Network Domains in Social Networking Sites:

Expectations, Meanings, and Social Capital

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Abstract:

This paper examines why the use of social networking sites (SNSs) leads to different results in cultivating bridging and bonding social capital for different groups of people. Based on in-depth interviews of forty-five university students in Hong Kong, I find that Mainland Chinese students studying in Hong Kong actively use SNSs for seeking practical information about offline matters, and they obtain substantial enacted support from other Mainland students of the same university through SNS use. As a result, they accumulate both bridging and bonding social capital. Local Hong Kong students, however, use SNSs mainly for social information seeking and are only able to accrue limited bridging social capital through SNS use. Drawing on the theory of network domains, I argue that the different offline network structures in which students are located—namely, homogeneous and closed networks versus heterogeneous and open networks—explain this difference. Students with closed offline networks have defined expectations of online ties; they think of their online activities as practical and leading to real changes in their status among peers. Those with open networks have indefinite expectations of their online audience; thus, they interpret online activities differently, thinking of them as recreational, and they are playful in their online behaviour. These different outcomes of online activities consequently lead to diverse results in social capital accrual.

Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) are dramatically increasing in popularity among adolescents and young adults all over the world (boyd, 2008; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). Although they positively influence social capital overall (e.g., Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007, 2011; Lee & Lee, 2010; Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011), SNSs have mixed results in terms of the quantity and quality of social capital for different groups of users (Brandtzæg, 2012; Brooks, Howard, Hogan, & Titsworth, 2011; Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014; Choi, Kim, Sung, & Sohn, 2011; Jiang & de Bruijn, 2014). We still know little about why the social ties created and maintained through SNSs can be transformed into practical resources and relational benefits endowed by social capital for some users, but fail to have the same results for others.

To further the research on why people use SNSs in different ways, and how these different uses result in varying degrees of social capital accrual, this study examines two groups of university students in Hong Kong: local students and Mainland students. The locals were raised in Hong Kong and are permanent residents. The Mainland students are from Mainland China and have come to study in Hong Kong. Drawing on the theory that because individuals belong to different networks, they assess what is happening differently (Corona & Godart, 2010; Gondal & McLean, 2013; White, 1995, 2008), this study focuses on the subjective meanings that participants assign to their online activities and the relationship of SNS use to their offline lives. In Hong Kong, because local students tend to build heterogeneous and open offline networks, they mainly use SNSs for self-presentation and entertainment. Mainland students studying in Hong Kong, however, tend to form homogeneous peer networks with a strong sense of belonging because of their common status as sojourners. Consequently, Mainland students tend to think of

online activities as having a substantial impact on their offline lives. Because these two groups have different offline network structures, each group has different expectations of online ties and attributes different meanings to activities on SNSs.

In the following, I will first review relevant literature on social capital and social networking sites, followed by a brief discussion of the theory of network-domains. After introducing data and methods, I will then demonstrate how network structures influence the meanings people attribute to online activities, and how that explains the different results of SNS use for different social groups. I conclude with a discussion on how networks and online cultures influence online behaviors in different ways, and why among all the offline networks, the immediate physically bounded daily offline network is the most important for determining meanings of online action.

Social Capital and Social Networking Sites

To understand how offline network structures influence SNS use and social capital accrual, it is useful to first define social capital, and then see how it is accumulated through SNSs in different contexts. Social capital is defined as the resources and benefits individuals accrue from interaction with members of their social network (Lin, 2001; Putnam, 2000). It is usually divided into two types: bonding social capital and bridging social capital (Williams, 2006). Bonding social capital tends to be associated with homogeneous, dense networks and close relationships (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Its benefits include material, social, and emotional support; access to limited resources; and the ability to mobilize solidarity (Williams, 2006). Social support—both emotional and physical—is a key construct of bonding social capital. On the other hand, bridging social capital is associated with weak and diverse social ties (Granovetter, 1973; Adler & Kwon, 2002). Weak ties are especially useful when bridging two or more networks (Burt, 2000); they

are usually heterogeneous in nature and so are more likely to expose people to diverse perspectives (Granovetter, 1973). Information diffusion is considered the most important benefit of bridging social capital.

