Facebook or Renren? A comparative study of social networking site use and social capital among Chinese international students in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites (SNSs) are important tools for college students to maintain and develop social capital. Yet, few studies on the social implications of using SNSs have focused on international students and their use of different social media platforms for social capital. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the implications of using host country and home country SNSs for social capital among Chinese international students in the United States. A survey of Chinese international students at a large public university ($N = 210$) reveals that both Facebook and Renren use are positively associated with bridging social capital but not with bonding social capital. Facebook use has a stronger relationship with bridging social capital than does Renren use. Yet, only Renren use has a significant and positive relationship with maintaining home country social capital. These results have practical implications for international students to develop different types of social capital through different social media platforms.

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1. Introduction

A growing body of literature has shown that using social networking sites (SNSs) is positively related to social interaction and network building among college students, contributing to their social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). However, most research has focused on one single social media platform—and more often than not—Facebook. Only a few studies have examined how using indigenous SNSs, such as Renren in China, Cyworld in Korea, or VKontakte in Russia, is related to social capital (Ji et al., 2010; Liu, Shi, Liu, & Sheng, 2013). Even fewer studies have examined whether different social media platforms may have differential implications for social capital. As importantly, there has been a striking lack of research on how international students use and benefit from social media in the host and home countries, respectively (see an exception in Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim, & LaRose, 2011, which however only examines Facebook). In this study, we explore the usage patterns of both Facebook and Renren, the two major SNSs used by Chinese international students in the US coming from mainland China and their implications for social capital in the host and home countries.

Our research has both scholarly and practical significance. First, international students in US higher education have increased by more than 30 percent over the past decade, contributing to the brain gain in the US and the socioeconomic development in the home countries (Alberts, Hazen, & Hazen, 2013; Bevis & Lucas, 2007; Institute of International Education, 2012). In particular, Chinese international students accounted for more than 25 percent of the international student pool in the US in 2011/12 (Institute of International Education, 2012). Because migrants have to cope with high levels of uncertainty when arriving in the US, social capital, that is, resources embedded in social relationships (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001), can play a crucial role in their social adaptation and professional development (Chen & Wellman, 2009; Kim, 1988; Nee & Sanders, 2001; Neri & Ville, 2008). Thus, a better understanding of the relationship between social media use and Chinese international students' building and maintaining of social capital has practical implications.

Second, Chinese international students in the US offer a unique case to examine and compare the differential usage patterns of host country and home country SNSs and their implications for social capital. Given Facebook's dominant status as the leading SNS around the globe (World Maps of Social Networks, 2012), China is one of the few countries where indigenous SNSs remain more popular than or as popular as Facebook. Renren, established in 2005 under the name of Xiaonei, was one of the clones inspired by Facebook, and has evolved as one of the most popular SNSs

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among young people in mainland China (CNNIC, 2011, 2013). As Facebook has been blocked in mainland China since 2009, most college students in mainland China do not use it. Instead, Renren is often their first choice. Yet, upon arrival in the US, Chinese international students coming from mainland China are likely to join Facebook to build up their new social networks in the host country and continue their use of Renren to maintain co-ethnic ties both in mainland China and beyond.

2. Social capital and SNS use

Social capital refers to resources embedded in one's social networks, which can be accessed and used for instrumental or expressive returns such as mutual support, reciprocity, and cooperation (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001; Putnam, 2000). Bridging social capital refers to the values and resources embedded in the heterogeneous social networks, which contain weak ties, such as acquaintances, coworkers, and strangers, providing access to new and diverse information. Bonding social capital refers to those embedded in the homogenous social networks, which contain strong ties, such as family members and close friends, providing reciprocity, solidarity, and emotional support (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000).

The implications of the Internet for individuals' social capital have gained growing scholarly attention. Early studies suggested that the Internet decreased social capital by reducing face-to-face social interaction (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, 2001; Nie & Erbring, 2000). However, more recent studies show that Internet use, especially online communication, can increase the size of social networks or supplement sociability offline, helping to generate or maintain social capital (Chen, 2013a; Hampton & Ling, 2013; Hampton & Wellman, 2001, 2003; Kraut et al., 2002; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001).

