CAMPUS SNS WEBSITE AND THE SOCIAL CAPITAL POSSESSION
FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

By

Xia Meng

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Sociology

2011

ABSTRACT

CAMPUS SNS WEBSITE AND THE SOCIAL CAPITAL POSSESSION
FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

By

Xia Meng

By the advent of Global Information Age, the social network service (SNS), represented by Campus SNS websites, has become an important approach of online communication for current college students. This article discusses the consequences of broad use of campus social network service among college students by conducting a survey on RenRen.com, which is an analogous website to Facebook.com and the most popular Campus SNS website in China. The paper presented the evidence that college students seek for social capital possession more intensively under the specified social environment which facilitate the emergence of SNS websites that focused on college student users. Meanwhile, these SNS websites play the role as medium for the social networks construction and social capital possession of college students.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Social Network and Campus SNS Websites

The developing trend as an "information-society" and the popularization of related information technology education has caused youngsters' transition from juvenile period to independent adulthood been significantly prolonged. Although most of the college students have been adults by the time they enrolled in campus, while many of them still more or less rely on parents economically and mentally. Being aware of the independent campus life ahead, majority of them would suffer from "trepid inklings" which intensify their needs of communicating, especially with their peers, to dispel the worry and unfamiliarity.

There have been many informal associations on campus besides official organizations which are directed under traditional educational system such as school, department and class. However, those unofficial associations are the resources and manifestations of the interpersonal relationships of college students. The foundation of such associations is resulted from the fundamental needs of affectional affiliation and interpersonal communication. Judging from the social psychology aspect, the unofficial associations on campus, to some extent, guarantee the satisfaction of desires to communicate with peers, which I called the desire as "Peer Longing".

The approaching of Information Age enables the Internet technology to be applied to more circumstances. The social intercourse sphere of college students is also broadened by the assistant of digital media. Perhaps Milgram's conception of Six Degrees of Separation can be best illustrated by people's active and even zealous application of Internet in the Information Age. According to the theory, if a person is one "step" away from each person he or she knows and two "steps" away from each person who is known by one of the

people he or she knows, then everyone is no more than six "steps" away from each person on Earth. Therefore, from the theoretical perspective the social intercourse sphere of each individual can be broadened infinitely and finally formed a massive network, which is the social network. Some scholars anticipate that the social intercourse sphere of college students would be broadened infinitely by the popular application of social network services such as Blog, IM and RSS, even breaking the "boundaries" of family and school. Since the sphere may not be broadened "infinitely", it has still been enlarged to a certain extent due to the emergence of many SNS websites that are specially designed for college students, which we call it the Campus SNS websites. These Campus SNS websites potentially break down the spatial limit and broaden the students' social intercourse range from their own university to all the universities around country.

The SNS websites were originated from the United States in 2003. It took no more than five months for SNS websites to be widely popular over the North America. Meanwhile, the growth of Campus SNS websites drew remarkable attention among all the SNS websites. The most famous Campus SNS website is Facebook.com, founded by Michael Arrington in 2004. The dramatic success of Facebook.com provides a good model for Chinese investors and entrepreneurs. Ever since the year of 2005, the number of Campus SNS websites similar to Facebook.com increased significantly in China, including Renren.com, Yiduo.com, Yiju.com, Zhanzuo.com and Lulian.com.

Most of the current Campus SNS websites normally use a limited-registration approach which means it is only open to college students. By verifying the e-mail or Internet Protocol address, those holding an ".edu.cn" e-mail or using the Internet service on

campus would be accepted as registered users. One of the most important features of Campus SNS websites is the identity conformity of registered users. In addition, the practicability of the various services embodies the value of these websites. Almost all the user's guide on the Campus SNS website encourages college students to upload their personal photo, fill in their real names, gender, age and the institution they are current studying in so every user could have their own record and profile page. The websites also develop customized Blog pages, embedded forum group and convenient functions for making new friends. Generally speaking, the Campus SNS can maximum the available resources from the interpersonal relationships. College students can find another people through the people they already know. Some can even manage their interpersonal network resources through the application of Campus SNS websites. According to my observation, more and more college students use Campus SNS websites to show themselves, meet new friends in the "college student group" and earn the chances to broaden their social intercourse sphere. From the sociological perspective, I believe that college students gain social capital from the substantive social network constructed by the application of Campus SNS websites in the digital world.

