

Cross-Cultural and Cross-Platform Differences in Youths' Social Networking Site Behavior

Skyler T. Hawk, MA, MS, PhD

Department of Educational Psychology, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

The explosion of social networking sites (SNSs) in the last decade has shown a great deal of variety in the services and features offered by various platforms. The increasing popularity of SNSs has also revealed the dynamic nature of this phenomenon, both in terms of how particular platforms have evolved over time and how new SNSs have emerged to meet specific demands. Although Facebook largely dominates both the international SNS market and related social and behavioral research, platforms continue to arise on both the national and global levels, and these new platforms remain relatively untapped contexts for understanding youths' SNS activity.¹ Physicians, educators, and researchers can easily become overwhelmed by the fast pace at which new SNSs appear and disappear and by the ways in which this rapid evolution complicates intervention efforts. As a result, it might be tempting to generalize research findings and concerns based on particular platforms to the broader context of all SNSs or to focus on 1 or 2 popular platforms at the expense of others. However, doing so ignores important distinctions between different sites that might contribute to youths' SNS behaviors. Knowledge of the factors influencing SNS popularity, as well as the policy, structural, and feature differences that characterize particular SNSs, can assist in anticipating new online trends and their implications for youths' well-being. It is important to recognize that most adolescents and young adults now use multiple SNSs, and a better understanding of how their motives for use vary between platforms can aid educators in mitigating potential harms and promoting the social benefits of these online environments.

While previous works have provided a detailed history of the early days of SNSs and related research efforts,² the present review focuses more on the structural and social aspects of several current platforms and their implications for continuing

*Corresponding author: Dr. Skyler T. Hawk
E-mail address: s.t.hawk@uu.nl

research in this field. In addition to SNSs that are popular internationally, it is important to consider SNSs that are largely unfamiliar to western users and researchers. In this regard, the present review places a special focus on China, perhaps the fastest growing but most politically complicated market for SNS platforms. Because others have suggested that aspects of predominant culture often translate to online interaction, it is important for researchers to have an in-depth knowledge of the features of indigenous SNSs as well as how differences in both culture and SNS platform structure might promote certain online behaviors.^{3,4} If research, social policy, and intervention efforts related to SNS behavior are to remain accurate and relevant, it is essential to consider how these potential issues might influence research questions, methodologies, and the generalizability of findings.

BEYOND FACEBOOK: INDIGENOUS SNSs AND THE CASE OF CHINA

While SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have gained large international followings, a number of indigenous platforms, such as Hyves (Netherlands), Blijp (Norway), VKontakte (Russia), Orkut (India), CyWorld (Korea), and Mixi (Japan), have arisen to fill particular social and cultural niches. While Facebook and Twitter are available—and even widely used—in these countries, individuals might also opt for indigenous SNSs to nurture their local networks, more comfortably communicate in their own language, and share content that is highly pertinent to the local culture. Mainland China is particularly interesting in this respect because Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube all have been blocked in the country for several years. A number of homegrown SNSs have rushed in to fill this vacuum, including RenRen (translated as “everyone,” often called the Facebook of China), Sino Weibo (translated as “micro blog,” a platform similar to Twitter), Douban (a MySpace-like platform organized around various artistic and intellectual interests), and Weixin (“WeChat”). WeChat combines instant messaging with a personalized news feed and currently is the most dominant mobile SNS in China.⁵ All of these SNSs easily have more than 100 million subscriptions, thus demonstrating a more variable market than exists in countries dominated by Facebook and Twitter. Social media seem to be equally or even more important to Chinese users, with recent research suggesting that they actually spend more time on SNSs than do Americans.⁶ One recent study reported that 9.5% of sampled Chinese adolescents aged 12 to 17 years (which translates to more than 13 million youths) exhibited signs of problematic Internet use.⁷ With first-time Internet users in China still growing at a rate of 10% per year, the behaviors of Chinese young people present a highly dynamic context for SNS research and intervention efforts.⁸ In particular, the larger variety of Chinese SNSs can provide important clues regarding how particular structural, feature, and policy differences attract users and shape related behavior.

