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How motivations of SNSs use and offline social trust affect college students' self-disclosure on SNSs: An investigation in China

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How Motivations of SNSs Use and Offline Social Trust Affect College Students'

Self-disclosure on SNSs: An Investigation in China

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ABSTRACT

Social Networking Sites (SNSs) have been proliferating and growing in popularity worldwide throughout the past few years, which have received significant interest from researchers. Previous literatures on Internet suggest that offline social trust influences online perceptions and behaviors, and there is linkage between trust and self-disclosure in face-to-face context. Adopting the Uses and Gratifications perspective as the theoretical foundation, this exploratory study aimed to address the roles that motivations of SNSs use and offline social trust play in predicting levels of self-disclosure on SNSs. Taking 640 snowballing sampling on *Renren.com*, the study found that there was an instrumental orientation of SNSs use among China's college students. Social interaction, self-image building and information seeking were three major motivations when college students use SNSs. As expected, the results also indicated that motivations of SNS use and offline social trust play a more important role in predicting self-disclosure on SNSs than demographics. This exploratory study gives an empirical insight in the influence of motivations of SNSs use and offline social trust on self-disclosure online.

Key words: Social Networking Sites, Motivations, Self-disclosure, Offline Social Trust

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, the phenomena of frequent use of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) among young people have received a tremendous amount of attention from academic and industrial researchers. So far, researchers have explored the general use of SNSs (e.g. Sheldon, 2008), psychological well-being derived from the use of SNSs (e.g. Dunne, Lawlor, & Rowley, 2010), content analysis of users' profile on SNSs (e.g. Dwyer, Hiltz, & Passerini, 2007), the potential benefits of SNSs as a tool for business promotion (e.g. Peters & Salazar, 2010), political campaigns (e.g. Ancu & Cozma, 2009), and youth education (Huijser, 2008). Among these activities, self-disclosure is the most frequent and important behavior when young people join in SNSs, they begin by creating a profile which contains a list of personal information (including name, photograph, hometown, interest, and so on). Moreover, they also disclose themselves through writing dairies, leaving messages and other activities. The previous studies have affirmed the linkage between trust and self-disclosure in face-to-face context (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Derlega & Chaikin, 1975; Fisher, 1984). Also a number of researches on Internet suggest that offline social trust influences online perceptions and behaviors (Uslaner, 2004). Thus, it raises the following questions: How users' offline social trust influences their self-disclosure on SNSs?

Past studies indicate that the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) approach is effective in "linking the media-use motives with media behaviors" and "examining the different social and psychological circumstances of media use" (Dunne, Lawlor, & Rowley, 2010). Adopted the U&G perspective as the theoretical foundation, this exploratory study aims to address the roles that motivations of SNSs use and offline social trust play in predicting levels of self-disclosure on SNSs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Over decades, scholars have been adopting the U&G perspective and argued that different audiences use media messages for different purposes to satisfy their different needs and goals (McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972). The U&G approach has been applied to "a variety of mass media and media content, with the selection of media type evolving to match the dominant or emerging media of the day" (Dunne, Lawlor, & Rowley, 2010). In recent years, with the rapid development of information and communication technology, a number of researchers have employed the U&G approach in the context of new media, including in the context of Social Networking Sites (Dunne, Lawlor, & Rowley, 2010). Previous studies have explored why they engage in this form of media behavior. For example, studies of the most popular SNS-Friendster, indicate how users create their profile to communicate with others (boyd,

2004; boyd, 2006; boyd & Heer, 2006; Donath & boyd, 2004). Shelden's (2008) and

Hall's (2009) studies indicate that there are six motives for U.S. college students' use

of Facebook, which are relationship maintenance, passing time, virtual community,

entertainment, coolness and companionship. Previous studies also imply that culture

influences the motivations of young people's SNSs use. While sharing most same

motivations with U.S. youth, Indian young people (Bolar, 2009) and Irish young

people (Dunne, Lawlor, & Rowley, 2010) also have one or two different motivations

for SNSs use, such as self-reflection and image-building or revisiting-memories. Thus

drawing from the literature review, the exploratory study addresses the following

question:

RQ1: What motive college students to use SNSs in China?