Method

I decide to discuss the social capital expansion of college students in online communication by studying their behaviors and customs when using the Campus SNS websites, so I put up these questions: What is the format of social capital acquiring when students are using the Internet? Will the social capital gained from the Campus SNS websites become substantive resource in the future? I chose Renren.com, which is currently the most popular Campus SNS website in China, to be my core research object and sent 320 pieces of online questionnaire to the users by snowball sampling and received 297 pieces which are effective. The statistical reports lend support to my conclusion on the social capital expansion of college students. I also conducted in-depth interview to achieve better understanding of the interacting consistency through Internet. All the 14 interviewees are college students from Nanjing University.

Literature Review

The social capital theory, in other words, is the study of the relationship between human become the field of very important theory. Although we can trace the birth of Social Capital theory back to classical sociologist's theories, such as Durkheim's concept of collective consciousness, Simmel's "Reciprocal Exchange" theory and Weber's concept of compulsory trust. However, commonly speaking, the forming of Social Capital theory is based on the social network research. The direct theoretical source origins from American scholars Mark Granovetter and Nan Lin's researches on the relations between personal social networks and his/her possessed social resources.

In the early 1970s, Granovetter raised a surprising opinion on social network. His work is considered one of the most influential sociology papers ever written when Granovetter demonstrated the strength of weak ties. In marketing or politics, the weak ties enable reaching populations and audiences that are not accessible via strong ties. The concepts of this work were later published in the related monograph "Getting a Job". Nan Lin and his colleagues pointed out that people with high occupational status and people with low occupational status constitute a social stratification system analog to pyramid structure. The higher the status is, the fewer the people will be while the more power and prestige they hold. For the reason that Strong Tie usually connects people possessing the same or similar resources, it is not very important in the same social class. On the contrary, Weak Tie usually become the connecting bond between different classes, thus its effects of resources exchange between different social classes can not be neglected.

However, some researchers came to radically opposite conclusion when studying

domestic issues. The Chinese scholar Bian Yanjie and his colleagues conducted a research based on the occupational mobility survey in Tianjin and pointed out that the Chinese society has long emphasized the "interpersonal relationships" as the directing principle in economic and social associations. The emphasis on "interpersonal relationships" is a social behavior which promotes the benefit exchange between acquaintances thus it calls for trust and compulsory exchange between people. Meanwhile, the urban job positions in China are allocated by Chinese government which means it would be no problem to get a good job if someone can build "interpersonal relationships" with officials who hold power. The essentiality of Social networks is quite apparent from this perspective. However, Bian Yanjie found out that it is the "actual influence" the more important factor than information in Chinese social networks. Considering the fact that these "actual influences" are not always legal, if there is no substantive Strong Tie between the job-seeker and the benefactor, it is very likely that the benefactor would stop applying his/her "actual influence" due to the constraints of opportunity cost in reciprocal exchange. In another word, the employment channel in China is more likely to be established through the Strong Tie in personal social networks. In a society constituted with different cultural background, people have diverse preferences towards different social networks structures. The research and investigation on Strong Tie and Weak Tie in labor employment could be considered as the early research of Social Capital Theory, it established the theoretical basis of Social Capital Theory.

The review of previous research tells us that we must consider the limiting and shaping of specific culture and system background to the social network sphere when we

are studying on the possession of social capital. One social network structure may have different effect under different system background. In our research on the social capital possession of college students, we must consider the general condition of higher education. We also need to consider the physical and psychological changes of college students as an important factor which might influence their online communication behaviors.

Discussion: The Essence of Online Relationships through Campus SNS Websites

College students is open to accept the new thing of the group, have very strong social demand, so SNS websites ,as emerging network social way, more acceptable to them .Why are there so many college students getting fervid for online communication? There are abundant theoretical interpretations related.

It alleviates one's pressure in daily life

Prof. Zhou Xiaohong's analysis using Goffman's dramaturgical perspective is quite representative among them: "Because of the anonymousness during online communication, people usually play a new role which is different from a front stage and a back stage. Consequently, people are able to talk about everything, share some secrets with someone he/she don't know for leisure and abreaction, alleviate one's pressure in daily life. In another word, it is the anonymousness of online communication that promotes its own development. This interpretation is explanatory under some circumstances, while situations are quite different on Campus SNS websites.

It is a way to keep freshmen from loneliness

Campus SNS websites are equipped with some small games such as friends buying and selling and parking, happy farm .Through the common participation can strengthen the freshmen who just enter the unfamiliar environment .With this scientific tool，freshmen can not only keep in touch with old friend but also meet new ones which help them relieve from loneliness. Through the websites, the reality of relations have further training and strengthening, and for some reason such as geographical space of the relationship between the fracture caused nearly also can be sustained. The freshmen will feel love around and

more easy to adapt to college life.

