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ASSESSING THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SOCIAL IDENTITY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE USAGE AND BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL

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ABSTRACT

The advance of web technology has allowed the different segments of society to have access to Social Networking Sites like Facebook. This study examines the relationship between social networking site (SNS) usage, social identity and bridging social capital for the student community. Data for the study were collected during May 2014 by using a questionnaire completed by the MBA students at Cochin University of Science and Technology. The study found that the social networking site usage significantly related to bridging social capital. Findings suggest that social identity acts as a partial mediator on the relationship between social networking site usage and bridging social capital. The study suggest that the relationship between social networking site usage and bridging social capital studied in western countries can be very well applied to Indian context as well.

KEYWORDS

Social Networking Site usage, Facebook, Bridging social capital, Social identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social capital has become an important object of research in the last few years as it provide a new look on social networks and beneficial outcomes. A large body of research work has been produced, and there has been a growing amount of empirical studies investigating the effects of social capital (Matin van der Gaag, 2002). Social capital broadly refers to the resources that drive from the relationships among people in varying social contexts (Coleman J. , 1988). The idea of social capital has been explained in the social science research during the last 15 years especially with the introduction of network theory of social capital which depicted how and why relational networks are important for explaining various individual and family outcomes. When we connect the network theory of social capital (Lin N. , 1999) with the social networking site like Facebook, it is interesting to have a knowledge regarding whether or not these sites affect the relations among members. Social capital was considered to be originated in communities and was developed by organizing membership groups and training programmes. But now, social capital development is studied in online context as the social networking sites provide a platform for the members to come together online and participate in any form of social interaction and communication. Moreover, as the most popular social networking site in India, Facebook is now available to people all over the world with low cost, the scope of social capital building through social networking site is becoming popular.

Facebook is one of the most famous social networking sites all over the world which has connected the world very close and becomes the global phenomenon for the last many few years (Foregger, 2008). The social networking sites have impressed a lot of teenagers and particularly university students for getting information and get connected with friends and relatives. Using data collected from students, this study attempts to examine the relationship between social networking site usage and bridging social capital in Indian context. The purpose of this study are twofold: first, it examines the relationship between social networking site usage and bridging social capital; second, it analyzes the mediating role of social identity on the relationship between social networking site usage and bridging social capital. Even though there are a number of studies conducted on the relationship between social networking site use and social capital in western countries, there lacks studies in Indian context on social capital through social networking sites. Thus, the research questions under this study are whether the relationship between social networking site use and social capital that we seen in western context can be applicable to Indian context or not. The second research question is regarding the mediating role of social identity on the relationship between social networking site usage and bridging social capital of members of Facebook. Thus, this study aims to unearth social networking site usage trend in developing country like India because most of the research has been carried out in developed countries. As Indians are also becoming very active in social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, a study is much needed to know the relationship building or social capital development among social networking site members from India. This study contributes to the literature by relating variables that affect the relationship between social networking site usage and social capital.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Bridging Social Capital

Social capital is a multi –dimensional construct, and theorists have defined the term from different perspective (Portes, 1998). There are three distinguish formulations of the concept of social capital by Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam. According to Coleman (1988), social capital is defined by its function; he also added that *“it is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, its two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain action of actors- whether persons of corporate actors- within the structure”*. Social capital is defined as *“the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition”* by Bourdieu (1986). But Putnam concentrated on collective level of social capital. Putnam (1993) defined social capital as *“features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks”*. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) defined social capital as *“the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrues to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition*. Burt and Lin (1999) were the first to link the network theory to the concept of social capital. Burt (2001) highlights the importance of networks within and between groups and suggests that networks do not simply imply the number of connections people have, but those that develop into social capital. That is, people who have well-connected networks have advantages in forming social capital. The network theory of social capital also deals with the same phenomenon i.e., higher the connection or network one possess, greater will be his social capital.