Ellison et al. (2007) are among the first to examine the implications of Facebook use for bridging and bonding social capital. In addition to bridging and bonding social capital, they conceptualize a third form of social capital—maintained social capital—which refers to social capital associated with acquaintances from a previously inhabited community as opposed to close ties. Drawing on a sample of college students, they find that the intensity of Facebook use is positively predictive of all the three types of social capital.

Ellison and colleagues' seminal work has inspired a growing body of literature. Most studies show positive relationships between SNSs used in the US and beyond, especially Facebook and MySpace, and various forms of social capital, such as weak-tie based bridging and strong-tie based bonding social capital or other indicators like life satisfaction, social trust, civic engagement, or political participation (Brooks, Welser, Hogan, & Titsworth, 2011; Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011; Hofer & Aubert, 2013; Johnston, Tanner, Lalla, & Kawalski, 2013; Lampe, Vitak, & Ellison, 2013; Pasek, More, & Romer, 2009; Pfeil, Arjan, & Zaphiris, 2009; Steinfield, DiMicco, Ellison, & Lampe, 2009; Steinfield et al., 2008; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009).

However, the existing literature has several gaps. First, little is known about the applicability of these findings regarding American or global SNS use and social capital to indigenous SNSs such as Renren, Cyworld, and VKontakte (see an exception in Liu et al., 2013, which shows that the intensity of Renren use is related to social capital among college students in China). Second, few studies compare whether the simultaneous use of American or global SNSs and indigenous SNSs would have similar or different implications for social capital. Two cross-cultural studies compare the levels of bridging and bonding social capital generated by general SNS use between American and Asian users—Korean and Chinese users

respectively (Choi, Kim, Sung, & Sohn, 2011; Chu & Choi, 2010). However, the two studies do not directly investigate the relationship between SNS use and social capital or focus on any specific social media platform. Another cross-cultural study compares the relationships between motivations of general SNS use and social capital in the US, China, and South Korea (Ji et al., 2010). Yet, it does not focus on the actual usage patterns of any specific SNS. As importantly, little research has examined international students, except one study showing a positive relationship between Facebook usage and online bridging social capital among international students (Lin et al., 2011). However, Facebook might not be the only or even the major SNSs used by international students who come from countries where indigenous SNSs are dominant. Thus, aiming to shed light on the social implications of global and indigenous SNSs, this study focuses on the association of Chinese international students' use of host country and home country SNSs (Facebook and Renren) with their perceived bridging, bonding, and maintained social capital.

2.1. Bridging social capital

Most of the literature indicates a positive relationship between SNS use and weak-tie based bridging social capital. Donath and boyd (2004) hypothesize that the Internet allows weak ties to be formed and maintained easily. A panel data analysis shows that Internet use increases changes in weak ties in Americans' networks during a two-year period (Chen, 2013b). A longitudinal study reveals an increase of the number of acquaintances in SNS users' social networks (Brandtzæg, 2012). Another longitudinal study finds that the intensity of Facebook use exerts a causal effect on the levels of bridging social capital among American college students (Steinfield et al., 2008). The positive relationship between the intensity of SNS use and bridging social capital also applies to corporate employees using an organizational SNS (Steinfield et al., 2009). In addition, studies in a variety of settings ranging from South African Facebook users (Johnston et al., 2013), Norwegian Facebook and MySpace users (Brandtzæg, 2012), international students using Facebook in the US (Lin et al., 2011), and Chinese student users of Renren (Liu et al., 2013) show a positive relationship between SNS use and bridging social capital. Thus,

H1a. The intensity of Facebook use by Chinese international students in the US is positively associated with bridging social capital.

H1b. The intensity of Renren use by Chinese international students in the US is positively associated with bridging social capital.

2.2. Bonding social capital

Unlike the consistent findings on weak-tie based bridging social capital, the existing literature has debated whether online communication in general and SNS use in particular enhance, impede, or do not affect strong-tie based bonding social capital (see a review in Chen, 2013a). Previous studies argued that Internet communication might substitute weak ties for strong ties due to a trade-off between time spent with strangers online and that with family and friends offline (Nie & Erbring, 2000). Yet, SNSs are found to mainly encourage communication with existing offline connections rather than to initiate new contacts online (Ellison et al., 2007; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Therefore, the use of SNSs at least appears not to impede the maintenance of strong ties.

On the one hand, a number of studies, besides the work of Ellison et al. (2007), show that SNS use is positively associated with