It is a display stage

Each user has a personal pages on Campus SNS websites , users can write their own blog recording to his or her own life, uploading photos of their own page, dressing up as their favorite style and background music, leaving the log message to different friends, commenting on different affairs and setting their own instant mood as a personal signature. They really became a master of space, and got a full power to show their individualities.

It is a real platform for communications

According to my survey, among 297 responders, 270 announced that the personal information they filled in when they registered at Renren.com is absolutely true, which percentage is more than 90. The personal information includes name, gender, date of birth, current school, current department, grade and hometown. The personal information basically covers all the information units to identify a college student. To interpret the data in another way, majority of users on the Campus SNS websites accept the real-name system although it is not compulsory on the websites. Besides, more than 80 percent of the responders confirmed the authenticity of their profile picture as their real photographs. These phenomena combine as a whole break the precondition of role playing theory.

What are the virtual reasons that cause the real-name attribute being applied through online communication on Campus SNS websites? I think there are three major reasons: Firstly, the identity conformity of registered users on Campus SNS websites secures the "internal" circulation of user information. Due to the social psychological characteristic of "Peer Longing", most college students do not want their personal information to be known

and disseminated by people outside the group. The comparative closed "Analogous-Campus" environment make college students feel easier to post their authentic information. Secondly, college students have strong self-awareness and strong desire to show themselves among peers. Therefore, they are eager to display and disseminate their life and experiences. Campus SNS websites provide the proper platform for the display. Thirdly, there is trust exchange behavior in online communication between college students. Such exchange of trust in online communication can be considered as demonstration of the social exchange theory. The representative figure of the social exchange theory George Homans asserted that the human behaviors are reasonable; they always make choices to maximize value. As to the college students, when the basic demands of social communication in the realistic world can not be satisfied, it generates the need of online communication. Consequently, such need arouses the incentive and the incentive induces the behaviors of online communication and fulfills the social needs. When users on Campus SNS websites search for partners or friends, they usually put those who can satisfy their communicating needs in prior. Any attributes of the user as gender, age, hometown, current school or even constellation could become the screening criterion of other users seeking for communicating partners. At this circumstance, whether if the personal information be compete and true would serve as an important precondition for the reason that both the selector and the person being selected completed the process of trust exchange. The information on the profile page which look more complete and real or at least appears complete would render more credibility to the person who is viewing the page. The research data from the survey sufficiently supported my conclusions. There are 76 percent

of the responders admit that the reason they display real information is to "attract more attention and build more online relationships" while more than 60 percent of the responders announce that they are "not interested to communicate with the users who share a incomplete profile page. So it can be concluded and predicted, more and more college student users of Campus SNS website will comply the "real-name rules" in order to increase their chances of building more online relationships.

It belongs to the notion of Weak Tie

By integrating the Theory of Social Capital and the empirical study into a whole, I believe that the online relationships between college students belong to the notion of Weak Tie in the Social Capital Theory essentially. The American sociologist Granovetter who first raised the concept of Strong and Weak Tie believed that the Strong Tie and Weak Tie made radically different influence between individuals, associations and between individual and social system. The strong tie maintains the internal relationships within groups and associations while the weak tie serve as the connecting bond between different groups and associations. Granovetter measured the relationship strength from four dimensions: The first one is the Interactive Frequency. Strong Tie exists between people, groups and associations which have frequent interaction. In the contrary, Weak Tie exists between people, groups and associations which have low interactive frequency. The second dimension, as Granovetter asserted, was the emotional strength. The stronger is the emotional strength, the stronger is the tie between people, groups and associations. While when the emotions are not strong, the strength of the tie also weakens. The third dimension comes down to the degree of intimacy. People who are closely intimate build Strong Tie

with each other while Weak Tie appears between acquaintances that are not very intimate. Finally the fourth dimension points to reciprocal exchange. The more often people conduct reciprocal exchanges, the stronger their tie is and vice versa. From the early researchers studying on Weak Tie, I discovered their focus on the interpersonal communication and interaction in the realistic society. However, I find that the discussion about Weak Tie based on online communication and interactions to be woefully inadequate. Therefore, I would like to interpret the interpersonal communication and interaction on Campus SNS websites in a different way by applying the conception of Weak Tie.