Self-disclosure on SNSs

Wheeless & Grotz (1976) conceptualized self-disclosure as "any message about

the self that a person communicates to another." Over past decades, considerable

psychological and marketing researches have examined the phenomenon of

self-disclosure in face-to-face context (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Collin & Miller, 1994;

Cozby, 1973; Daher & Banikitos, 1976; Dindia & Allen, 1992). Recently, a growing

body of empirical studies has focused on self-disclosure in electronic context. The

results of these studies provide confirmation that visually autonomous electronic

context tends to lead high levels of self-disclosure than face-to-face context (Joinson, 2001; Mckenna & Bargh, 1998; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Wallance, 1999). High level of online self-disclosure "can be effectively designed out of an Internet interaction (e.g. through the use of a video link or accountability cues, as well as encouraged)" (Joinson & Paine, 2007). Moreover, both affection motivation and interpersonal involvement motivation are significant positive predictors of the depth of self-disclosure online, while affection motivation also positively predicted the amount of self-disclosure (Pornsakulvanich et al., 2008). Thus drawing from the literature review, the study addresses the following hypothesis.

H1: The stronger motivations of using SNSs users hold, the more they will disclose themselves on SNSs.

Offline Social Trust and Self-disclosure on SNSs

In the offline world, trust is seen as the essential factor for social, economic and political life (Newton, 2007). According to Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman's (1995) definition, trust is "willingness to be vulnerable". In the face-to-face context, the interpersonal exchange studies indicate that social trust is positively linked to the likelihood of occurrence of self-disclosure because it reduces perceived risks involved in revealing privacy and forms a precondition for self-disclosure (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Derlega et al., 1993; Metzger, 2004; Roloff, 1981).

In electronic context, since there are physical distances between individuals, offline social trust seems even more important for online behaviors than offline behaviors. A number of researches on electronic commerce suggest offline social trust has positive relationship with online consumer behaviors. For example, Lee, Kang, & McKnight (2007) find the trust in an offline bank influences key factors in an online banking environment. Metzger (2004, 2006) also finds that offline social trust is strongly related to customers' information disclosure behavior. Since more empirical evidences are needed to provide evidences for the linkage between offline social trust and online self-disclosure, the study addresses the following hypothesis:

H2: SNSs users who commit to higher offline social trust will demonstrate higher degree of self-disclosure.

This study aims to explore how factors intrinsic to college students' motivations, along with offline social trust, would affect self-disclosure online. As a result, we address the following research question:

RQ2: How can demographics, motivations of SNS use, and offline social trust predict self-disclosure online?

METHOD

Data Collection and Sample

This exploratory study takes the case of *Renren.com* to explore the above

questions and hypotheses. As indicated above, SNSs such Facebook, Myspace, Friender have been studied by many scholars (e.g. Acquisti & Gross, 2006; Stutzman, 2006). However, little empirical materials about SNSs use in China can be traced. Established in 2005 and positioned first as communicative platform among college students and progressively extended to general society, *Renren.com* has rapidly grown to one of the most popular Social Networking Sites in China with around 100 million users with 80% of account active rate [1]。

This study is based on an online survey of college students in China. A pilot survey was conducted among 80 college students before actual field work, which ran between 15 to 23 October 2010. Then the study conducted a purposive sampling. The researchers sent 1200 invitation letters to the targeted respondents during a four-week period from November to December of 2010. Overall, 640 completed questionnaires were subject to data analysis.

The sample consisted of 51.6% male (n = 330) and 47.0% female (n = 301). Among the 640 respondents, 20.6% were freshmen; 27.7% were sophomores; 15.3% were juniors; 9.8% were seniors; and 25.0% were graduate school students. There were 193 respondents aged 20 or below (30.2%), 334 between 21 and 23 years old (52.2%), and 107 aged 24 or above (16.7%).

Measurement

Motivations of SNS Use. Initially, relevant motive items used in previous researches on ICQ (Leung, 2001), Facebook (Sheldon, 2008), and SNSs (Hall, 2009; Bolar, 2009) were extracted to conduct the motivation of SNS use in the questionnaire. A pilot study consisting of 17 motivation statements was conducted on 80 respondents to eliminate bad items and solicit new ones. Items that were found ambiguous and repetitive were eliminated. The final questionnaire consisted of 14 gratification statements. A five-point Likert scale was used (where 1 = 'strongly disagree' and 5 = 'strongly agree').

