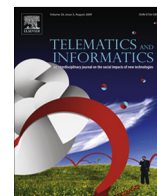




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Social media, social integration and subjective well-being among new urban migrants in China

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ABSTRACT

The current generation of migrants in Chinese cities, named “new urban migrants,” is closely related with social changes in today’s China. As these urban migrants are increasingly dependent on new media, particularly social media for news, entertainment, and social interaction, it is important to know how social media use contributes to their social integration and subjective well-being. Based on an online survey, this study identified positive relationship between new urban migrants’ social media use and their subjective well-being, as well as the possible indirect relationship through social integration. The overall positive socio-psychological effects of social media use within Chinese urban migrants were found. Specifically, this study revealed that social media use can contribute to their social integration, including their building of social identity and social network as well as real-world social participation. New urban migrants’ social integration, particularly their level of social identity, is significantly associated with their subjective well-being.

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1. Introduction

Migration is population movement from one country, region, or other place of residence to another location (Lin et al., 2011). Since the economic reform in 1980s, China’s booming urban cities have been flooded with urban migrants (Nielsen et al., 2011). By the end of 2014, the population of Mainland China is 1367.82 million, among which 54.77% is urban population, about 749.16 million (China National Bureau of Statistics, 2015). More specifically, by the mid of 2013, approximately 12.63% of the total population in China was urban migrants, with an annual growth rate of 2.7% (China National Bureau of Statistics, 2013). They made great contribution to urban population growth as well as the rapid and unprecedented process of urbanization and social change in China.

For some socio-economic and political reasons, there is a household registration (*hukou*) system in China that greatly restricts the geo-graphical mobility of the population (Chen, 2013). Nevertheless, the post-1978 economic reforms dramatically loosen the restrictions from *hukou* system. In the past three decades, one of the most remarkable social phenomena in China is urban migration. Farmers from rural areas, laid-off employees, college graduates, and other groups of people flocked from the rural areas to the cities and from medium and small-size cities to large cities (Liu, 2011). Generally speaking, there are three types of urban migrants in China today: 1) rural-to-urban migrants, who is the majority of Chinese urban migrants; 2) urban-to-urban migrants; 3) college graduates who moved from birth places (Tong and Ma, 2008). Most prior studies focus on rural-to-urban migrants (Lin et al., 2011; Wong et al., 2008), while scant attention was given to urban-to-urban migrants and college graduates, who have become increasingly important in Chinese urban population. Due to economic

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transformation and the gradually relaxing institutional obstructions that previously prevent outsiders from becoming “city people,” the components of urban migrant population have been changing significantly. The current generation of Chinese urban migrants includes not only labor migrants (i.e., rural-to-urban farmers, factory workers, etc.), but also intellectual migrants (i.e., white-collar, researchers, etc.), entrepreneurial migrants, and so on (Zhou, 2005). Regardless of their *Hukou* status, all these migrants have been referred to as “new XX people”—for example, “new Shanghai people,” “new Hangzhou people,” “new Beijing people,” etc. Sociological scholars in Mainland China have now named them “new urban migrants” (Liu, 2011).

These new urban migrants often encounter changes of working and living conditions, lack of social supports, and many barriers to adjust themselves to be part of the new cities, which may negatively impact their subjective well-being and mental health (Lin et al., 2011). Especially for rural-to-urban migrants, they fill the millions of jobs in urban construction, manufacturing, and service that local urban residents are reluctant to take. At the same time, they are considered marginal citizens who are responsible for rising crime rates and are perceived as a threat to social stability (Wong et al., 2007). Those better educated urban migrants such as college graduates are also not always welcomed because they would possibly increase the job competitions in the cities. As a result, compared to non-immigrant population, urban migrants are more likely to experience stress arising from migration, perceived discrimination, as well as social exclusion, thus having a higher incidence of mental health problems and lower subjective well-being (Wong et al., 2008).

Given its significant influence on social development and state welfare (Knight and Gunatilaka, 2010), urban migrants' subjective well-being and social integration have become important issues. A growing body of research has focused on the urban migration process and rural-to-urban migrants in China, providing empirical evidence of the impacts of media use on subjective well-being and the quality of life (Chen, 2013; Lin et al., 2011; Wong et al., 2008). But few of them investigated the influence of social media use on subjective well-being and social integration among the “new urban migrants” in China, although the group were found increasingly dependent on social media for news, entertainment, and social interaction. This study wants to fill the gap.

In fact, the recent decade has witnessed the explosive development of Internet and social media in China. According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2016), by the end of 2015, there are 688 million Internet users in China, with an Internet penetration rate of 50.3%. Among all the Internet users, about 71.6% were in urban areas, while 28.4% were in rural areas. The increasing popularity of social media among Chinese citizens, including new urban migrants, warrants more studies to reveal the relationship of social media use, social integration and subjective well-being in a transitional China. Based on an online survey, this study examines the potential effects of social media use among urban migrants on their social integration and subjective well-being, exploring whether subjective well-being is predictable by social media use and social integration in China.

2. Literature review

2.1. Internet and social media in China

China has made great strides in embracing the Internet and social media in recent years. Instant messaging, search engine, online news, online music, online video, online game, online shopping, social networking, etc. were very popular in China. Among all the popular online applications in China, social media is one of them. About 33.5% of Chinese Internet users have used micro-blogs (CNNIC, 2016). Sina *Weibo* (micro-blog in Chinese), Tencent *Weibo*, Sohu *Weibo*, and NetEase *Weibo* are all popular micro-blogging portals. Users turned to micro-blog sites to obtain news, publish information, express personal views, and engage in social interactions and public opinions. The multi-functionality meets people's various needs in flexible ways, which resulted in a high growth rate in the number of micro-bloggers since 2010. In addition to micro-blogs, WeChat has become an influential form of social media in today's China. Since its launch in 2011, the number of WeChat users has been skyrocketing. Starting as a mobile instant text and voice messaging tool, WeChat has expanded its service to meet various demands of Internet users in terms of financing, shopping, traveling, entertainment, etc. (CNNIC, 2016). Different from micro-blog, WeChat is a semi-public mobile platform that mainly relies on personal contacts and peer relationship.

Micro-blogs, WeChat, Renren (Facebook equivalent in China), Douban, etc. are all vital social networking sites (SNS) in China that “allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others” (Boyd and Ellison, 2007, p. 211). By the end of 2015, the number of SNS users in China has reached 530 million; about 77.0% of Internet users in China have used SNS (CNNIC, 2016).

Chinese society is experiencing an unprecedented historical change, and social media is an indispensable and irreplaceable catalyst of change. With the relatively restricted environment of traditional media in China, Chinese social media sites have become important portals in serving as entry points for Internet users to obtain content and interact with each other (Lee et al., 2008). In addition, for new urban migrants, social media provide a good opportunity for them to adjust themselves to city life, feeling more involved and hence improving subjective well-being (Brendler et al., 2013; Vlašić, 2012). Given the size and importance of urban migrants in China today, it is necessary to examine the potential effects of social media use on their social integration and subjective well-being.

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