It reflects ideas of Modern Theory of Interpersonal Communication

In retrospect of Modern Theory of Interpersonal Communication, normally there are four phases in interpersonal interactions: Orientation Selecting, Further Communicating, Relationship Establishing and Relationship Maintenance. The communication between college students on Campus SNS websites also started from the orientation selecting phase and move on to the other three phases sequentially. However, their online communication may not cover the entire process. Comparing to the face-to-face communication in real world, the probability that online communication approaching the relationship maintenance phase is seen to be much lower. After the orientation selecting phase, most of the users can keep the interacting frequency and degree of intimacy at a considerable high level. There are two possible explanations for this phenomenon: Firstly, the users on the Campus SNS website always screen for communication partners whose characteristics meet their expectations and psychological needs. Once two of the users find each other as reliable friends and a good partner to communicate with, it is an obvious thing that they will

communicate actively through the Internet. Secondly, the sense of novelty when making

new friends will make college students excited and facilitate their interactions. No matter if

someone is a rookie or a master user of the Campus SNS website they are all enthralled

with the interactions with their new partners during this "further communicating" phase.

My survey results show that 56.7 percent of the responded users "often make new friends

on the website". However I also discovered that the frequency of online communication

greatly declines after the "further communicating" and "relationship establishing" phase. I

interviewed 14 Renren.com users and asked if they have experienced unconscious

relationship severance resulted from long time without contact. 13 of the interviewees

admitted that they have had such experience. Another fact is that 10 of the interviewees

announced they used to have the impetus to become real friends with those they really get

along well on Campus SNS websites. However, when they really come offline and meet

each other in the real world, many of them find it inappropriate or not suitable to become

friends. Hence, their relationship would maintain at a certain level after the offline meeting.

Only very few of them make real friends with people they meet on Campus SNS websites,

three of the interviewees said they have had such experience. Besides, many of the online

acquaintances do not have the chance to meet each other due to the spatial limit. From the

result of my in-depth interview, I conclude that although Campus SNS websites provide a

national communication platform for college students, the enlargement of social sphere

only tenable in online communication while there is limited gain of substantive social

relationships by using Campus SNS websites. The configuration of different functions on

the websites also contributes to the limited gain of substantive social relationships. Many

functions on the websites appeared to be relatively too simple and casual. The simple interacting functions such as "I like it" or "say hello" perhaps will maintain the interacting frequency at a higher rate while the interactions will become nothing but non-essential. From the results of the survey, 53.2 percentages of the responders expressed the ideas that they will reply the greetings when someone use the "say hello" function. In addition, 10 percent of the responders announced that they would ignore greetings from strangers.

It is the reinforcement and supplement of interpersonal communication

There is another important influence of Campus SNS website other than meeting new friends which is to establish Internet communication with people you already know in the realistic life. To establish online communication is usually considered as the reinforcement and supplement of interpersonal communication in the realistic world. My data also demonstrated that by establishing online communication, the intimacy index between acquaintances in realistic world increases. As we can see, 50.5 percent of responders believe that the communication on Renren.com can make them feel "more intimated with people you know in real life". At this circumstance, if two people are acquaint in real life, then the online communication they established on Campus SNS website can not be simply considered as Weak Tie while we should evaluate the degree of intimacy in real life before judging their online relationship. In another word, if two people are closely interacted in real life, their online communication could still be considered as Strong Tie. By then, even simple interacting methods online could improve the degree of intimacy.

Conclusion: The Possession of Social Capital based on Campus SNS Website

The social capital as a theory and a perspective has emerged as one of the salient concepts in social life in various forms and contexts in the last twenty years. From the perspective of the entire social environment, social members are required to enhance their ability of absorbing information because the approaching of Information Age. Just like how the advent of industrial society changes our life style and criterion as a qualified social member, the Information Age, perhaps more intensively, urge us to train ourselves the ability to receive information more efficiently. The competition for the valuable job information among job seekers perhaps best illustrated the importance of such ability. From the perspective of the smaller environment for Chinese college students, the employment situation became worse after the enrollment expansion since 1999. Besides, the low frequency of involvement with life outside campus caused the increasing demands of external information. To be more specific, there are major differences before and after the enrollment into college. College students own much more freedom to determine their lifestyle. Although most of them are still far from economic independence, they have the power to manage their living expenses. Overall, the strong awareness of independence and loose connections in real life make college students at a non-interference state. However since it is still necessary to fulfill certain physical and psychological needs, college students begin to appeal for online communication.