EVOLUTION OF SNS FEATURES, POLICIES, AND POPULARITY

Numerous structural aspects of SNSs have changed over time. For example, commentators have noted a steep decline in popularity of sites that too slowly

embraced users' moves from PC-based to mobile-based platforms. This has been viewed as a partial reason for Facebook's domination over MySpace⁹ as well as an issue that has contributed to the waning interest in RenRen in China.¹⁰ In contrast, WeChat was specifically launched as a mobile platform in 2011 and acquired more than 300 million users in the first 2 years alone.⁸ Mobile Internet traffic in China surpassed desktop Internet use as of early 2014, suggesting that the shift toward mobile SNSs likely will continue.⁵ The ability of individuals to immediately connect with others and to share their experiences in real time, regardless of their location, is an especially dramatic example of how SNSs have become integrated into everyday life.

The features offered both within and between particular SNSs have also undergone modifications. For example, Facebook has tried to cater to users and advertisers by continually increasing the number of available services. Similarly, WeChat quickly evolved beyond instant messaging and posting personal photos to include a variety of features in order to maintain its entertainment value. In contrast, other currently popular sites have settled into various niches, such as microblogging (Twitter, Tumblr, Weibo), instant messaging (WhatsApp), sharing photographs and videos (Instagram, Flickr, YouTube), and professional networking (LinkedIn). Many SNSs also differ in their privacy policies in order to strike a balance between profitability, accountability, and encouraging their members to share a large amount of content. Some SNSs allow pseudonyms (eg, MySpace, Twitter, and WeChat), while others require individuals to register their actual identities (eg, Facebook, RenRen, and Weibo). Some SNSs have become popular because the information shared by users is not permanent (eg, Snapchat). Additionally, the ability to have multiple accounts, the amount of control over who sees particular information, and the amount of ownership that companies claim over users' posted content all vary between these sites. Thus, there has been considerable variety in how specific SNSs attempt to appeal to new users and retain existing ones. It is important to note that studies conducted several years apart on the same SNS might not be comparable if such policies and features change substantially over time.

Political concerns and youth culture surrounding SNSs have also evolved and have been equally crucial in determining the success and failure of particular platforms. One notable issue surrounding Chinese SNSs is the censorship of user-generated content. Some have suggested that stricter institutional control over traditional media outlets has led social and political activists in China to consider SNSs more effective for disseminating information and fueling open discussions among large groups of people.¹¹ While both Chinese and western SNS companies actively delete posts deemed to be inappropriate or depicting illegal activity, some have suggested that the government of mainland China takes a more active role in initiating such moves.¹² This is particularly the case with regard to sensitive political issues, such as criticism of the Communist Party, separatist sentiments in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and commemoration of

the anniversary of Tiananmen Square. Reports of deleted content on sites such as Weibo and Douban have increased steadily in recent years. Beyond deletions, the government has also instituted policies mandating account suspensions for those discussing potentially volatile topics and prison sentences for those intentionally distributing false information.

These crackdowns have had an especially sanitizing effect on Chinese platforms such as Weibo, which typically experiences large spikes in activity after major disasters and social or political events. Users have now become more reluctant to pass along sensationalized information or unsubstantiated rumors to a large number of followers, but these constitute a large portion of Weibo's entertainment value.¹² This government involvement has been at least partially blamed for the steep declines in Weibo's popularity and user activity.^{8,12} In contrast, WeChat focuses on being a venue for interactions with smaller networks and closer ties. This has allowed users a relatively higher level of freedom from censorship and monitoring because of a reduced potential for broadcasting opinions and rumors about sensitive topics to a large number of followers.¹² Even so, anecdotally, individuals expressed concern that posts related to the July 1, 2014, election protests in Hong Kong could be censored from their WeChat newsfeeds and private conversations. Such censorship and monitoring policies present challenges for those interested in the role of SNS in Chinese youths' development of self-expression, political identity, and civic engagement.