Social capital has aspects on both individual and collective level. The research on social capital has focused their views either as a property of individual and their social networks or as a feature of the community and the degree of civic engagement and trust among its members. Individual level of social capital refers to micro and the collective level of social capital refers to the macro. Some authors (Coleman, 1990; Putnam R. , 1995) developed theories specifically on the

macro level, in which the social capital is taken as a collectively produced and owned entity, and the benefit of which is enjoyed by the whole community. Collective social capital is associated with outcomes such as poverty reduction, health and well-being and the economic development (Grootaert, 2004). Other scholars in the field of social capital studies (Bourdieu P. , 1986; Lin N. , 1999; Erickson, 1996) concentrated on micro level where the social capital is considered as an additional pool of resources for the individual. Individual social capital is defined as the collection of resources owned by the members of an individual's personal social network, which may become available to the individual as a result of the history of these relationships (Snijders & Martin Van Der Gaag, 2005). Individual level social capital allows individuals to capitalize on their personal relationships and at the collective level the major focus is on collective actions (Putnam R. , 2000).

Putnam (2000) classified individual level social capital into two; bridging social capital and bonding social capital. Bonding social capital reflects the strong ties with family and close friends, who might be in a position to provide emotional support or access to scarce resources. Bridging social capital is linked to "weak-ties" (Granovetter M. , 1982), loose connections that may provide useful information or new perspectives for one another, but typically not emotional support. According to Putnam, "bridging" social capital is inclusive. It occurs when individuals from different backgrounds make connections between social networks. By contrast, "bonding" can be exclusive. It occurs when strongly tied individuals, such as family and close friends, provide emotional or substantive support for one another. The individuals with bonding social capital have little diversity in their backgrounds but have stronger personal connections. Bridging social capital involves the weaker ties we have with work colleagues and contacts, acquaintances and friends of friends. The bridging social capital measures were outward looking, contact with a broader range of people, a view of oneself as part of a broader group and diffuse reciprocity with a broader community (Wellman, 2001). Burt (1992) highlights the opportunities and benefits arising from bridging effects between relationships in the network, which are characterized by weak ties.

2.2 Social Networking Site Usage

Social networking sites is defined as "the web based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Boyd, 2007). Online social networking sites can be used for a number of purposes, but three primary roles are considered to be as common to all the sites. First, online social networks are used to maintain and strengthen existing social ties, or make new social connections. Second, online social networks are used by each member to upload his or her own content. Third, online social networks are used to find new, interesting content by filtering, recommending, and organizing the content uploaded by users (Mislove, 2009).

A study conducted by Yadav (2012) among youngsters demonstrated that the youngster's attitude towards virtual social networks and subsequent behavioural intentions are significantly influenced by Perceived hedonic benefits, information orientation and social pressure. Madhusudhan (2012) conducted a study among the research scholars of Delhi University and indicated that demographic characteristics such as gender and educational background have a strong influence on social networking site usage. Additionally, people with more experience and autonomy of use are more likely to be users of such sites. Helliwell (2013) compared the real-time and on-line social networks as sources of subjective well-being and found out that the size of online networks is largely uncorrelated with subjective well-being. Albert (2012) found out that there is no significant relation between Intensity of Facebook usage and life satisfaction.

Ellison et al (2007) surveyed a sample of college students and found that their intensity of Facebook use is positively related to both bridging and bonding relationships. In a similar study of Texas students, researchers also found that Facebook use was positively associated with characteristics of social capital. Students who used Facebook more often reported higher levels of trust, and participated more in civic and volunteer groups (Sebastian Valenzuela, 2009). Ahn (2012) studied the intensity of social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace and its relation to bridging and bonding social capital and found out that MySpace shows higher bonding social capital while Facebook shows higher bridging social capital. Hargittai (2008) suggests that the use of such sites is not randomly distributed across a group of highly wired users. A person's gender, race and ethnicity, and parental educational background are all associated with use. But not all social networking sites use is positive, people can make hurtful comments about others through these sites, individuals can lose their jobs when they post inappropriate content, and companies can invade user's privacy in their efforts to market products and services using data from social networking sites (Charles Steinfield., 2012). The research on social networking site usage suggested that the provision of the actual identity information and the information disclosures on social networking sites are key to their successful functioning, facilitating relationship initiation, development, and maintenance that permits the establishment of bridging and bonding social capital (Steinfeld C. E., 2012).