I believe what behind the increasing demand of information is the thirst for possession of social capital. The social capital is the applicable social resource within the social networks while the social networks are produced and re-produced by individuals in the

society. The college students in China live in the relatively closed environment during their higher education. This makes it even harder for college students to cope with the society outside campus when they are about to graduate or seeking for job. Consequently, more and more college students begin to pay attention to the early establishment of their own social relationship network at school. The Campus SNS websites, as a representative form of online communication, significantly enlarge the living sphere and personal influence domain. The application of social network services enables them to break through the previous limit when building their social relationship network and provides more options. Although the nature of Campus SNS websites determines the status of users to be unitary, while it is more reliable to use Campus SNS websites when considering establish persistent relationship. More importantly, for those who still use Campus SNS website after their graduation, they can share the experience and information for other users who are still at school. It could be expected that after a few years when many current college students enter the labor market through job seeking, there will be greater probability of gaining substantive social capital for the later users. The founders of the Campus SNS websites are also seeking for a transformation, from a campus social network service to a campus-office binary social network community (SNC). By then, campus-office SNC would play a more remarkable effect to the social capital expansion.

Possession of Physiological Social Capital

The whole process of development of Campus SNS is to following the people who gradually line the life more complete information transfer to online activities, in order to lower the cost of management , it makes virtual groups more and more contact with the

16

real social world . From the evolution of network social history, it is always following the low cost principle, online social networking alternative reduces people's social time and material cost, or lower information expense. To communicate with the opposite gender is the biological demand of human instinct. College students are going through the period of fast physiological and mental changes while they have strong desire for communication with the opposite gender. Although college students no longer need to feel worried about being punished for having a love affair at school, however the interactions with the opposite gender in real world is still restricted within narrow limits. Through the interactions on the Internet, college students can look for partners of opposite gender and communicate with them freely without anxiety. In Dr. Guo Wenbin's research report on College Students Online Interaction, the data shows that only 16 percent college students make new friends of the same gender. The data from my survey also display this tendency. 78.7 percent of the responders acclaim that they tend to browse the profile page of someone with the opposite gender more than the same gender. 62.9 percent of the responders say that they have more online friends of the opposite gender. This illuminates the point that college students gain physiological social capital such as the cognition and experience of sex, the taste of romance and so on through the Weak Tie on the Internet.

Possession of Emotional Social Capital

College students combined as a social group, they cry for emotional affiliations after leaving parents. Being aware of the independent campus life ahead, majority of them would suffer from "trepid inklings" which intensify their needs of communicating, especially with their peers, to dispel the worry and unfamiliarity. They travel around between family,

school and public domain, searching for all kinds of things related with ideals, norms and lifestyles through the observations to their peers, making preparations to become independent. On the profile page of Campus SNS Websites，what we could see are various styles and colors. These styles and colors not only manifest individuality, but also represent someone's attitude towards life. The appearances of profile page, the settings and the music distinguished different lifestyles and distinguished the identity of college students in an invisible manner. In a word, college students find the right media where they can incorporate themselves into the social system and consequently establish certain social relationship. Coleman's Rational Choice Theory points out that all human behaviors are the results of rational thinking. Thus under the social background of Information Age and higher education system revolution in China，the popularization of online communication is the rational behavior of college students seeking for beneficial instrumental and emotional social capital. The Campus SNS websites, to some extent, play as the medium of social network establishment for college students.

REFERENCES

REFERENCES

Bian, Yanjie. (1999). Social Network and Job Seeking. <u>Reform and Opening and Chinese Society</u>. HongKong: Oxford Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. (1997). <u>The forms of Capital, Cultural Capital and Social Alchemy</u>. Shanghai: The Shanghai People's Publishing House.

Coleman, James S. (1988). Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital. <u>The American Journal of Sociology</u>, 94: 95-120.

Durkheim, Émile. (1997). <u>The Division of Labor in Society</u>. New York: Free Press.

Granovetter, Mark. (1973 May). The Strength of Weak Ties. <u>American Journal of Sociology</u>, 1360-1380.

Guo, Wenbin. (2006 April). A Research on Internet interaction of College students. <u>Chinese Health Psychology</u>, 14-26.

Kamolnick, Paul. (2001, March). Simmel's Legacy for Contemporary Value Theory: A Critical Assessment. <u>Sociological Theory</u>, 65-85.

Lin, Nan. (2001). <u>Social Capital: A Theory of Social Structure and Action</u>. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Milgram, Stanley. (1967 May). The Small World Problem. <u>Psychology Today</u>, 60-67.

Turner, Jonathan H. (1998). George C. Homans' Behavioristic Approach. <u>The Structure of Sociological Theory</u>. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Watts. (2003). <u>Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age</u>. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.