As many studies have shown, SNS use helps form both bonding and bridging social capital (e.g., Steinfield et al., 2008; Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010; Lee & Lee, 2010; Hampton et al., 2011; Brandtzæg, 2012) because this form of online interaction facilitates building and maintaining large numbers of both strong and weak ties (Donath, 2007; Ellison, Lampe, & Steinfield, 2010; Stefanone, Kwon, & Lackaff, 2011). However, studies have found that some SNS users are more likely than others to benefit from social capital accrual (Brandtzæg, 2012) and that some activities on SNSs are more likely than others to cultivate social capital (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011; Yoder & Stutzman, 2011; Ellison et al., 2014).

One possible explanation for the divergence of SNS use might be cultural background (e.g., Jiang & de Bruijn, 2014; Choi et al., 2011; Qiu, Lin, & Leung, 2013). Indeed, existing studies on SNS use in non-Western contexts suggested that people tended to use SNSs differently in different cultures (Kim & Yun, 2007; Takahashi, 2010). This cultural approach might explain differences between countries, such as those between Western countries (which are usually characterized as individualistic and low-context) and Eastern countries (which are usually characterized as collectivistic and high-context) (Choi et al., 2011), but it still cannot explain the differences among users in one culture. For example, Hong Kong is commonly understood as a collectivistic, high-context culture (Chau, Cole, Massey, Montoya-Weiss, & O'Keefe, 2002), just like Mainland China. Why, then, is there still a difference between the two student groups?

Although not able to account for why people use these sites differently, the studies of cross-cultural differences in SNS use directed our attention to the importance of factors other than the technology itself in influencing people's online behavior. To be sure, offline cultural and social context within which the users are embedded shapes the way they organize their online behavior (Halavais, 2000). However, a more immediate context is the users' daily offline life. Existing research comparing different groups of SNS users suggested that offline life might influence patterns of SNS use. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2011) have found that students who live on campus are more likely to accumulate social capital than those who live at home. Based on a comparison of Facebook use for British and Chinese students attending a British university, Jiang and de Bruijn (2014) have found that the Chinese students tend to accumulate more social capital through Facebook than British students. Similarly, in the United States, Lin, Peng, Kim, LaRose, and Kim (2012) have found that international students who use Facebook to interact with Americans and friends in their home country adjust to their new environment and increase their online bridging capital. It's possible that the difference they identified can also be attributed to the different network structures of sojourners and locals. Building on these studies, the next step is to examine how individuals' offline network influences their online activities.

Network Structures and Domains of Meaning

One framework for analyzing the link between offline life and online activities derives from a concept carved out by White (2008) who has argued that individuals belong to different network domains, or 'netdoms,' a concept that aims to capture the mixture of network ties ('net') with domains of meanings ('dom'). White has pointed out that relationships and meanings are inseparable. While networks of social relationships ('net') represent the social texture, 'dom' refers to the subjective understandings and the social-cultural formation of the social network.

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That is, networks are culturally made; at the same time the social texture of network structure influences how individuals understand the meaning of actions (Fuhse, 2009). This theory contends that individuals get access to certain types of meanings through the positions they occupy in those networks (Corona & Godart, 2010). Networks cannot be separated from culture, and meanings arise in a relational context (Mützel, 2009).

Because individuals are located in multiple networks (Padgett & McLean, 2006; Padgett & Powell, 2012), such as family, peers, friends, and neighbors, they are constantly exposed to different cultural domains with their own legitimate symbols, practices, and discourses. Those meanings could be commensurable or contradictory. The consequences of multiple network domains are twofold. First, each individual has different values depending upon which network he/she associates themselves with at a given moment. Facing this multiplicity, individuals 'switch' between multiple netdoms and have to constantly negotiate to establish social footing in relation to each other (Mische & White, 2009). Second, the same relationship or activity does not carry the same meanings for different people. Diversity of meanings, therefore, arises from actors' differential embeddedness in other networks. As a result, seemingly similar ties, for example, the online friend ties created or maintained through SNSs, may be imbued with distinct meanings by differently positioned network participants, and that multiplicity of meaning can be traced back to individuals' differential exposure to multiple networks (Gondal & McLean, 2013).

