

Chapter 14

Leveraging Online Communities for Building Social Capital in University Libraries: A Case Study of Fudan University Medical Library

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the development of social capital in university libraries using the Fudan University Medical Library (FUML) as the case. The authors first use the SWOT matrix to analyze the FUML based on librarian interviews, official websites, and previous literature. Next, they construct a social capital evaluation framework for university libraries with four dimensions (degree of user demand, level of trust, visibility, and status in users' minds). Guided by the framework, our findings indicate that FUML's user demands in recent years are optimistic, though trust, visibility, and library status vary in users' minds. Thus, they suggest some strategies to help improve patron-library relations through online communities, such as using social media, multi-online channel user feedback, and improving related employee training. This study provides insights into how university libraries can build online relations from social capital concepts. Scant studies have applied social capital to investigate the relationship between university libraries and students, especially in East Asia.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of social capital can be traced back to the nineteenth century as some intangible capital that could potentially contribute to future development and effective resources available to the group through building relationships (Farr, 2004; Fong et al., 2020; Leung, Chiu, et al., 2022). Libraries, as public institutions, have long been seen as producers of social capital (Goulding, 2004; T. Jiang et al., 2019; Kee et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2023). From the perspective of community development, university libraries should undoubtedly consider how to build social capital more effectively. At the same time, the building of social capital should be anticipated for future beneficial feedback to the institutions that produce it.

However, due to recent mobile technology advancements and the general availability of electronic resources, students can access learning materials anytime, anywhere (Lau et al., 2017; 2020), and thus fewer students visit the physical library (Leung, Chiu, et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2023). Worse still, the general lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated this change (Meng et al., 2023; P. Y. Yu et al., 2023) because their information habit has significantly changed (Dai & Chiu, 2023; Yi & Chiu, 2023). Thus, libraries should develop new online strategies to reinforce their patron community, which can be effectively and systematically guided by social capital concepts (Fong et al., 2021; Kee et al., 2023).

The Fudan University Medical Library (FUML), which was selected as the case of the study, has a unique cultural heritage that evolved from the Shanghai Medical University Library in the Republic of China, combining intelligence, high professionalism, and rich resources (Q. Liu et al., 2022). It has effectively utilized resources and reduced unnecessary capital loss by establishing a cross-institutional resource-sharing consortium (Fang et al., 2017). Yet amid COVID-19 and economic austerity, FUML still needs to consider how to increase its social capital in the long run through online communities to cope with technological and user habit changes.

Unfortunately, scant studies have addressed the social capital of university libraries, particularly the relationship with online communities, which is essential for their positioning and mission amid the health crisis, especially in East Asia. Thus, this study investigated how university libraries can build social capital for long-term development in the post-COVID era. Through a literature review, we first established a social capital evaluation framework with four dimensions. Next, we analyzed FUML using the SWOT matrix to classify the results into our 4-dimensional university library social capital assessment framework to diagnose FUML in building social capital. Based on the problems revealed, we suggested some online and other associated strategies to improve FUML's deficiencies in building social capital.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social capital

The definition of social capital has been well-discussed continuously since the 1980s. Mark Granovetter (1985) suggests that social behavior, including economic behavior, is influenced by social relations, and James S. Coleman (1988) refers to the binding effect of social capital on responsibility and obligation in his theoretical system.

The period from 2000 to 2005 was a significant period in which many theories defining social capital were proposed. Robert D. Putnam's (1995) concept of social capital demonstrates a more understandable

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