Self-Disclosure. In order to measure self-disclosure, we used a revised 14-item scale constructed by Wheeless & Grotz (1976). Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree) with these statements. Results of a principal component factor analysis yielded four factors using Varimaxrotation. The fifth-factor solution accounted for 67.74% of the total variance. Factor 1, Valence of self-disclosure (eigenvalue = 2.07, Cronbach alpha = .70), accounted for 14.79% of the total variance (M = 3.49, SD = 1.40). Factor 2, Depth of self-disclosure (eigenvalue = 1.98, Cronbach's alpha = .69), accounted for 14.14% of the total variance after rotation (M = 2.82, SD = 1.40). Factor 3, Amount of self-disclosure (eigenvalue = 1.96, Cronbach's alpha = .71), accounted for 13.97% of the total variance (M = 3.11, SD = 1.28). Factor 4, Intentionality of self-disclosure

(eigenvalue = 1.86, Cronbach's alpha = .66), explained 13.31% of the total variance

(M = 3.66, SD = 1.24). Factor 5, Honesty-Accuracy of self-disclosure (eigenvalue =

1.61, Cronbach's alpha = .70), explained 11.53% of the total variance (M = 3.76, SD

= 1.37).

(Insert Table 1 here)

Offline Social Trust. The most classic and influential measure of social trust is

Rosenberg's (1956) Faith in People Scale. The scale consists of three questions as

"Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't

be too careful in dealing with others?"; "Would you say that most of the time people

try to be helpful or are they mostly looking out for themselves?"; and "Do you think

that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance or would

they try to be fair?" However, as Valenzuela, Park, & Kee (2009) argue, the items of

the scale are double-barreled questions, which contain two separate questions rather

than exact opposites questions. Thus, following the approach of Valenzuela, Park, &

Kee (2009), this study separates the double-barreled questions into single items and

expands the response choices by using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to

5 (all of the time). The reliability is .60 for offline social trust scale. The scale items

include: (1) "Generally speaking, I would say people can be trusted in real life." (2)

"Most of time people try to be helpful in real life." (3) "Most people try to be fair in

real life." (4) "You can't be too careful in dealing with people in real life." (5) "People are just looking out for themselves in real life." and (6) "People try to take advantage of you if they got the chance in real life."

FINDINGS

Motivations of SNSs Use

This exploratory study successfully yielded three clearly identifiable motivations of SNS use (social interaction, self-image building and information seeking) among college students in China, which, by and large, are consistent with previous research (Bolar, 2009; Hall, 2009; Leung, 2001; Sheldon, 2008; Leung, 2009). The result of factor analysis yielded three factors accounting for 66.2% of the total variance.

(Table 2 insert here)

Factor 1, Social Interaction (eigenvalue = 2.34, Cronbach's alpha = .72), accounted for 23.4% of the total variance after rotation (M = 3.67, SD = 1.30)). The second factor, Self-image Building (eigenvalue = 2.32, Cronbach's alpha = .84), accounted for 23.2% of the total variance (M = 3.79, SD = 1.86). The third factor, Information Seeking (eigenvalue = 1.96, Cronbach's alpha = .74), explained 19.6% of the total variance (M = 3.67, SD = 1.27).

In sum, the result reflects the instrumental orientation of SNSs use among China's college students. The respondents considered SNSs use as a proactive social activity

instead of passive escape. Through SNSs use, they would maintain social relations,

gain self-identity, and learn more of the world.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1 that the stronger motivation of SNS use college students

demonstrate, the more they will disclose themselves on SNSs, is fully supported. The

zero order product-moment correlations between motivations of SNS use and

self-disclosure on SNSs range from .12 to .41.