Following this line of work, I examine how the composition of multiple networks in which the students are located influences their online activities. Indeed, individuals are maintaining online ties; however, they are also exposed to and located in various offline networks, and the offline networks tend to have different characteristics defined by their practical daily situations (are they outsiders or locals, what are their living conditions, etc.).

Data and Methods

To understand why people use SNSs differently, I recruited 45 university students using a nonrandom quota sampling method. Only full-time undergraduate students at a particular university in Hong Kong who were either using Facebook or Renren or both were interviewed. The university I chose has a high number of enrolled Mainland students (around 300 per year, and around 1,400 total). This is a large enough number to assure diversity of background in terms of geographic areas, socioeconomic status, and so forth.

The student respondents consisted of 13 local males, 10 local females, 8 Mainland males, and 14 Mainland females, all between eighteen and twenty-three years of age (mean age, twenty years). They were at the end of their first, second, or third years, and from diverse majors. With two exceptions (local interviews in English), all interviews were conducted in the students' primary language (Mandarin for Mainland students and Cantonese for Hong Kongese).

During the interviews, students were asked about a range of issues regarding the use of SNSs and the nature and management of contacts on their SNSs. The interview protocol probed users' general attitudes toward Facebook and Renren, focusing on issues of why and how they used a specific site and for what purposes. Students were also asked about different aspects of university life, such as their daily routines, where and with whom they lived, where and how long they studied abroad (overseas exchange programs, etc.), to whom they would turn both online and offline if they needed help or advice, with whom they usually dined and hung out, and so forth.

I deployed comparative methods to examine different students' uses of SNSs in order to achieve effective generalization by comparing a strategic set of cases (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I

also used analytic induction (Katz, 2001) to examine patterns of similarities and differences in students' offline networks and online activities. Relying on in-depth interview data, I was able to uncover the subjective underpinnings of social action and reorganize their descriptive data into explanations (Vaughan, 1992). Such analysis enables theoretical development by showing how variations of the explanations fit with instances of the explanandum (Katz, 2001).

Different Patterns of SNS Use

Although they all attend the same university and are all Chinese, Mainland and local students have very different patterns of SNS use, both in the site they prefer to use and how they engage. The most salient difference is the types of information they post and seek on SNSs, as I will discuss in detail below.

Local Students: Social Information Seeking and Entertainment on Facebook

My findings regarding Hong Kong users are in line with other research conducted in the West (such as Pempek et al., 2009; Lewis & West, 2009; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Among participants raised in Hong Kong, the most popular SNS is Facebook. They rarely use Chinese SNSs, such as Renren, even though there are no technical and few linguistic barriers. They usually joined Facebook around 2008, and use it to interact with friends or people with whom they have established relationships. These local students spend more time 'lurking' on the site rather than actually posting information and check Facebook mainly to seek social information such as learning about the achievements of old school friends.

Local students post on their SNSs mostly about emotional conditions, or to share photos of travel and social gatherings. One respondent who posts on Facebook uses the SNS as a means of staying up to date on things he's interested in:

> Facebook has a 'page,' and I like sports and music, so I'll check out those pages to find out what's new. I usually log on Facebook to see my friends' pictures, to find out what my friends have done.

Most locals confess that they use Facebook only to kill time, like when they are waiting for the bus or get bored. They prefer to browse Facebook instead of other websites (e.g. those that are news only) because looking at friends' photos and status updates is easier and more fun than reading text.

