

Use of SNSs, Political Efficacy, and Civic Engagement among Chinese College Students: Effects of Gratifications and Network Size

Qian Xu, Elon University, Elon, NC, USA

Lingling Qi, Nanjing University, Jiangsu, China

ABSTRACT

Almost half of China's 564 million netizens are using social networking websites (SNSs). Based on the growing popularity of native SNSs, this study aims to examine whether the younger generation feels more actively engaged in civic and political activities. A survey of 471 Chinese college students in Mainland China explored the effects of SNS use on political efficacy and civic engagement. Among the four identified gratifications of SNS use, social connection significantly predicted internal political efficacy and political voice. Entertainment negatively predicted both external political efficacy and political voice, while information seeking had no influence on either political efficacy or civic engagement. SNS network size emerged as a positive predictor of civic engagement, including electoral activities and political voice. Intensity of SNS use had no significant effect on any of the political outcomes. The results of the study shed light on the role of SNSs in the democratization of Chinese society.

Keywords: Civic Engagement, Network Size, Political Efficacy, SNS Use, Uses and Gratifications

INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, the media landscape in China has undergone vast changes. By the end of 2012, China had more than 564 million Internet users (CNNIC, 2013a), half of whom are users of online social networking websites (CNNIC, 2013b). While high-ranking social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook and Twitter, are blocked in Mainland China, Chinese users

have been actively engaged in social networking activities on various native SNS platforms such as Qzone, Weibo, Renren, and Kaixin, to name a few. According to the Global Web Index (2012), six of the top ten most actively used social networking providers in China are native SNSs. These booming social networks offer a virtual discursive space (Chan, Wu, Hao, Xi, & Jin, 2012; Chan & Zhou, 2011) where Chinese citizens are exposed to diverse voices

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that are different from the mainstream media tightly controlled by the central government.

However, with the authoritarian model of the press (Anokwa, Lin, & Salwen, 2003), the Chinese government implements strong control over the information published online. In a society with a high degree of power distance (Hofstede, 1980, 1993), this may further catalyze users' self-censorship by conforming to the realities of extensive government censorship (Shen, Wang, Guo, & Guo, 2009), which discourages individuals from engaging in political and civic activities on SNSs. Would the growing popularity of native SNSs contribute to the democratization of Chinese society by allowing younger generation that constitutes the largest group of SNS users (CNNIC, 2013b), to feel politically efficacious and engage more in civic activities? Or would it direct the younger generation towards more shallow activities and distract them from engaging in public life, as predicted by the time displacement hypothesis (Putnam, 1995)?

Integrating Boyd and Ellison's (2007) explication of SNSs and the practical definition adopted in the Report of Social Networking Sites in China (CNNIC, 2012), this study defines SNSs as Internet-based services that allow individuals to stay connected with others and share interests and activities. Since mainstream media are highly censored in Mainland China (Wu, Lau, Atkin, & Lin, 2011), the decentralized structure of SNS provides an ideal space for a less filtered discussion on social and political topics (Mou, Atkin, Fu, Lin, & Lau, 2013). In comparison with the state-controlled media (Anokwa et al., 2003), SNSs provide a more accessible forum, to allow Chinese users to share information and opinions with each other. Taking these local political and cultural contexts into consideration and drawing from both instrumental and psychological approaches to media effects, this study aims to examine how the intensity of SNS use, gratifications of SNS use, and size of SNS networks influence political efficacy and civic engagement among Chinese college students.

SNS Use, Political Efficacy, and Civic Engagement

Political efficacy is generally considered a primary indicator of the overall health of a democratic system (Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1991; Putnam, 1995). Campbell, Gurin, and Miller (1954) first defined it as "the feeling that an individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process (p.187)." Extending this definition, Balch (1974) further conceptualized it into two dimensions: internal efficacy and external efficacy. Internal efficacy describes an individual's belief in his/her own competence in understanding and effectively participating in political life, whereas external efficacy refers to the degree to which one believes that the political actors and institutions represent him/her and respond to his/her needs (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991). Unlike Western democratic societies in which political efficacy is usually associated with electoral behaviors, in the authoritarian society of China political efficacy is mainly achieved through the deliberative processes via non-electoral settings (Ergenc, 2014). To Chinese citizens, political efficacy is more about the extent to which they can affect the government's decision making through public discussion and make complaints about dissatisfaction with their lives (Tang, 2005).

Aside from political efficacy, civic engagement has been identified as yet another important factor in a democratic society (Putnam, 1995). Researchers have identified a strong connection between political efficacy and civic engagement (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006). Shah (1998) conceptualized civic engagement as "membership in formal community groups and participation in social activities (p. 477)," whereas Rheingold (2008) considered it as the direct experience with discourse, debate, collective action, and co-creation of culture in the public sphere. While some researchers (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012) defined it narrowly to include only civic participation, others considered civic participation as just

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