Charles Steinfield et al (2008) investigated the relationship between Facebook usage, psychological well-being and bridging social capital and found out that self-esteem moderates the relationship between Facebook usage and bridging social capital in such a way that lower the self-esteem, the more will be the Facebook usage in terms of bridging social capital. Intensive Facebook usage relates to bonding social capital and it has a moderate relationship with the bridging social capital and users who posted often and engaged in directed communication with friends reported higher bonding social capital (Burke, 2010). Brooks (2011) studied the relationship between socio-economic status and three types of social capital such as network size, bonding social capital and bridging social capital and found out that socio-economic status has a significant influence on maintaining existing network but it has not much importance to build new networks. Wenhong Chen (2013) examined how the social capital is related to Internet adoption and use and found out that the average resources accessible via bridging social capital are not significantly related to Internet access and online communication; the bridging social capital is positively associated with internet access, has a significant relationship with general internet use, and is negatively associated with online communication with daily contacts. Some theorist argued that online interaction can substitute or replace the personal communication, and even mitigate the loss of time which is spent online. The studies conducted at organizational level also show that there is an association between SNS use and social capital. Charles Steinfield (2009) explored the relationship between various dimensions of organizational social capital and the use of an internal social network site (SNS). The research in online social capital supports the notion that social networking sites can contribute to the formation and maintenance of both bridging and bonding social capital.

H1: Social networking site usage is positively related to bridging social capital.

2.3 Social Identity

Social identity theory examines the group relations based on one's group membership (Brown R. , 2000). Social identities help individuals make a sense of who they are, how they construe their connections to other people around them, and how they should act in social situations (Brewer, 1991). Roderick M Kramer (2006) developed a framework for conceptualizing how individuals' psychological identification with a collective enhances their willingness to engage in behaviours that contribute to the creation and maintenance of social capital. Dholokia et al (2004) relates social identity to the main feature of the individual's identification with the community in the sense that the member views himself as a member of that community. The social identification can be measured in two dimensions – Cognitive identification and affective identification. The cognitive identification refers to the self categorization aspect of identification whereas the affective identification concerned with the emotional and evaluative aspect of identification. The cognitive dimension is characterized by those resources providing shared vision or values. It includes collective goals, common representations and system of meaning and aspiration of group members. And the affective dimension of social capital refers to the sense of emotional involvement with the group, which includes identification with, involvement in, and emotional attachment to the group. Barker (2009) had identified one of motives for social networking site usage as social identification. As networks can provide social support, self-esteem, identity and perceptions of control (Cohen, 1985; Brown G. &. , 1978), this study predict that online social networks such as Facebook, also relate to social identity of the members. As literature has already established the predictive capacity of networks on the formation of social identity, there is a scope for the formation of social identity in online social network context as well.

H2: Social networking site usage is positively related to the social identity of the members.

H3: Social Identity is positively related to the bridging social capital.

2.4 Social Networking Sites Usage, Social Identity and Bridging Social Capital

Studies found out that greater use of social networking sites, especially Facebook is associated with greater perceived amounts of bridging and bonding social capital (Ellison Nicole, 2007; Steinfield C. E., 2008). Donath and boyd (2004) proposed that Social networking sites use influence the bridging social capital, as SNSs enabled users to maintain and enlarge more diverse social networks to draw resources. As we hypothesized earlier, social networking site usage will enhance the social identity of the members. Social networking site usage that enhance the social identity of the members are likely to result in bridging social

capital building. There are studies which assessed the mediating role of social identity in organizational context. For example, Kark (2003) have studied the mediating role of social identity on the relationship between transformational leadership and empowerment. Even though there are studies in organizational context to establish the mediating role of social identity, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that social identity mediates the relationship between social networking site usage and bridging social capital.