Adolescents and emerging adults are the primary users of many popular SNSs, and for them novelty is an essential component. Once particular media have become popular in the larger culture, it is common for young people to seek out new trends. Social networking sites have been no exception to this pattern. For example, scholars and news outlets have suggested that younger users have begun to retreat from Facebook *en masse* and to migrate to more novel networks that are not yet populated by parents, teachers, and family members.¹³ Not surprisingly, youths apparently are reluctant to share all aspects of their lives with their entire social network. Similarly, RenRen in China faced complaints from university students in 2009 when it began allowing nonstudents to register for the site.¹⁴ Although RenRen continues to struggle, recent evidence suggests that the reports of Facebook's demise were premature.¹⁵ Facebook remains the most popular SNS among young people; 88.6% of late adolescents and young adults in the United States had an account as of late 2013. However, sites such as Instagram (51.5%), Twitter (43.7%), and Tumblr (35.5%) certainly are competing for users' attention. Likewise, while older SNSs such as Weibo and RenRen likely remain important to Chinese young people because such sites allow them to quickly acquire information from and communicate with a larger network of childhood friends and relatives, youths might currently prefer their WeChat accounts for staying in touch with more proximal contacts.¹⁶ In other words, users likely connect to multiple SNSs because the different platforms fulfill particular social needs.¹⁷

Such information suggests that youths are not wholly abandoning more established sites, but rather that they are diversifying their SNS use. This poses a challenge to research and intervention efforts because it suggests that a single individual's motives for use, the "friends" with whom the user interacts, and the content he/she shares might vary considerably among the different sites. In this sense, different SNSs even within the same host country constitute particular subcultures with their own communities, norms, and styles of interaction, and users of different platforms might participate differently in each of them.⁴ Even to the extent that information shared on a certain SNS can be considered an accurate depiction of a person's offline life, it is not necessarily a *complete* portrayal.^{18,19} As such, sweeping generalizations about SNS behavior, as well as the predictors and consequences of such activity, must be made with caution.^{4,20} Understanding how youths' motives for SNS use might differ between cultures, as well as how the same users' behaviors might change when they switch between different SNSs, is essential for researchers using related evidence to develop sound policy and interventions.

CROSS-CULTURAL AND CROSS-PLATFORM DIFFERENCES IN SNS BEHAVIOR

Jackson and Wang²¹ gathered self-reports from both Chinese and American students on motivations for general SNS use (with questions such as "How much time per week do you spend on social networking sites?") as well as personality factors (eg, extraversion, agreeableness) that might predict such motives. Users in both countries reported motives such as keeping in touch with family members, friends, and long distance contacts, acquiring information, and making new friends. However, American students reported a larger number of SNS contacts than did Chinese students, and they endorsed all motivations for use more strongly. Furthermore, personality characteristics tended to be stronger predictors of American students' SNS motivations compared to their Chinese counterparts. The researchers conjectured that orientations inherent in collectivistic cultures, including the emphases placed on face-to-face interaction, family duty, and group harmony, might account for these patterns. Members of individualist cultures, in contrast, are more motivated to engage in strategic self-presentation in order to project the best possible image of themselves.²² Comparisons of college students on Facebook in the United States and in Singapore (relatively individualistic and collectivistic cultures, respectively) have shown that American students tend to update their profiles more frequently and more actively manage unwanted photo tagging by others in their network.²³ However, American students with a very large number of "loose" ties in their networks also seem to be more willing to forego positive self-presentation in exchange for attention. A study of Korean CyWorld users and American Facebook users also found that college students in each culture endorsed the same basic motivations for using their respective sites (seeking friends, social support, information, entertainment, and convenience) and used the SNSs at similar frequencies.²⁴ However,

Korean students had a substantially smaller number of friends, on average, and their networks consisted of a higher proportion of close friends and family members. These differences were also reflected in each group's reports of motivations for use. While American students found greater entertainment in making new contacts through Facebook, Korean students were more likely to use CyWorld for maintaining close relationships and obtaining social support. Taken together, this collection of studies suggests that youths select particular SNSs with specific goals in mind and that young people from individualistic and collectivistic cultures might approach their preferred SNSs with substantially different mindsets.

