

Weibo and Interpersonal Relationships: An Analysis of How New Media Affects Users' Socialisation

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Abstract: With the advent of social change and technological advancement, new media social networking platforms are flourishing, and Weibo is one of the most prominent among them. As one of the largest new media social networking platforms in China, Weibo has significantly impacted users' social lives. It is possible to see new media's impact on people's socialisation and interpersonal relationships. This paper analyses a range of existing literature on Weibo, social networking sites, and relationships. It demonstrates that the Weibo platform has had a range of impacts in terms of social interaction, social circles, discussion of current affairs, and other aspects. The study also provides some recommendations for both users and the platform. The impact of Weibo on people's social and interpersonal relationships has been both positive and negative. On the one hand, it has helped people make friends, discuss and express their views in new ways, disseminate important information, and help people escape isolation. On the other hand, it inevitably poses some risks in terms of social anxiety and privacy. For instance, users may feel overwhelmed by the amount of information available on Weibo or may be exposed to cyberbullying or harassment. More extensive study will be required in the future to better assess the impact of Weibo and other comparable new media platforms for social. This research focuses on understanding how these platforms affect different groups of users and how they can be used to promote positive social interactions while minimising negative ones.

Keywords: Weibo, social media platforms, socialisation

1. Introduction

New media has become an important part of modern lives. As the internet has given rise to a series of new social media platforms, social networking sites, also known as SNSs, have emerged as the most widely used and rapid method of exchanging information and engaging in personal social interactions [1]. SNSs are seen as one type of new media that allows for that sharing content created by users, self-expression and social interaction, and they have become an integral element of young people's daily life [2].

There have been studies on social media and SNSs' influence on interpersonal social relationships. Some studies show that more lonely people or persons who are socially inept in real life in real life can fulfil their needs of expression by having online communication on social media platforms, as these computer-mediated platforms are anonymous and physically isolated [3]. Although physical

interaction or conversation is required for the most intensive social interactions to remain intact [4], interactive media like SNSs are still favoured for maintaining relationships [5].

Weibo is also one of the social networking sites with millions of users. There are some studies on Weibo itself as a platform. As an SNS that has held more than 56.5% of the market in China for microblogging since 2011, Weibo has become a social platform similar to Twitter in China and can quickly disseminate important information and reflect people's views on certain events [6]. Unlike some SNSs that emphasise the sending of instant text messages, Weibo allow for a degree of confidentiality in online communication [7]. Users are not required to disclose real-life personal information in order to use Weibo, as opinion expression and information sharing take priority over direct social involvement [8], so the posted content will get more attention than the user's identity. According to the 2020 Weibo User Development Report released by the Weibo official platform [9], Weibo user groups continue to show a pattern of youthfulness, with nearly 80% of users being post-90s and post-00s, and female users outnumber male users. Weibo users of various ages exhibit clear generational differences in terms of life consumption and interests. For instance, the 2020 Weibo User Development Report [9] shows that popular phrases are used by 63.8% of Gen Z, more than the Post 80s (12.5%) and Post 90s (52%). Also, on Weibo, users can follow a wide variety of content, such as current news, entertainment, and culture. The platform will also selectively recommend content of interest to users. Many people use Weibo to find people with similar interests, which is easier than making friends with similar interests in real life, especially for niche hobbies and subculture enthusiasts. At the same time, for users who are more interested in content and expression than in social networking and personal identity, Weibo as an SNS is a much better platform than SNSs that focus on one-to-one communication [10].

However, there is still a lack of an overview of how new media affects users' socialisation with respect to the platform Weibo. In this article, the effect of new media will be explored by analysing existing studies and data related to Weibo in order to see how such new media, like social platforms, has influenced users' status of socialising. This article will first analyse the specific case study relating to the Weibo platform and aim to find some characteristics of influence. Next, influence will be analysed from several different angles. Finally, this article will make some suggestions for different perspectives in order to mitigate some of the negative effects.

2. Analysis of Influence

As one of the major social networking sites in China, Weibo impacts the social lives of its users. In the following, this article will specifically address the impact of Weibo as a social networking site on its users' socialisation status in several different ways, and in doing so, this will also demonstrate some of how new media social platforms are impacting the social lives of their users, both positively and negatively.