H4: Social identity mediates the relationship between social networking site usage and bridging social capital.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Data

The data used in this study were collected from MBA students from CUSAT who are regular users of Facebook. A structured questionnaire was distributed among the students. The data was collected from May 13 to June 10, 2014. A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed to the respondents, out of that 178 collected back. The response rate was 89%.

3.2 Measurement

Social Networking Site usage was assessed with Facebook Intensity Scale (Ellison Nicole, 2007). The Facebook intensity scale includes a total of 8 items like "Facebook is part of my everyday activity", "I am proud to tell people I'm on Facebook", "Facebook has become part of my daily routine" etc. All the items were measured on a 5 point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree).The reliability analysis of the scale to the data showed a cronbach's Alpha=.754

Bridging social capital was measured using items from William's Internet Social Capital Scale (2006). The items includes " Interacting with people on Facebook makes me feel like part of a greater community", "Interacting with people on Facebook gives me new people to talk to" etc. Participants responded to the statements on a 5 point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree). The reliability analysis of the items were done and the results indicated a cronbach's Alpha=.756.

Social Identity was measured with scale by Pinho (2013). The scale consists of 9 statements in total; 3 for cognitive dimension and six items for affective dimension measurement. The respondents were asked to report their agreement to each statement on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree. The social identity scale showed a cronbach's alpha value 0.748.

Demographic variables included respondent's age (mean 22.61, SD=1.492) and gender.

3.3 Data Analysis Strategy

To examine the relationship between Social networking site usage and other two variables namely social identity and bridging social capital, correlation analyses with the variables were performed. After the correlation analysis, social identity was tested on the basis of mediation analysis as suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). A Sobel test was also done to validate the mediation analysis.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

Before testing the hypotheses, a descriptive analysis was performed to analyze the general pattern of respondent's Social networking site usage and social demographic variables. Approximately, 35% (N=63) respondents reported that they were spending 30 minutes to 1 hour daily on Facebook and 30% (N=54) were reported less than 30 minutes on Facebook. And 143 students (80%) agreed that they have more than 200 friends on Facebook. The respondents were, on average 22.61 years old (SD= 1.492) and comprised of 51% women (N=90) and 49% men (N=88).

TABLE 1: DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Variables	Item	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	88	49.4
	Female	90	50.6
Age (years)	20	7	3.9
	21	39	21.9
	22	47	26.4
	23	36	20.2
	24	29	16.3
	25	15	8.4
	26	2	1.1
	27	3	1.7

4.2 Hypotheses Testing

The means, standard deviations, and correlations between all variables are given in the Table2. Hypothesis 1, that suggested a positive relationship between social networking site usage and bridging social capital found support. Hypothesis 2, which suggested that social networking site usage positively related to social identity also find supported. Hypothesis 3, which suggested a positive relationship between social identity and bridging social capital, was also found to be support. All these three variables are significantly and positively related to each other.

TABLE 2: MEAN, STANDARD DEVIATION AND CORRELATION BETWEEN VARIABLES

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1 SNS Usage	3.1098	.60531	(.754)	.338**	.486**
2 Social Identity	3.0993	.63202		(.748)	.429**
3 Bridging Social Capital	3.2374	.67427			(.756)

N = 178. *** = p < 0.001. ** = p < 0.01. * = p < 0.05. Standardized Cronbach alphas are in parentheses along the diagonal.

Hypotheses 4, which suggested that the relationship between social networking site usage and bridging social capital would be mediated by members social identity, was tested by regression as shown in the table 3. The relationship between dependent variable and independent variable, social networking site usage and mediator, social identity was tested on the basis of the causal chain model suggested by Baron R M & Kenny (1986). It was observed that social networking site usage and social identity affect bridging social capital positively. This shows that the relationship between social networking site usage and bridging social capital is indeed mediated by social identity. Kenny (1986), Sobel test was conducted to test whether the mediator, social identity, carried the influence of independent variable, social networking site usage, to the dependent variable, bridging social capital.

