Personal network on the Internet: How the socially marginalized stay marginalized in personal network diversity and multiplicity

Yong Jin Park a,⇑, Grace S. Yang b

a School of Communications, Howard University, 525 Bryant Street, NW, Room W-3, 207M, Washington DC 20059, United States
b Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, B267 East Hall, 530 Church Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1043, United States

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ABSTRACT

The Internet by its asynchronous and non-spatial nature may facilitate the diverse and multiple personal networks, but we hypothesize that this network affordance will be heavily influenced by one's socio-demographic positions. To test this hypothesis, we used a large survey data set of Internet users (n = 3,120) and examined how users' socio-demographic positions interact with Internet access to shape the affordance of network diversity and multiplicity. We found significant interactive effects, while network diversity, as indicated by homogeneity and heterogeneity, was not directly impacted by social positions. The effects of network multiplicity on personal wellbeing also differed by socio-demographic background. We argue that, without an understanding of socio-demographic disparities, a focus on Internet affordance fails to recognize the social reproduction in the creation and the benefits of personal networks.

1. Introduction

The Internet has enabled a shift from face-to-face relationships to network-based societies in which close interpersonal contacts can be established, expanded, or corroborated (Castells, 1996; Robinson et al., 2003). Just as the telephone in its inception provided individuals with a new way of establishing personal contacts independent of the constraints of physical distance (Pool, 1983) or social stratum (Fischer, 1994), the Internet may enable the creation of diverse personal networks that are less bounded by one's socio-economic status and are supportive of social wellbeing. Recent theories about the digital transformation of personal networks have been marked by a continuing debate over whether communities are becoming more fragmented or more integrated. Some researchers have argued that information and communication technologies (ICTs) help to break down barriers and decrease fragmentation by bringing together people in alienation (Castells, 1996; Robinson, 2003). On the other hand, many have contended that the Internet, mobile devices, and social media accelerate the insularity of personal networks, isolating them from each another. In this debate, however, little attention has been paid to how technologies intersect with a diverse variety of socio-demographic factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, education, and income to incubate the affordance of new personal networks. Further, little research has examined how this interplay may or may not translate into resource-enhancing personal outcomes that enable marginalized people to widen their networks.

⇑Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: yongjinp@hotmail.com (Y.J. Park), gyang@umich.edu (G.S. Yang).
This paper aims to understand how Internet access in interaction with stratified offline conditions is conducive to building personal networks, with a particular focus on under-resourced communities. We argue that the debates concerning the digital transformation of personal ties may benefit from obtaining an understanding of (1) how existing social backgrounds influence people's ability to create personal networks online and (2) how different social groups benefit from their networks, potentially exacerbating disparities between haves and have-nots. Our central thesis is that ICTs, especially the Internet, may support diverse and multiple personal networks but that they do so within the context of existing social layers. We test this proposition using five socio-demographic indicators (education, income, age, gender, and having a child at home). Our evidence supports the conclusion that Internet access encourages the creation of multiple personal networks, but that such benefits are concentrated and exclude groups who are socially marginalized by education, income, and/or age, as the creation and functioning of personal networks are deeply tied to social stratification.

2. Personal network stratification

The Internet, in its asynchronous and non-spatial capabilities, allows individuals to assemble easily and reach out to distant contacts. Foremost, the Internet affords communication across times and space, lending itself to the creation of a network that can be sustained regardless of the physical or temporal constraints. From this, it is often posited that the Internet produces social capital and associated activities that make it easier for low-status people to form relations with high-status others (see Benkler, 2006). By facilitating the interactions among close and distant friends, family members, and those with similar or dissimilar interest in various venues and sizes, Internet can redefine modes of personal connection beyond social as well as geographical boundaries. For instance, even an email directory can enable new friendships as it can include distant others and foster wider and more diverse networks of discussion. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter can also serve as enablers of interaction, as users follow the status of friends and interject comments, potentially bringing out positive resources into their lives.

Despite the enabling possibilities of the Internet, however, it may also be possible that this account considers only the most optimistic scenario, one that is immune to status inequalities. Empirical studies make it clear that the use of new technologies is by no means uniform and consistent across groups. In an alternative scenario, the Internet's non-spatial and asynchronous capacities for network diversity and abundance may not enable a certain stratum of society, namely without access to resource and skills (DiMaggio et al., 2001; Neuman et al., 2011; Wellman, 2004; Hindman, 2008). There is a long tradition of scholarship (DiMaggio et al., 2001; Wellman, 2004) that suggests that the development of network contacts is not impervious to social and demographic variations. Rather, gaining resource-enhancing personal contacts is more likely when existing ties are already strong (Haythornthwaite, 2002; Lin, 1999) and, as a result, a portion of society may be unable to utilize the relationship between ICTs and multiple and diverse forms of networks to fertilize their social well-being.

Decades ago, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) provided the conceptual foundation by which persistent social stratification can explain differences in the utilization of new technologies. Bourdieu's understanding is that the development of cultural capital is a disposition that evolves out of one's social position. Such skills as artistic appreciation, for instance, are not just individual attributes as is commonly perceived, but a product of participation in a particular social class. For Bourdieu, this type of cultural capital helps to maintain social hierarchies that become more firmly ossified over time, to the extent that societal positions are reproduced and the dominant classes retain prestige. In our view, Bourdieu's conception should serve as the starting point for investigating the differential effects of the Internet in sustaining or limiting network-building possibilities. Notable researchers (e.g., Donohue et al., 1975; Neuman et al., 2011; Zillien and Hargittai, 2009) have convincingly argued that Bourdieu's critical insight of stratification can be applied in various contexts of differentiated online uses, as accumulated advantages across socio-demographic statuses tend to widen existing societal gaps. This work is significant because these researchers refute the monolithic assumption that the Internet will lead uniformly to an increase of personal betterment and positive consequences in people's lives.

It thus appears that the Internet may reinforce and potentially increase, rather than decrease, network inequities by benefiting higher-status individuals who can secure and digest additional network contacts more efficiently than those from lower social backgrounds. This means that the affordance of personal networks online may be concentrated in highly selected social contexts and be less pronounced among those who are underprivileged in terms of social, human, and financial capital (Donohue et al., 1975; Neuman et al., 2011; Steyaert, 2002). In short, one's ability to create, build, and maintain personal contacts, and to translate those network ties into advantages in one's life, may be dependent on one's socialization (Zillien and Hargittai, 2009), which is deeply embedded in established disparities.

2.1. Hypotheses and empirical expectations of this study

The personal networking opportunities afforded by the Internet are our central focus in this paper. Given the importance of social background in the creation of diverse and multiple personal ties, this paper examines (1) how the diversity and multiplicity of one's personal networks are influenced by socio-demographic characteristics in interaction with Internet access, and (2) how those network contacts translate into beneficial personal outcomes, conditioned by socio-demographic background. Prior studies on social capital (Putnam, 2000; Wellman, 2004) and capital-enhancing activities have provided a solid foundation for developing empirical expectations. More specifically, advanced studies on network contacts (Boyd, 2006, for
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