2.1. Changes in Social Behaviour

Social media platforms like Weibo can change the way users behave socially, such as online chats, posing articles and sharing pictures. These ways of socially behaving are all different from what they are in real life, and such differences may make it easier for users to communicate and interact with others and express their feelings and attitudes on these platforms. In China, as 4G networks have grown rapidly and mobile devices have been more widely used, the general public is able to swiftly engage in a series of public opinion information presented by others. Weibo is one of the platforms which can help users to participate in new ways of socially behaving, like expressing their feelings and communicating with others on the multimedia internet. According to one paper focusing on analysing the interests and behaviours of users of Weibo [11], the social behaviours of Weibo users

mainly concentrating concentrate in on following accounts, retweeting posts and commenting on activities.

As well as influencing people's social behaviour, Weibo itself has changed over the decade since its creation. As Weibo's survival and development strategy has changed, the mainstream content of Weibo has also continued to change, from a social media network that facilitates the exchange of information to a marketable platform to a platform that focuses on entertainment content and socialising. To some extent, this change has also affected what users communicate and post [12]. Social platforms and users will interact with each other.

However, such changes in ways of behaving may not always be beneficial. Harwit [13] claims that, as users of Weibo tend to spend longer on digital devices, they are getting more isolating and atomising. He believes that they fail to form the social bonds that may bind opposition teams during crises [13]. What is more, Weibo-based social behaviours are not real-time face-to-face interactions and are divorced from reality, and interpersonal relationships constructed entirely on the basis of microblogs are relatively fragile compared to traditional, real-life social relationships [14]. This may not actually fulfil many users' needs for strong social connections and may also bring some anxiety towards users.

2.2. Increase Social Interactions

As mentioned above, expressing feelings and attitudes becomes easier on social networking sites, so social interactions may also increase. Users can engage in more frequent social interactions, such as liking, commenting, and sharing on Weibo. Such engagements enable users to express their opinions and emotions and build connections with others. This effect of increased social connections is especially obvious for some individuals who may have trouble connecting with others in person. In general, people experiencing loneliness tend to favour online social interactions over in-person contact [15], so some people who have limited socialisation in real life are more likely to benefit from online interactions and activities. Individuals exhibiting elevated levels of social isolation, insufficient external social support, and poor social interaction skills are more inclined to utilize Weibo [10]. This enhanced social interaction is reflected in more communication and sharing on the platform and in users' self-disclosure on the Weibo platform. Self-disclosure refers to the act of sharing information about oneself with others [16]. Here, it means sharing with other users of Weibo. It is necessary to have such self-disclosure to have social interactions and then build strong interpersonal connections with others. Chen and other researchers [17] analysed the situation of self-disclosure on Weibo based on an evaluation model which includes textual data, personal profiles, and SNS profile photos as the index. They found that on the Weibo profile pages, people with significant attachment anxiety tend to withhold more personal information and build connections with others, while users with high levels of attachment avoidance would show lower disclosure of personal information.

However, disclosing more private information may also result in jeopardising personal privacy, as social networking platforms may not always fully protect personal information, or the information may be exploited by unscrupulous individuals.

2.3. Expanding Social Circles

When social interactions increase, accordingly, users tend to reveal more people they did not know before on Weibo. In this way, users can expand their social circles, meet new people and share interests and experiences. Also, Weibo has a special function that can recommend some relevant content on the platform to users based on the users' different preferences and interests. This makes it easier for users to find like-minded people and make deeper connections. The study carried out by

Sun [14] showed that the expansion of social circles on Weibo has two types: weak bonding and strong bonding. The results of interviews in Sun's study also show that Weibo can expand social circles and help users know about more people. The maintenance of weak bonding facilitated by Weibo mainly refers to the fact that users already know each other, but the degree of familiarity is low, and the relationship between the two can be maintained through microblogging to avoid its dilution and fading. On the other hand, strong bonding generally exists between nodes with similar age, gender, occupation, cultural level, educational background, and income status. There are also some groups of people who gather together because of some strong interests and maintain a fervent interest in a certain topic and a desire to discuss it continuously. Football fans are a notable case. Another reflection of expanding social circles by Weibo is the support towards people with HIV and AIDs from Weibo. One study focusing on perceived online social support from Weibo shows that patients with these diseases receive much more support and care from their close friends on Weibo than from offline [18]. On some levels, the expanded social circle actually provides more support and attention to these patients, and patients are more likely to have a higher level of well-being in this way.