Like their Western counterparts, local students who use Facebook do not think of it as a good place for seeking instrumental support (Stefanone, Kwon, & Lackaff, 2012). One local student answered whether she had ever looked for help on practical matters on Facebook:

> No, I never did that. If I need help, I would not ask for it on Facebook, because, you know, diffusion of responsibility. You won't get any response that way. If you ask many people at the same time, you won't get any response. It would be better to ask people individually. And for doing that, I prefer to use other means, like my mobile phone.

As a consequence of this type of usage, local students have accumulated some bridging social capital through Facebook, but the effects are not strong.

Mainland Students: Practical Information Seeking and Enacted Social Supports

Mainland students in Hong Kong use both Renren and Facebook. They usually friend some local and international students on Facebook, like those from the same major or neighbors from the same floor, but they do not actively engage with them because Mainland students don't use Facebook often, as noted by this Mainlander:

> I use Facebook probably twice a month. I use Renren more regularly, daily perhaps. But I can't tell you how often either. When something comes up, I post on Renren and ask for help; or if I've been somewhere and want to post the pictures, Renren is my first choice. I never turn to Facebook for that.

Even though these respondents keep both Facebook and Renren accounts, they are much more active on Renren and use it to interact with a network of Mainland students of the same university.

Mainland students seek social information on Renren, but, they seek essential information and practical help from members of their social group on the site. On Renren, Mainland students tend to seek various kinds of practical information related to their daily tasks and practical problems. For example, the most popular posts shared on Renren are on topics like how to extend your student visa; how to apply for a British, U.S., or other visa in Hong Kong; what websites offer cheap Hong Kong–Mainland airfare or how to get a cell phone number for newcomers. In contrast to the 'social information seeking' on Facebook, I call this 'practical information seeking.' The information is useless to local students, but necessary to Mainlanders. By sharing this kind of information, users achieve the essential function of bridging social capital.

Mainland students face many practical problems such as visa and housing issues because they must navigate Hong Kong's legal system, political structure and social norms, all of which are very different than in the rest of China:

We live far away from our parents and there are lots of things for us to take care of, things that maybe our parents have no answer for. It's different from living on the Mainland. Yeah, many other things need to be bothered with, like, we need to apply for [residential] halls every year, get extensions for [our] student visas, things like that. While on the Mainland, university students can live in the dormitory for the whole four years; here, we can't. We need to hand in applications. There's a real chance of being kicked out, and then we need to get our own place. Also, we need to keep an eye on plane tickets. If we want to fly home at a reasonable price, we need to buy a ticket at least a month in advance. There are all kinds of things to be dealt with and we need to handle them by ourselves.

Because Mainland students must rely on themselves to solve these types of problems, they turn to Renren:

I was relying on it [Renren] so much that I didn't even Google anything. I just logged on to Renren and asked. For some problems it's faster to ask other Mainland students [than to check on official websites], like a student visa; when I had a problem with my objection letter [for an internship application], I went straight on Renren. Turns out that others were confused, too. So after I solved this problem, I posted instructions there to save some time for latecomers. It's pretty useful to them.

In another instance, a Mainland student described how Renren keeps him apprised of pragmatic university matters in Hong Kong:

People sometimes post a link that says you need to fill out this form or you need to do

this before a specific time. Once, someone posted a reminder of a student visa extension, and there was a link of all the documents needed, so I followed their instructions. I would probably forget such things if not for them. I keep up on Renren, just to make sure I don't miss anything. I also ask questions about things like student visas, passports, and so on. I sometimes ask questions by leaving comments under others' recent statuses because I don't have anything to hide. And they answer my questions in detail. Renren is quite helpful in that way.

In addition to Renren's usefulness for seeking practical information, Mainlanders also believe that information on Renren is far more trustworthy and easier to acquire than what is available through official channels:

You don't have to spend extra time finding information. You get it directly from your peers. If you surf the immigration website, it takes a while to find the information that fits your specific case. On Renren, you know that's what everybody [other Mainlanders at the same university] does.

The students believe the information on Renren is 'more trustworthy' because it is coming from their peers who have been through the same process. Even for those who do not intentionally search for information on Renren, they see such practical information automatically whenever they log in because their friends and fellow students share it.

