



# Self-disclosure on social networking sites, positive feedback, and social capital among Chinese college students



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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on social capital theory, this study examined whether college students' self-disclosure on a social networking site was directly associated with social capital, or related indirectly through the degree of positive feedback students got from Internet friends. Structural equation models applied to anonymous, self-report survey data from 264 first-year students at 3 universities in Beijing, China, indicated direct effects on bridging social capital and indirect effects on bonding social capital. Effects remained significant, though modest in magnitude, after controlling for social skills level. Findings suggest ways in which social networking sites can foster social adjustment as an adolescent transition to residential college environments.

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## 1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook and Myspace have become an important venue for building and maintaining social networks and relationships, especially among young people. These websites offer individuals a platform to create personal Web pages, connect to known and unknown peers, disclose information about themselves, and seek information about other individuals. Previous research (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009) has linked SNS activity/participation to the accrual of social capital, especially bridging capital. But the mechanisms by which SNS activity affects social capital are not well known.

A key factor in building capital is self-disclosure, especially in early phases of relationships. Despite considerable interest in self-disclosure in SNS (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014; Kwak, Choi, & Lee, 2014; Park, Jin, & Annie Jin, 2011; Rau, Gao, & Ding, 2008), few scholars have examined its role in building social capital (Maksl & Young, 2013; Trepte & Reinecke, 2013). We test this relationship in a developmental context that requires individuals to rebuild or expand their social networks: the transition to residential college. We consider an important factor that may account for level of self-disclosure as well as the accrual of social capital (social skill), and we examine factors that may moderate (gender) or

mediate (positive feedback on disclosure) associations between self-disclosure and social capital.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. Accruing social capital during the transition to college

Social capital theory postulates that resources accumulated through building social relationships are instrumental in adapting to life circumstances (Coleman, 1988). Based on Granovetter's (1973) concept of weak and strong ties, Putnam (2001) distinguished two types of social capital. Bridging capital refers to the capacity to access resources through a wide array of social relationships and networks. It is derived from social ties that connect individuals to people of different lifestyles and backgrounds who can provide useful information, new perspectives, and other forms of instrumental support. Bonding capital involves more sustained support, especially emotional support, from individuals with whom one shares an intimate and reciprocal relationship. In contrast to the relatively weak ties that provide bridging capital, bonding capital tends to come from fellow members of small homogeneous social networks.

Concerns about social capital are heightened during periods of transition that require reorganization of social networks, such as the move to a residential college in late adolescence. As late adolescents move to residential college settings, they are particularly poised to benefit from SNS. The move creates distance from and strains on relationships with established intimate associates,

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thereby threatening a young person's bonding capital. The college environment places new academic, psychological, and social demands on students (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Lapsley, Rice, & Shadid, 1989), for which the resources of local social capital would be helpful. To meet these demands, students need to rebuild or at least reshape their social networks. As is obvious from their name, a primary purpose of social networking sites is to help individuals seek, establish, and then maintain social relationships—to build, rebuild, and regulate the sorts of social networks that provide social capital (Maksl & Young, 2013).

Following Donnath & Boyd's (2004) suggestion that SNS may be particularly well suited to fostering bridging capital, several investigators examined associations between SNS activity and social capital (Ellison et al., 2007; Greenhow & Burton, 2011; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). They reported significant associations between bridging (as well as bonding) social capital and "Facebook intensity"—generally, a measure of the amount of time or energy study participants devoted to Facebook use and the importance they attached to this social medium. From these studies, however, the specific SNS activities that foster social capital remain unclear.

## 2.2. Self-disclosure on SNS and social capital

We propose that to rebuild and reshape their social networks, college students must prove themselves attractive to potential network members. In SNS, self-disclosure is an essential element of this process (Sheldon, 2009). Revealing information about oneself on such sites as Facebook or MySpace is the basis for enticing others to ask to be a friend or to respond positively to one's request to be their friend. Once the "friend" connection has been established, self-disclosure is the basis of virtual interactions that serve to deepen the relationship (Walker & Wright, 1976).

