To See and to Be Seen: Chinese White-Collar Workers’ Interpretation of Microblogging and Social Capital

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, microblogging has gained enormous popularity in China, especially among urban professional workers. This phenomenological study investigates how white-collar workers in China experience microblogging and how they perceive the impact of microblogging on their lives. Twenty in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted in Beijing and Qingdao with young white-collar professionals who are active users of Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo. The analysis revealed that by engaging in microblogging activities workers can increase their social capital. In addition, the results suggested that through microblogs white-collar professional users can not only increase their social capital at the individual level but also enhance it at the collective level. The authors conclude that information sharing and social interaction enabled through microblogging platforms empower Chinese white-collar workers and strengthen their social capital.

Keywords: Chinese Consumer, Microblogging, Phenomenology, Social Capital, Social Media, White-Collar Worker

INTRODUCTION

Every morning after she wakes up, the first thing Rachel does is browsing her Sina Weibo, one of the most popular microblogging services in China, and probably posting a status of her feelings or thoughts on the site to share with her friends. On her way to work, she constantly checks updates on Weibo. After arriving at her company, she spends about a half hour on Weibo to see if anyone sends her a message or comments on her posts, and during her work breaks, she browses her Weibo multiple times and sometimes chats with her friends. Before she goes to bed, she must check updates on her Weibo again and sometimes say goodbye to her friends. This scenario describes a Chinese white-collar worker’s typical day of microblogging activities.

In China, microblogging or Internet-based services, like Weibo, that allow users to stay abreast of each others’ activities within a group by receiving frequent updates—typically of 140 characters or less—have gained enormous
popularity, especially among urban white-collar workers. After the first microblogging website “饭否” (fanfou.com) launched in China in May 2007, more than twenty other Chinese microblogging services have been established by the end of 2011 (Zhang, 2011). According to one report (CNNIC, 2012), by the end of 2011, the number of Chinese Internet users has reached 500 million, with more than 250 million microbloggers among them. Currently, Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo are the two leading microblogging websites in China. Launched in August 2009, Sina Weibo has claimed to have more than 300 million registered users (iResearch, 2012). Tencent Weibo, established in April 2010, has grown rapidly capitalizing on the vast user base of Tencent QQ. It is estimated that Tencent Weibo has more than 370 million registered users (iResearch, 2012). While the number of subscribers of Tencent and Sina are comparable, Sina Weibo attracts more white-collar users who are better educated, have higher incomes, and have significant consumption power (GroupM, 2011).

Research indicates that young, urban white-collar workers are the core users of microblogging services in China (GroupM, 2011). Previous studies have found that social media can serve not only as an information channel but also an important platform for social interaction (Chen & Haley, 2010). However, little is known about the way Chinese white-collar workers engage in microblogging activities to interact with each other. In addition, prior investigations suggest that the usage of social media can increase users’ social capital in Western society (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011). Does the same pattern exist in the context of China? According to Steinfield, Ellison, Lampe, and Vitak (2012), the vast majority of analyses of social media and social capital were conducted with students and they encouraged scholars to focus on other populations of Internet users. Finally, even though Chinese white-collar workers enjoy a relatively high social status, they feel isolated and alienated due to the high mobility and societal instability (Chen & Haley, 2010). In order to fill the above research gaps, the current study investigated how white-collar professional workers in China use microblogging and how they perceive the impact of microblogging on their lives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Capital

The concept of social capital has been widely used to refer to the accumulated resources derived from relationships among people within a specific social context or network. In the literature, two frequent debates about social capital involve whether it represents an individual or a collective level phenomenon (Lin, 2001), and whether it results from “strong” or “weak ties” (Burt, 2000). Although many scholars define social capital from different perspectives (Lin, 2001; Steinfield et al., 2012), definitions by Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (1994, 2000) are most commonly accepted. In particular, these three scholars view social capital at three different levels: individual micro-level (Bourdieu), collective middle-level (Coleman), and collective macro-level (Putnam).

Specifically, Bourdieu’s definition focuses on the individual. According to Bourdieu (1986), “Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential sources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition or, in other words, to membership in a group, which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital” (p. 242). Bourdieu emphasizes how social capital may become a useful resource and benefit each individual.

In contrast, Coleman’s definition concentrates on the relationship between social capital and collective action. According to Coleman, social capital consists of a variety of different components, which have two things in common; “they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors…within the structure” (1988, p. 98). Therefore, social capital can not only benefit
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