In addition to practical information seeking, Renren also helps users achieve enacted social support, which is the key construct of bonding social capital. Compared with Facebook users, Renren users among my sample were more likely to seek all kinds of practical help on Renren, such as borrowing earphones, phone chargers, calculators, or textbooks from whoever was nearest to them. For example, if they were working in the library and found their laptops were

out of battery, they might post a message on Renren borrowing an adapter. Contrary to existing research that found the majority of the requests for instrumental support sent on Facebook were simply ignored (Stefanone et al., 2012), on Renren, someone usually comes to the rescue. When I asked one Mainlander why she chose to use Renren instead of other channels to get instrumental help, she replied, 'It is the fastest and easiest way to reach the broadest audience who might be able to help.' By using Renren to keep track of practical information and for potential help, Mainland students increase both bridging and bonding social capital. The major differences in terms of engagement between Facebook and Renren use are shown in table 1.

<Table 1 here>

Closed Network and Defined Expectations

Mainland students prefer Renren to phone or face-to-face interactions when asking for help because the potential pool of respondents is much larger on Renren. If they call a specific person for help, for example, that person might be occupied at that moment, or too far away, or may not have an answer. With Renren, the chances that someone may be able to quickly help are much greater; it's commonly understood that a considerable number of users are willing to offer help both online and offline.

This understanding shared by Mainland students is made possible by their particular offline community. Although locals and Mainlanders share a campus life—attending classes, living together, and sharing common areas—interaction between the two groups is rare and superficial. Most of the time, Mainlanders tend to socialize with other Mainlanders and are reluctant to interact with local students (Chiu, Lau, & Zhang, 2014).

An immediate result of this segregation is that Mainland students tend to form a homogeneous and closed group, a cohesive campus community. There are several reasons for this. First, as sojourners in Hong Kong, they all face similar practical problems. Second, they usually live on campus or close by because it is university policy that priority should be given to nonlocal students when it comes to dormitory applications. However, while all nonlocal students can live in university dorms in the first year, those who leave the dorms after the first year tend to rent apartments near campus with other Mainlanders. Third, although geographically they come from different parts of China, Mainland students share similar intellectual and financial backgrounds. They are recruited through a special enrollment program and must take the national college examination. Those with high scores will be chosen for an interview, and if they are accepted, they have to pay a tuition fee of more than HK$ 140,000 (around US$ 18,000) per year, which is much more expensive than Mainland universities or what local Hong Kong students are paying for tuition for the same university. Accordingly, most students who come to Hong Kong to study have high test scores, are fluent in English, and have substantial financial support from family—at least, that is what they believe. This sense of a common intellectual and financial background increases their sense of belonging. As one student said:

> We [Mainland students] know our peers [other Mainland students] are 'the better ones,' so to speak. After all, we all survived the college entrance examination and the interviews. You know you're surrounded by highly competitive students. So we all respect each other.

Local students are aware of this group cohesion in Mainland students. During interviews, several local students explicitly said that they did not interact much with Mainland students because 'they [Mainland students] are very close to each other. It does not look like they need to

interact with us.' One mentioned that she would like to make friends with her Mainland roommate, but 'her life is quite different from mine. She cares too much about her GPA and spends too much time studying. She tends to hang out with other Mainland students most of the time, so there is little chance for us to chat.'

Defined Expectations and Status among Peers

Because of the closed offline network, Mainland students who post on Renren have an audience in mind and defined expectations of that audience, which is very important to them, especially when they take the time to write a long post such as those that provide detailed instructions on practical matters. One student reflected on this:

> It's very important that I know a relatively fixed audience is there. On Renren, I know my friends around me are there and will read what I write. Knowing that my post will change their opinions or make their lives easier motivates me to write more. After I post, I get 'likes' and my writings are shared by many; that makes me feel good and it improves my status among my friends. I get a sense of achievement. This is only possible on Renren. I once uploaded a long post on Renren, and within twenty-four hours it was shared forty thousand times and it had more than a hundred thousand views. I posted the same thing on Facebook, but I got three likes in one month.