The following table present the four steps for mediation analysis as suggested by Baron R M & Kenny (1986). The first, second and third step which suggested that the independent variable(X) should influence the dependent variable(Y), X should influence the mediating variable (M) and the Mediating variable (M) should significantly influence the dependent variable (Y). These three steps were done with a simple regression. The regression result of the influence of social networking site usage on bridging social capital shows that social networking site usage did contribute significantly (B= .49, P value=.000) to bridging social capital with a R² value .24; Social networking site usage to social identity also contributed significantly (B= .33, P value=.000) with R² 0.11 and the third step, influence of social identity on bridging social capital also found significant (B= .43, P value=.000) with R² 0.18. The fourth step of Baron R M & Kenny (1986) mediation analysis suggested doing a multiple regression by keeping both social networking site usage and social identity as independent variables and bridging social capital as dependent variable. From the table it is clear that when applied for multiple regression as stated above, the overall adjusted R² has increased to 0.32, suggesting that the present model explains 32% variation on dependent variable, bridging social capital; the strength of the relationship between social

networking site usage and bridging social capital has decreased from 0.49 to 0.39, suggesting a partial mediation since the relationship between X and Y not nullified with the effect of Social identity. After the mediation analysis, a Sobel test was also done to validate the mediation effect of Social identity. Sobel test statistics was 3.20528071 and P value 0.00134931. Thus, as per Sobel test also the hypothesis 4, which suggested the mediating role of social identity on the relationship between social networking site usage and bridging social capital also found support.

TABLE 3: LINEAR REGRESSION RESULTS

Dependent variable	Step	Independent variable	Beta	R ²	Adjusted R ²	P value
Bridging social capital	1	SNS Usage	0.49	0.24		0.000***
Social Identity	2	SNS Usage	0.33	0.11		0.000***
Bridging social capital	3	Social Identity	0.43	0.18		0.000***
Bridging social capital	4	SNS Usage	0.39		0.32	0.001***
		Social Identity	0.33			0.000***

*** = $p < 0.001$ and ** = $p < 0.01$.

5. DISCUSSION

The main goal of this study was to investigate whether social networking site usage significantly influence bridging social capital among Indian or not. This study contributes to the understanding of social capital through social networking sites in Indian context. Furthermore, this study examined the mediating role of social identity on the relationship between social networking site usage and bridging social capital. Our first research question asked was whether the relationship between social networking site usage and social capital established in western countries can be applicable to Indian context or not. Our findings suggest that the social networking site usage is positively and significantly correlated with bridging social capital. The second research question was with regard to the social identity as a mediator of social networking site usage and bridging social capital. The study results show that social identity partially mediate the relationship between social networking site usage and bridging social capital. Considering the significant influence of social networking site usage on social capital, we believe that Social networking sites are influencing the lives of Indians also just like the western countries. It can be further added that irrespective of the cultural differences, Facebook is contributing to the social capital of members from India significantly when compared to western countries.

6. LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study opens a wide area of research on online social capital among Indians for future work but it has its limitations. A significant limitation of this study was the nature of the sample. Even though the most of the users of social networking site usage comes under the age group of 18-24 range, the generality of the results obtained needs to be verified with research in other student community that a heterogeneous mix of students. More research should be done to see whether the groups other than the studied group are also influenced by social networking sites such as Facebook for their social capital building or not. Another limitation was with regard to the site selected, in order to test bridging social capital among users, the relationship that we found between social networking site usage and social capital in Facebook should be looked with other social networking sites like Twitter, LinkedIn etc also. Additionally, the less studied cognitive and affective dimension of social capital in online context should be further analyzed among Indians.

7. CONCLUSION

Since the number of users of social networking sites such as Facebook is increasing day by day, this study confirms the importance of social networking site usage on social capital building among student community. As social networking sites are closely integrated into the daily lives of Indians as well, we examined the relationship between social networking site usage and bridging social capital among Indian. This study is an attempt to contribute to the existing literature on social networking site usage, social identity and bridging social capital. It was found that social identity partially mediated the relationship between social networking site usage and bridging social capital. Thus, it can be concluded that social networking site usage influences the social identity of the members of these sites and it will significantly influences the social capital of the members.

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