What Does Channel Say? Understanding How Social Media Social Capital Facilitates COVID-19-Related Information-Seeking and Opinion-Expression on Two Types of Platforms: User-oriented versus Content-oriented

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ABSTRACT
Social capital (i.e., resources obtained from social relationships) facilitates informational use of media, yet how in detail the mechanism functions in a multi-platform social media environment remains underexplored. Taking an affordance approach, this study aimed to investigate the differentiated effects of social media social capital on COVID-19-related information behaviors on user-oriented and content-oriented social media (USM&CSM). It was hypothesized that information exposure on USM mediates the relationship between social capital and information-seeking intention, whereas exposure on CSM was expected to mediate the relationship between social capital and opinion expression. Web-based survey data collected among Chinese social media users (N=256) supported the hypotheses, and in-depth interviews (N=15) further revealed how people explored the affordances of different platforms to enjoy the information resources. Implications were discussed.

KEYWORDS
Social capital, social media, information-seeking, channel choice, affordance.

INTRODUCTION
Previous literature in information and communication has revealed that bridging social capital (i.e., resources derived from loosely-knitted social networks: Putman, 2000) generated through Internet use (Ellison et al., 2007) can bring information resources, facilitating risk information-seeking (Hovick et al., 2014; Johnson, 2004; Junaidi et al., 2020; Wen, 2020) and social media expression (Skoric et al., 2009; Wen & Wei, 2018). Yet, how in detail the mechanism functions in a multi-platform media environment remains rather underexplored. According to the modality switching perspective (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007), which was proposed to understand the effects of channel choice on computer-mediated information processing, people navigate between social media channels with different affordances (e.g., privacy and network association) to find the one that best serves the interests of their social relationships, which leads to differentiated impacts of social media use (McEwan, 2021).

Mainstream social media platforms can be categorized into either user- or content-oriented. User-oriented social media is characterized by relationships between family, friends, and other types of strong-ties, on which the diffusion of more credited information is largely based, whereas user-oriented social media is known for the prevalence of weak-ties and diversified information (Tufekci, 2014). In previous literature, Facebook was usually seen as typical user-oriented social media, and Twitter and YouTube more of the content-oriented type (e.g., Yoo et al., 2018).

Chinese has its own social media ecology, yet the social media map also shares similarities with the one in the Western context, with WeChat largely being the Chinese Facebook, and Weibo the Chinese Twitter (Kantar, 2019). On WeChat, information is circulated largely depending on individual’s personal networks with people they know in real life (Wu & Wall, 2019). By contrast, Weibo is more like a virtual square for public deliberations (Chan et al., 2012). Different as they are, both are mainstream platforms that enjoy frequent informational use by the Chinese public during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the first wave of outbreaks took place (Han et al., 2020; Zhong et al., 2020).

The study aimed to explored the differentiated effects of online bridging social capital on information behaviors on two types of platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic: user-oriented and content-oriented social media. By providing the information resources through individual’s social media social capital, the two types of platforms may facilitate distinctive information practices. On the one hand, interpersonal influence mediates the relationship between media use and attitudinal change(Katz, 1957), which makes WeChat—on which credited information is proliferated among strong-ties (Wu & Wall, 2019)—a more powerful vehicle for attitudinal change and subsequent information-seeking. On the other, information is more diversified and abundant while norms and social surveillance...
are weaker in weakly-knitted social networks (Putman, 2000; Williams, 2006), making Weibo a better platform to make personal expression about the issue. A recent research showed that news recommended by strong-ties on social media motivated news-seeking, but that by weak-ties did not (Kaiser et al., 2018). Taken together, it was hypothesized that:

H1: Bridging social capital is positively related to (a) information-seeking intention and (b) social media expression;

H2: Information exposure on user-oriented social media mediates the relationship mentioned in H1a;

H3: Information exposure on content-oriented social media mediates the relationship mentioned in H1b.

METHOD

First, web-based survey data (administrated on Wenjuanxing.com) was collected from January 25 to 28, 2020 among Chinese social media users (N=256). Participants were recruited on WeChat and Weibo. Most people were 18-30 years old (74.6%; n=191). 52.3% of them were female (n=134). For measures, we referred to previous studies (e.g., Ellison et al., 2007; Wen, 2020; Yoo et al., 2018, and Kantar, 2019). In addition, 15 in-depth phone-interviews were conducted with social media users recruited in the same way as survey from March to April, 2020 (M=22.27, SD=1.62; Among the 15 informants, seven were female), so as to further interpret the quantitative findings.

RESULTS

Quantitatively, most of the variables of interests were related, and Cronbach’s α were all larger than .70. CFA and path analysis using Cohen & Cohen’s (1979) residualization procedure for controlling the effects of age, gender, education, income, health status (for which, the model fit was good: Chi-square=2.587, df=3, p=.460, CFI=1.00, NFI=.99, RMSEA<.001) using AMOS 22.0 showed that the data supported all of the three hypotheses (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Path Analysis](image)

Qualitatively, most participants did not take it seriously when they saw risk information on content-oriented social media (i.e., Weibo) at first until relevant posts were circulated by family and friends on user-oriented social media (i.e., WeChat) with a greater affordance of identifiability (Fox & McEwan, 2017), which prompted them to seek more information on Weibo. By contrast, because of context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011) that occurred on WeChat and the diversified views circulated on Weibo with a greater affordance of anonymity (Fox & McEwan, 2017) that made them feel “capable of opinion-expression”, many informants preferred Weibo as the platform to voice out.

DISCUSSION

One and a half decades since Ellison et al. (2007) demonstrated that Internet use can also generate social capital, we have now understood more about how online social capital in turn facilitates informational use of social media in times of crisis (e.g., Chang & Chuang, 2011). Yet, how do people weave their way into the information sea deserves more scholarly attention, as most of them do not solely rely on one platform, but navigate between many. Taking an affordance approach, the study found that channel choice may influence people’s information behaviors in the context of covid-19 pandemic. The suppressing effect of context collapse on expression on certain platform and the opposing effect on another can be also applied to understand the spread of malicious contents and misinformation. Taken together, the findings call for more information studies that employ a channel choice perspective.

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