Because of the closed structure of their offline network on campus, Mainland students know relatively well who is going to read their posts. As the student above described, they also believe that posts about practical offline matters will lead to real changes and will be appreciated by others, since they all have these issues in common. They know that the information they post is

immediately circulated among their offline group. This, along with frequently seeing other Mainlanders around campus, leads them to believe that posting online can lead to real changes in status in their offline community. This quick feedback loop between online activities and offline life provides motivation for them to continue sharing practical information.

Another student who was also very active in writing posts and answering other students' questions even became famous among his fellow Mainlander students. He explained why he spent so much time posting on Renren in terms of accruing social capital:

> Let me put it frankly: it's for status and power. By answering other students' questions, you show that you are smarter than others. And knowing my posts will be circulated among other Mainland students makes me feel good about myself. I enjoy being valued and being needed by others.

Students know that because both offline and online peers appreciate their information, their posts on Renren are transformed to offline status and power. In fact, those students who are active on Renren, writing widely circulated posts and answering many practical questions from the newcomers become celebrities of a sort. These Renren 'celebrities' are known by almost all Mainland students at their university and some remain famous and influential several years after their graduation. Among the students I interviewed, they all mentioned the names of those 'celebrities' and showed respect for them.

The most famous 'celebrity' student became a legendary figure who was well-known amongst almost all Mainland students. Even those who matriculated several years behind him, long after his graduation, still know his name. He continued enjoying his high status even after he had been gone from Hong Kong for several years. Once, on a trip back to Hong Kong, he lost his wallet on his way to renew his visa. Instead of calling a friend or family member, or reporting

it to the police, he chose to find a public library nearby and posted a message on Renren, saying that he needed a few hundred Hong Kong dollars right away for visa renewal. Within an hour he received several responses, and in the end someone who was working in a building nearby went to the library and lent him the money. Other than the ability to borrow money, some other 'famous' figures on Renren have been able to use their connections and influence to organize businesses and turn a profit. Their online posts have indeed been transferred into offline status and even economic capital.

Open Network and Indefinite Expectations

Unlike Mainland students, who tend to hang out exclusively with other Mainlanders, local students tend not to build a closed network with other students. This has a lot to do with many practical arrangements of university life. With ever-increasing undergraduate population (currently at around 14,000), fewer students know one another, and the student community as a whole becomes less cohesive. In addition, the number of undergraduates who take advantage of study-abroad programs has increased steadily, so fewer students physically remain on campus for all three years.[1] These trends weaken the students' sense of community. For example, although it's possible for students to establish bonds with their roommates, many of the interviewees mentioned that the exchange programs made it hard for them to build a close relationship with roommates or neighbors:

> The first semester I lived in the hall, my roommate was a year-two student. But the
> second semester, he went on an exchange program, so my new roommate was an
> exchange student from a Mainland university. They had totally different habits, and it

was hard for me to adjust to both of them and build close relationships in such a short

time.

The increasing flexibility to offer courses abroad might be shared with universities all over the world, but the universities in Hong Kong face other constraints. For practical reasons (such as housing scarcity due to limited housing space), the majority of local students do not live on campus, but stay with family. The average commute between school and home is 70 minutes one way—140 minutes round trip.[2] Many students do not go to campus unless they have classes, which greatly reduces their chances of sharing a common social life with other students.

Also, it is common for local students to maintain close relationships with high school classmates and hang out with people outside of the university community, as illustrated by this local female student:

Like others say, it is harder to find a real friendship in university [compared to high school] so I prefer to work alone and be more independent. I don't try to work with others in a group or build friendships. Compared to high school or middle school, the sense of belonging in university is much lower. There are too many people. Everyone remains friends with their high school friends. In high school, you have classes together and spend the whole day with the same group of people. We built much closer relationships. Here, we just go to different classes and different buildings. And then after you're done, you go home. You don't really have much time and energy to maintain relationships, like friendships with others. It's tiring.