(Insert Table 3 here)

Hypothesis 2, assuming that SNSs users who commit to higher offline social

trust will demonstrate higher degree of self-disclosure, was largely supported. Offline

social trust was found strongly related to honesty-accuracy of self-disclosure online (r

$= .13$, $p < .001$), moderately related to valence of self-disclosure ($r = .11$, $p < .01$), and

slightly related to control of depth ($r = .09$, $p < .05$) and amount of self-disclosure (r

$= .10$, $p < .05$). However, there was no linkage between offline social trust and

intentionality of self-disclosure.

Predicting Self-disclosure Online

RQ2 asked about the contribution of demographics, motivation of SNS use, and

offline social trust for predicting self-disclosure online. Five separate hierarchical

regression analyses were used to examine how these antecedent factors contribute to

predict self-disclosure online.

(Insert Table 4 here)

As table 4 shown, social interaction was a significant predictor of deeper self-disclosure online (β = .18, p < .001), higher intentionality of self-disclosure online (β = .24, p < .001), and higher accuracy of self-disclosure online (β = .18, p < .001). The results of the regression analyses also indicate that self-image building was a significant predictor of intentionality of self-disclosure online (β = .19, p < .001) and honesty-accuracy of self-disclosure online (β = .15, p < .01), while information-seeking was significantly associated with depth of self-disclosure online (β = .20, p < .001), amount of self-disclosure online (β = .13, p < .05), and intentionality of self-disclosure online (β = .13, p < .05).

Table 4 also indicated that offline social trust was a significant predictor of valence of self-disclosure online (β = .09, p < .05), and honesty-accuracy of self-disclosure online (β = .11, p < .01).

DISCUSSION

This exploratory study successfully yielded three clearly identifiable gratifications obtained from SNS use among college students in China, which, by and large, are consistent with previous research (Bolar, 2009; Hall, 2009; Leung, 2001; Sheldon, 2008; Leung, 2009). Social interaction is the most important gratification

obtained while entertainment is not the significant gratification obtained from SNSs use. The result reflects the instrumental orientation of SNSs use among China's college students.

Most of the hypotheses were fully supported in this study, while some were largely supported. The gratifications of SNSs use play an important role in predicting self-disclosure on SNSs than gender, age, grade and offline trust, which is consistent with U&G theory. China's college students are not passive users when they use SNSs. Instead, they reflect an instrumental orientation of SNSs use. Moreover this instrumental orientation is indeed relevant to the media behavior (e.g. self-disclosure). The results of this study also found that offline social trust plays important role in predicting the level of self-disclosure online. It indicated that offline factors influenced online behaviors. As Uslaner (2004) argued, "the Internet really depends upon trust rather than creates trust".

LIMITATIONS

However, there are several limitations that might influence the generalizability of these findings. First, the snowballing sample might restrict the generalizability of these findings. Although this study approached the approximate distribution of the population of SNS use by hook, yet the population might not be as the same as the snowballing sample. Second, this exploratory study only suggests the instrumental

orientation of SNSs use is an important predictor of self-disclosure on SNSs among

college students. However, the relationship between other motivations of SNS use

(e.g. ritual orientation) and self-disclosure online has not yet been revealed in this

study, thus future study needs to explore the relationship between motivations of SNS

use and self-disclosure online better.

NOTE

1. 2009 Deep Research Report on China's SNSs Development Industries (2010)

http://www.dratio.com/special/sns2009/index.shtml Accessed on Dec.7, 2010.