2.4. Faster Information Dissemination and Discussion

As a social network site with a high number of users, users on Weibo can access a range of information, share it and disseminate it faster. This allows users to learn more quickly about what is going on with friends and family, as well as news and events from around the globe. Weibo can be a platform that reflects users' opinions and thoughts on some serious events and topics, for instance, nuclear wastewater discharged by Japan and the sudden spread of the Covid-19 virus [19,20]. Opinions and discussions towards these two topics can both be found on Weibo. For the wastewater discharging event, worries and positive trends are seen on Weibo. The public has been able to have a logical conversation about the repercussions of this occurrence due to the spread of important information and the popularisation of knowledge, featuring a focus on positive aspects such as protecting the environment and sustainable development [19]. In the case of Covid-19, the number of Covid-19-related microblogs in the Wuhan area appeared to be positively correlated with the number of cases officially recorded in Wuhan at the beginning of the outbreak. The subject of discussion also shifted, from the relationship between the virus and seafood markets to potential modes of interpersonal transmission. Overall, this study on Covid-19 found a wide variety of user responses to the material, with some users showing a desire to undertake protective behaviour while others downplaying the risks [20].

Not to be forgotten is the fact that users of various platforms' distribution and debate of a certain event reflect the user demographics of those platforms, which can also be seen as a representation of one of these social networking sites' key impacts. The same applies to Weibo. In one study comparing reposting behaviours between two similar social networking platforms, Twitter and Weibo [6], Weibo user-generated content on extreme smog weather in China was compared with prior data concerning a weather event on Twitter. The findings reveal both similarities as well as distinctions between these two social networking sites in terms of reposting behaviour patterns and post content features. Compared with Twitter, on Weibo, most of the posts that were retweeted were informational, such as methods to deal with extreme situations, real-time weather updates and other useful information. There was consistency between informational, emotional and humorous retweets in the time series of Weibo. The Weibo sample also had lower frequencies of hilarious reposts.

2.5. Increasing Anxiety and Personal Privacy Risks

Unlike the previously mentioned impacts, which are neutral or have both benefits and harms, the two major impacts in this section are both completely negative. New media social networking sites like Weibo may also increase users' social anxiety, for example, because of concerns that their posts are not getting enough attention or likes. Here, such anxiety from Weibo is the social and psychological reaction of the users towards unmanageable or inescapable risks while using Weibo. This may cause users to be overly concerned about their performance on social platforms and affect their emotional states in real life. On Weibo, there are four major categories of anxiety: social, written form, technical, and security-related anxiety [21]. Interviews in Li and Lin's study show that different types of anxiety have different causes [21], and the main source of social anxiety is that users of Weibo are afraid of receiving negative comments or having no feedback. Also, some self-efficacy beliefs also lead to anxiety during using Weibo [22]. Users' words show that having low self-efficacy and composing posts would cause Weibo posting anxiety connected to technology and writing.

Another hidden danger posed by social networking sites is the leakage of personal privacy, which is also one of the sources of safety anxiety [21]. The misuse of private data gained online can cause a variety of privacy problems and fears, including fraud and discrimination [23], so sharing personal social information, such as location-based information, may also endanger users. Such risks are common to all social networking platforms. Plenty of discussions on Weibo have shown how extraordinary social and technical advancements have also called into question the meaning and limitations of privacy in modern China, and people are having thoughts and discussions about this [24]. The Weibo platform side has also enhanced posting privacy protection since 2013 in order to reduce users' anxiety.

3. Suggestions

The impact of Weibo has been laid out above, and this includes some negative impacts as well. In order to ameliorate the negative effects and outcomes of these influences and achieve better use of some impacts, here are some suggestions.