Even when Mainlanders also have high school classmates in their online networks, they rarely are able to interact with them during daily life due to the constraints of university life in a

different area; thus, their daily offline network is still composed almost entirely of other Mainland students in Hong Kong. Conversely, locals, because of the physical proximity, have daily contact with their high school friends. After entering university, they may share a social life in that they go out together to parties, restaurants, and events, but very few take classes with their roommates or friends, and they spend a lot of time with people outside of the university community. All these factors taken together lead to locals having a lesser sense of belonging to the university community.[3] Consequently, the daily offline personal network of local students is heterogeneous and open, including family members, previous teachers, former classmates, acquaintances from university, and so forth. It is much more fragmented and diverse than that of Mainland students.

Indefinite Expectations and Playful Attitudes

Because their offline network is open and heterogeneous, locals do not have a finite audience in mind when they are posting online. In particular, they do not think posts detailing practical information will be interesting to their Facebook friends, and it would not have any effect on their real-life status. If a local student posted some practical information on Facebook, it would most likely be ignored because it wouldn't be useful to much of the audience.

Local students do share some practical information online such as part-time job opportunities and interview experience for job applications. However, they rarely seek this kind of information on Facebook. Instead, they go to other public forums with designated subjects such as the job board on the hkGolden discussion forum or Uwants.com, where they would find a large group with similar interests. Thus, their reluctance to use Facebook for practical

information seeking has little to do with their willingness to share, but rather with their expectations of the audience, and this expectation is related to their network structures.

Instead of sharing practical information on Facebook, local students tend to post expressive content that easily resonates with most people. [4] For them, Facebook is a venue for them to 'play and kill time.' According to one student:

> I never thought about this question [of why I use Facebook]. In general, I guess because it is good. There is no reason for me to not play with it. So I played and kept playing. Facebook is good for playing because it kills time easily. It lets you know all the gossip. Once you get the gossip, you can tease others when there is a chance.

Interestingly, almost all locals use the word 'play' when referring to their activities on Facebook, but Mainlanders all say 'use' for both Renren and Facebook. This playful attitude is very common among local students:

> Don't trust the information on Facebook. Much of it is fake. People are just playing and looking for fun. My brother, who is also a student at this university, for example, does that all the time. And my friends also do that all the time. For instance, the university confession and secret Facebook pages are popular, so they go there and write fake information, pretending to be someone else, like one of their friends, and confess to a girl. They do that just for fun. It's like practical jokes with friends.

They have this playful attitude because they do not expect posting on Facebook to result in changes to their offline status among peers.

Offline arrangements, such as practical problems faced by Mainland students and the living conditions of local students, lead to different offline network structures—namely, homogeneous and closed networks versus heterogeneous and open networks. Because of these different offline network structures, students have different expectations of online ties. Students with closed offline networks may have defined expectations, whereas those with open networks have undetermined expectations. Consequently, they interpret online activities differently. Those with strong offline networks think of their online activities as practical and leading to real change in their offline status. Those with weak offline networks think of their online activities as recreational and therefore are more playful in their online activities. The flow of this relationship is illustrated in figure 1.

<Figure 1 here>

Conclusion and Discussion

Local Hong Kong students mainly use Facebook for social information seeking and entertainment, so although they may be able to accumulate some bridging social capital, the impact is limited because many ties remained inactive. However, students from Mainland China use SNSs for practical information seeking and problem solving. They tend to use Facebook to maintain weak ties with local or international students (bridging social capital), but use Renren to connect with other Mainland students (bonding and bridging social capital). For Mainland students, SNS use increases both bonding and bridging social capital. Renren helps them bond with those with whom they have close offline ties and it increases their bridging social capital by bringing Mainland students of different majors, geographical locations, different family backgrounds, and genders together. Accepting that online activities cannot be separated from

offline life, I argue that this discrepancy in SNS use is rooted in participants' offline networks. Although all students present themselves through SNSs and simultaneously create seemingly similar ties online, those ties may be imbued with disparate meanings because participants are positioned in different offline netdoms.