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TABLE 1 FACTOR ANALYSIS OF SELF-DISCLOSURE ON SNSs

Items	Mean	SD	Factor				
			1	2	3	4	5
Valence							
1. I usually don't disclose negative things about myself.	3.54	1.61	.78				
2. I often reveal more desirable things about myself than undesirable things.	3.62	1.77	.77				
3. On the whole, my disclosures about myself are more positive than negative.	3.33	1.91	.65				
Depth							
4. Once I get started, I intimately and fully reveal myself in my self-disclosures.	3.12	2.01		.76			
5. I often disclose intimate, personal things about myself without hesitation.	2.40	1.57		.74			
6. I feel that I sometimes do not control my self-disclosure of personal or intimate things I tell about myself.	2.96	1.75		.73			
Amount							
7. I often talk about myself on Renren.com.	3.24	1.80			.85		
8. My conversation lasts long time on Renren.com when I am discussing myself.	3.02	1.50			.73		
9. My statements of my feelings usually are not brief on Renren.com.	2.98	1.59			.63		
Intentionality							
10. When I express my personal feelings on Renren.com, I am always aware of what I am doing and saying.	3.34	1.81				.77	
11. I am self-disclosing on Renre.com, I am consciously aware of what I am revealing.	3.55	1.51				.74	
12. When I reveal my feelings about myself on Renren.com, I consciously intend to do so.	3.68	1.46				.71	
Honesty-Accuracy							
13. I am always honest in my self-disclosures.	3.75	1.80					.81
14. My statements about my feelings, emotions, and experiences are always accurate self-perceptions.	3.71	1.54					.78
Eigenvalue			2.07	1.98	1.96	1.86	1.61
Variance Explained			14.79	14.14	13.97	13.31	11.53
Cronbach's Alpha			.70	.69	.71	.66	.70

TABLE 2

FACTOR ANALYSIS OF MOTIVATIONS OF RENREN.COM USE

Items	Mean	SD	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Social Interaction					
1. I can influence other people	3.62	2.29	.75		
2. I can share my views, thoughts and experiences	3.76	1.52	.73		
3. I can feel less lonely	3.34	1.67	.60		
4. I can stay in touch with people I know	3.95	1.45	.60		
Self-image Building					
5. I can project good about myself in public	3.89	2.17		.83	
6. I can establish my personal identity	3.72	1.99		.81	
7. I can gain respect and support	3.74	2.23		.78	
Information Seeking					
8. I can find information for study, work or research, etc.	3.66	1.65			.80
9. I can find out what is going on in society	3.66	1.54			.70
10. I can broaden my knowledge base	3.69	1.53	.54		.58
Eigenvalue			2.34	2.32	1.96
Variance Explained			23.38	23.19	19.62
Cronbach's Alpha			.72	.84	.74

TABLE 3 CORRELATION MATRIX OF GRATIFICATIONS OBTAINED, SELF-DISCLOSURE, AND OFFLINE TRUST

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Demographics											
1. Gender	-.05	.03	.02	.04	.02	.02	-.05	-.02	.02	-.01	.09*
2. Age		.72***	-.09*	-.09*	-.17***	-.10*	-.03	-.10*	.01	.02	-.07
3. Year-entry			-.09*	-.15***	-.16***	-.08	-.06	-.08	.01	-.02	.02
Motivation of SNS Use											
4. Social interaction				.57***	.65***	.14***	.31***	.14***	.41***	.25***	.01
5. Self-image building					.53***	.14***	.24***	.12**	.37***	.24***	.05
6. Information seeking						.14***	.34***	.17***	.35***	.26***	.10*
Self-disclosure Online											
7. Valence							.33***	.54***	.31***	.39***	.11**
8. Control of Depth								.44***	.42***	.44***	.09*
9. Amount									.24***	.37***	.10*
10. Intentionality										.39***	.07
11. Honesty-Accuracy											.13***
12. Offline trust											

Notes: #p < = 0.1; *p < = 0.05; **p < = 0.01; ***p < = 0.001; N = 640.

TABLE 4

REGRESSION OF MOTIVES OF SNS USE, OFFLINE SOCIAL TRUST, AND
DEMOGRAPHICS ON SELF-DISCLOSURE ON SNS

Predictor Variables	Self-disclosure on SNSs				
	Valence	Control of Depth	Amount	Intentionality	Honesty-Accuracy
	β	β	β	β	β
Demographics					
Gender	.01	-.07	-.03	-.01	-.03
Age	-.03	.04	-.03	.06	-.01
Year-Entry	-.04	-.03	-.03	.01	.09
Motives of SNS Use					
Social interaction	.09	.18***	.02	.24***	.18***
Self-image building	.10	.05	.08	.19***	.15**
Information seeking	.03	.20***	.13*	.13*	.08
Offline Trust	.09*	.05	.07	.04	.11**
R^2	.05	.15	.05	.22	.13
Adjusted R^2	.04	.14	.04	.21	.12

Notes: #$p \leq 0.1$; *$p \leq 0.05$; **$p \leq 0.01$; ***$p \leq 0.001$; N = 640.