Self-disclosure is a process by which an individual shares personal feelings, thoughts, experiences and information with others (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). SNS encourage disclosure of basic information about self, along with inner thoughts and emotional states (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). Such disclosure is a crucial element in the process of relationship development (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Young people tend to disclose more on Facebook than in offline environments, and unlike comments made in face-to-face interactions, which typically involve only one or a small number of peers, disclosures in SNS are usually broadcast to one's entire network of virtual friends. These characteristics make self-disclosure on SNS especially instrumental in fostering social capital, particularly during late adolescence (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008).

Investigators have examined numerous aspects of self-disclosure on SNS, including norms, motives, practices, and, to some extent, connections to social capital. In terms of norms, college students tend to admire Facebook profiles with broader rather than limited information (Limperos, Tamul, Woolley, Spinda, & Shyam, 2014; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008), although there is some expectation that more intimate information should be shared privately rather than be open to all Facebook friends (Bazarova, 2012).

Awareness of norms leads individuals to be intentional and strategic in what they post on SNS (Qui, Lin, Leung, & Tov, 2012). Uses and gratifications theory postulates that individuals use media in specific ways to achieve certain goals or gratifications. Applying this theory to SNS, Chang and Heo (2014) found that relationship maintenance and initiation were especially strong motives among college students for using SNS. The stronger these motives are, the more information young people are likely to post (Park et al., 2011). Nosko, Wood, and Molema (2010) reported that those seeking new relationships were more likely to disclose sensitive or potentially stigmatizing information, whereas Seidman

(2014) found that honest self-disclosure was more common among students trying to deepen existing relationships than those seeking new affiliations.

Breadth and depth of information disclosed on SNS are likely to have an impact on social capital—breadth because it enhances a person's appeal to a wider audience (bridging capital) and depth because it fosters deeper connections (bonding capital). Evidence for these connections, however, is still indirect. Maksl and Young (2013) found that the more social capital college students felt they accrued from Facebook, the more information they were willing to disclose on their profile; actual disclosure was not assessed. Trepte and Reinecke (2013) found reciprocal associations over time between frequency of SNS use and level of disclosure, but only for those reporting high levels of social capital.

These patterns of association between SNS use and social capital, combined with the inclination of college students to self-disclose on SNS as part of their motive to initiate or deepen social relationships, leads to our first hypothesis.

**H1.** Students' level of self-disclosure on their SNS will have a positive direct influence on their perceptions of bridging and bonding social capital.

## 2.3. The mediation role of positive comments

The connection between self-disclosure and social capital may not be direct. "Friending" someone on SNS does little more than establish a rudimentary relationship. To establish a connection that provides social capital, a stronger connection is required, especially for bonding capital. We propose positive feedback as a variable that mediates the association between self-disclosure on SNS and levels of bridging and bonding social capital. When an individual reveals personal information about self—whether innocuous events of the day or more significant facts such as changes in key relationships or employment status—all of the person's SNS friends and anyone else granted access to the person's SNS page can comment on the posting.

Positive comments are indicative of acceptance, care and attention, signaling the person's attractiveness to the responder and strengthening the bond between the two persons. Tong and Walther (2011) identified activities like these as relationship maintenance signals. They may serve a bonding social capital function in that they represent an investment in a given relationship (Jang & Yoo, 2009). Again, this feedback should be especially salient during the nascent phases of relationships or when individuals are rebuilding or reorganizing their social network, as is usually the case during the initial year in a residential college. Jang and Yoo (2009) added that positive comments make one popular on SNS, especially when the number is large. Therefore, a reasonable alternative to the first hypothesis is that the association between SNS self-disclosure and social capital will be mediated by the degree of positive feedback received from their SNS postings (self-disclosure).

**H2.** The number of positive comments received on students' SNS pages will mediate the association between self-disclosure on SNS and bridging and bonding social capitals.

## 2.4. Social skills as an important covariate

It is possible that the association between self-disclosure on SNS and social capital is due to another variable not yet considered, one that affects both target constructs. Though often debated, there is growing support among researchers for what is often termed the "rich get richer hypothesis," that the individuals who benefit most from on-line social interactions are those with high social skills, who already enjoy a great deal of success in face-to-

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