The majority of existing studies found that Facebook was used mainly for social information seeking (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011), and that enacted support on SNSs was rare (Stefanone et al., 2012). However, as shown in the research above, Mainland students from China perform both social information seeking and practical information seeking, and they obtain substantial enacted support from Renren. This is also the key difference between Mainlanders and Hong Kongese. Some might attribute sharing practical information and providing enacted social supports to the cultural difference between Mainland China and Hong Kong, or to the difference between the online cultures of Renren and Facebook. For example, Qiu et al. (2013) noticed that although Renren shared many technological similarities with Facebook, the 'sharing' function was used far more often on Renren than on Facebook. The authors attributed that to the 'sharing culture' of Renren and claimed that different SNSs might have different online cultures. However, as discussed above, local students do share information online—just not on Facebook. On the other hand, Chinese students in Britain share information on Facebook as well (Jiang & de Bruijn, 2014), not only on Renren. So it has little to do with the 'sharing culture' unique to Renren as a platform. Rather, the network structures of the users, such as sojourners versus locals, provide a better explanation of this difference.

Among the multiple networks in which the users are located, physically bounded daily offline networks are essential for shaping users' online activities. For instance, a physically bounded place, like a university campus, accounts for the popularity of solving practical

problems on Renren because these types of requests require close proximity in order to be answered. Additionally, even though offline power can be acquired through cultivating online status, this transfer is only possible if there is a large overlap between online and offline communities in a bounded physical space. This echoes the insight that individuals still tend to manifest locally bounded social circles during online interactions, despite the technological affordance of transcending geographical borders and networking with people from other parts of the world (Ellison et al., 2007; Zhao & Elesh, 2008). SNS use, like other social behavior, is linked to offline networks and cannot be separated from the local rooting (Fine, 2010).

The limitation of the study emerges from the data. I am aware of the particularity of this case and am not trying to make an empirical argument that could be generalized to many other contexts. Instead, this paper serves as exploratory research that looks at the complex interplay between online activities and the offline network structures: how the interweaving of offline and online networks influences the way people understanding their online activities and the implications on behavior.

Further research can be done on who provides informational, social, and emotional support in other contexts to better understand the relationship between SNS use, social capital, and offline life. In particular, more details need to be uncovered on how other social groups with different network structures, such as Eastern European settlers in Western European countries or international students from the West studying in East Asian countries, use SNSs to better understand the relationship between culture and network structures. Examining how these other contexts influence the strategies of interactants will offer further new directions for explaining contemporary sociality in the interpretive study of social action.

Notes:

1. Before 2013, this institution, like most others in Hong Kong, operated on a three-year undergraduate curriculum.
2. Data are from internal 'First Year Experience' surveys (2008-2013) collected by the university Student Affairs Office to learn about first-year student experiences.
3. Although many Mainland students also take advantage of the study abroad programs, they tend to live on or around campus for a longer period of time, and interact less with high-school friends or family members in offline life.
4. Political topics might be an exception, but people have different political opinions. Students realize that discussing political issues can in fact lead to more dissent instead of resonance.

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Table 1. Varieties of and differences in SNS engagement

Type of Engagement	SNS	
	Facebook	Renren
Pastime	Yes	Yes
Broadcasting	Often	Less often
Self-expression	Individualizing self-presentation, focusing on unique personal experience	Yes, but focusing more on common experience shared by many others
Practical information seeking (collecting information relevant to daily needs)	Rare	Often
Social information seeking (collecting information relevant to the daily lives of close friends)	Yes	Yes
Meaning attached to SNS use	Playful	Both recreational and instrumental

Figure 1. Offline Network and Online Activities

Homogeneous and closed	←	Offline network	→	Heterogeneous and open
		↓		
Defined and finite	←	Expectations of online ties	→	Indefinite and uncertain
		↓		
Practical and instrumental	←	Meanings of online activities	→	Playful and expressive
		↓		
Bonding and bridging social capital	←	Social capital accrual	→	Weak bridging social capital