requires voluntary decision which is expedited when one maintains strong ties built on mutual trust, a critical component of social capital. Thus it is a logical extension of this rationale to investigate the role of SNS as a social media by which people demonstrate social capital.

Another objective of this study is to explore the role of subjective well-being as a mediator between social capital and SNS use. Past research has demonstrated that social capital produces subjective (or psychological) well-being, and that people with high degree of subjective well-being tend to partake in online community activities through reciprocal adaptation (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Ellison et al., 2007). But no previous research so far reported on whether subjective well-being actually mediates between social capital and SNS use. Verifying the mediating role of subjective well-being will help us to understand whether people with high level of social capital take part in SNS activities more when they are emotionally charged. This emotional linkage has not been fully explored in past research on the outcome of social capital, which makes this study a meaningful addition to current literature.

Next, drawing upon the theory of social identity proposed by Dholokia, Bagozzi, and Pearo (2004), this study aims to examine whether collective identity at individual level affects SNS use. When one contemplates on joining a new community, either online or offline, or when one reevaluates the value of continuing current community membership, one normally embarks on mental accounting where one evaluates the value of joining the new community against current membership. Hence, understanding how social identity operates is critical in determining one's membership into SNS community. Based on this rationale, this study aims to uncover whether social identity actually moderates the relationship between social capital and SNS use. This research focus is expected to elevate the current understanding of the role of social capital that relates to identity-based community membership, which has not been previously researched. The result will also help us to better understand the specific roles of self-identity with regards to SNS use, incorporating three dimensions of social identity (cognitive, affective, and evaluative). The finding will alert social media firms to the importance of understanding specific roles of self-identity as facilitator or inhibitor of SNS use.

In sum, it is the main objective of this study to examine the relationship between social capital and SNS use drawing upon existing theories pertaining to the network-based social capital. Also, the study seeks to sub-categorize social capital and SNS use in an effort to provide more specific theoretical as well as practical implications regarding the topical issue. The study has the following three research objectives. First, it adopts the network-based typology of social capital which dichotomizes social capital into bridging and bonding dimensions, and it aims to determine whether each type of social capital has significant relationship with SNS use. In this study, to differentiate behavioral intensity of SNS use, SNS use is further categorized into qualitative use and quantitative use. Second, with a view to integrating previous findings on the relationships among social capital, subjective well-being, and SNS use, this study aims to ascertain whether subjective well-being mediates between social capital and SNS use. Finally, the study seeks to verify whether social identity (cognitive, affective, and evaluative identity) moderates between social capital and SNS use.

2. Literature review and research hypotheses

2.1. Social capital

There has been a strong academic consensus that social capital is a principal driver that promotes healthy and effective democracy

(Putnam, 2000). The past literature on social capital reveals that researchers have approached it as a multi-faceted concept composed of social network, trust, civic participation, life satisfaction, and others (Coleman, 1988; Newton, 2006; Putnam, 2000). But the core concept of social capital pertains to the resources made available through social interactions among people (Putnam, 1993). Putnam (1993, p.37) defined social capital as “characteristic of social organization such as network, trust, norm, and social trust that promote coordination and cooperation for the sake of reciprocal benefits.” By investing in social networks, people gain norms and expectations about trust and reciprocity, which is essential for successful participation in collective activities (Putnam, 2000). As such, among those elements, network concept has received the widest attention as network was viewed as a social mechanism that produces trust and social norms. According to network researchers, people with diverse networks have greater amount of social capital than those with fewer and less diverse networks. Thus, drawing from this logic, it is reasonable to postulate that the intensity or amount of SNS participation, to some degree, depends on the nature and amount of social capital.

Putnam (2000), one of seminal scholars on social capital, argued that social capital differs in its nature and function, and classified social capital into bridging capital and bonding capital based on network attributes. He asserted that these two types stand apart when people encounter norms and networks that differ substantially. What sets the two types apart is the extent of difference in socioeconomic background of people in networked group (Putnam, 2000). Bonding capital refers to social network that is composed of relatives and friends, and it facilitates provision and mobilization of emotional, material support for people within the highly intimate group. People with bonding capital have little diversity in their backgrounds, and maintain high personal connections, which is conducive for sharing information high in credibility and intimacy (Briggs, 1998). But, people fitting this category may experience animosity and insularity between in-group and out-group members, and depend too much on interactions among homogeneous members, causing lack of informational diversity (Briggs, 1998).

On the other hand, bridging capital is put to use when people of dissimilar backgrounds try to make connections with other social networks. Bridging capital is in demand when one voluntarily makes relations with different organizations. Such organizations may have people of diverse socio-economic backgrounds (i.e., race, gender, occupation, income, faith, and others), and this diversity provides appropriate climate for bridging capital to flourish. Also, bridging capital facilitates access to new information and resource, making it useful to expand social horizons or world views, and to capture valuable information and opportunity (Putnam, 1993). However, people possessing high level of bridging capital tend to form relationships that are temporary and shallow. Hence, bridging capital, unlike bonding capital, is limited in its ability to provide emotional or material support because it requires little interdependence among the members (Putnam, 2000).

2.2. Social capital and SNS use

SNS gives its users access to information on their counterparts (e.g., personal background, interests, musical preferences, and location). This information reduces uncertainty about other users' intention and behavior, which is a prerequisite to establish trust and reciprocity (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). If individuals do not understand each other well, the chances of maintaining sustainable trust relationship also diminishes, hindering the use of SNS (Newton, 2006).

Not much is known about whether social capital causes differences in one's use of SNS in terms of use intensity or quality of

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