Research comparing particular platforms against one another has been invaluable for demonstrating the general notion that user motives and behaviors across different SNSs are not identical. As noted by Panek et al,²⁰ for instance, the 140-character limit for Tweets might make Twitter a less ideal platform than Facebook for self-promotional behavior. The same might not be true for China's Weibo because although it has a similar interface and an identical character limit to Twitter, substantially more information can be conveyed with 140 Chinese characters than with 140 Roman characters. How youths choose and interact with different SNSs based on these kinds of fundamental structural differences constitutes an interesting area for both intracultural and cross-cultural research.

Few studies have strongly considered potential *intrapersonal* variation in user behavior (eg, honesty, self-presentation, and extent or content of self-disclosures) between different SNSs. Such research might be more difficult in a cross-cultural context because it requires obtaining samples of participants who have access to and are familiar with multiple SNSs. One such study to do so examined a group of Chinese international students' use of both RenRen and Facebook while they were in the United States.²⁵ Findings showed that students used both SNSs (but especially Facebook) in order to expand their networks while they were abroad so that they could acquire social information and resources. In contrast, they used only RenRen to maintain close ties in their home country. Another study examined Chinese students' use of both RenRen and Facebook while they were abroad in Singapore (where Facebook is the dominant SNS).⁴ Not only did these participants view the RenRen community as more collectivistic (ie, oriented toward sharing and conformity) than Facebook, but their patterns of use on each SNS actually reflected these differences. Specifically, both self-reports and observations of actual SNS behavior revealed that individuals engaged in more benevolent in-group sharing on RenRen (eg, distributing travel information that other contacts might find valuable) than they did on Facebook. Interestingly, these differences reflected patterns of behavior observed in participants' larger network of friends on each SNS, suggesting conformity to prevailing norms of particular online cultures. In contrast to the aforementioned research examining separate, culture-based groups, these studies more effectively demonstrated that even the *same* individual's network composition and behaviors might vary substantially between different

SNSs and can switch rather flexibly, depending on how these particular platforms meet specific needs and motives.

CONCLUSIONS

This review highlights how diversity in SNS platforms, their features and architecture, and related social policy are linked to youths' SNS behaviors and motivations for use. While research on Facebook and Twitter continues to proliferate, it is important to consider whether the findings of such studies can be generalized across all SNSs, especially those that are indigenous to other countries. The unavailability of Facebook and Twitter to most Chinese youths has been a contributing factor in allowing Chinese companies to develop a wide range of alternative SNSs. The variety of different sites available to Chinese young people, the rapid changes in the popularity of these sites, and the continued increase in novice users offer exciting avenues for understanding trends in youth culture and the ways that different SNS features both reflect and modify prevailing norms. However, blocked platforms (eg, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) and government/corporate censorship might complicate comparisons of western and Chinese youths' behaviors, as well as investigations of the content posted to Chinese SNSs.

The Chinese context provides an example of an issue that is rarely considered in either western or cross-cultural research, namely, that today's youth likely use a variety of different SNSs simultaneously in order to meet particular psychosocial needs. The different features and customs of particular SNSs constitute specific subcultures within the larger social networking phenomenon, and youths may participate differently in several of these communities. While prior studies have compared the motives and behaviors related to using different SNSs, such comparisons run the risk of creating a false dichotomy if memberships to different platforms are not mutually exclusive. The relatively few examinations of how the *same* individuals use different SNSs have demonstrated how youths might alter their posting behaviors and communications in concert with differing motives and perceived norms. While most SNSs have the potential to provide teens with similar benefits (eg, obtaining social support, acquiring information, making new friends, and maintaining existing relationships) and might pose similar risks (eg, increased narcissism,²⁶ decreased empathy and prosocial behavior,²⁷ less conservative views and behaviors related to alcohol,^{28,29} and risky disclosures and loss of privacy³⁰), it is fairly unlikely that *all* SNSs pose these consequences equally for a particular individual. Interventionists aiming to combat negative outcomes and promote positive SNS use must consider whether the problematic activities of target groups are widespread or confined to a particular SNS and must address the platform-specific motivations that might contribute to such behavior. Researchers and policymakers must carefully consider the SNS platforms and methodologies used to investigate such issues in both prior and prospective empirical studies in order to make accurate and contemporarily relevant decisions.

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