For users, anxiety problems and privacy issues are required to be solved. Unlike more private platforms like WeChat, which focuses on one-to-one acquaintance socialisation, Weibo focuses on weaker connection socialisation, mostly one-way communication and Weibo users following one another based on shared interests. As a result, Weibo privacy breaches are becoming more common [25]. Weibo users have less reservation while making comments as their accounts are not that strongly connected to themselves. Privacy of social media could influence users' self-construction and, as a result, indirectly influence what users would pose. Users need to be more aware of their privacy and security and refrain from mentioning their private information in their posts to prevent possible incidents of information theft and scams.

Speaking of users' anxiety, it is mainly from users' worries about the content they post. In the Weibo social network, everyone's network circle, friends and relatives are all quantitatively determined by a cold number; people compare each other for the number of followers but do not care about what kind of face is hidden behind a fan; the circle is a symbolic relationship built by the number of followers, retweets, fans, and other numerical contents, and the individual's social status and discourse influence is reduced to the competition of these numerical relationships. Users worry too much about their own content and whether they can get feedback, ignoring their own real experiences and feelings. This is a manifestation and characteristic of a mediatised society, in which the new media intervene in and even replace the interactions between people and people and people and society, making such interactions devoid of intimacy [14]. This, in turn, will inevitably intensify the individual's dependence on the media in order to obtain compensation for the lack of psychology.

Users need to examine and reflect on the positive and negative effects of the development of Weibo platforms without overindulging in them. Interactions with others should be a combination of online and offline, choosing appropriate communication methods to build stronger relationships and reduce anxiety.

For the platform regulators, they have a greater responsibility to run and maintain the platform well, as well as to make it bring more positive influence. Weibo needs to strengthen the regulation of content to avoid the spread of false information. In recent years in China, the trustworthiness of platforms like Weibo has largely grown to a level never before seen, and an increasing number of individuals opt to share their ideas on Weibo in order to seek assistance and support from others [25]. Social networking sites like Weibo have become important platforms for citizens to express their opinions. Under the influence and voice of many users, social media has become a direct or indirect force for modifying laws and policies [20]. Such a significant reach means that Weibo can better play a positive role. For instance, perceived online social support from social media has been proven to be important in promoting the health and life quality of patients with some diseases like AIDS [18]. Social media platforms should be more concerned about people with health issues and recommending more appropriate peers and potential friends to communicate with. To minimise possible risks of diseases, preventative agencies and volunteers can utilise the reach of the Weibo platform for advocacy and education. At the same time, user privacy should be protected, and possible unprovoked attacks and victimisation on platforms should be stopped in a timely manner.

On the other hand, for the development of the Weibo platform, the recommendation and suggestion system of Weibo can also be improved with more efficiency by analysing different tweeting behavioural factors, such as retweeting behaviours and tweeting efficiency. In this way, the efficiency of information dissemination can also be increased [11]. Under such circumstances, the influence of Weibo and other similar platforms on information dissemination should be considered more seriously. This is an inevitable result of the development of social media combined with the political environment in mainland China. More effective and responsive management of the platform is needed in order to help the platform grow better and also protect user privacy.

The relevant government departments also have certain responsibilities for Weibo platform management and health development. Users can gain more autonomy by actively participating in social discussions on Weibo, while the government is able to solve social problems in a timely manner by using feedback from posts on Weibo. Overall, Weibo has helped and enabled the Chinese government and people to monitor and collaborate with each other on different aspects of society, and together they have built a more vibrant society [26]. Weibo's special role here means that the government can make better use of Weibo to understand people's views and needs. At the same time, governments can work with the platform to set up laws and regulations to protect people's privacy and freedom of expression. Government agencies and departments should actively open Weibo accounts to interact with the public and improve the transparency and credibility of government information. At the same time, new technologies such as 5G can be used to promote diversified government services and meet the diversified needs of the public. The government also needs to strengthen the supervision of government microblogs to prevent false, misleading or harmful information and work with the platforms to protect users' privacy and information.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, Weibo, as a new media social networking site, has influenced users' social lives in different ways. It has changed users' social behaviours from traditional media to online social behaviours, increased social interactions and expanded social circles for some users, and provided faster information dissemination and more discussion for some social events and topics. Not all of the impacts are positive, and there are also negative impacts of Weibo as a socialising platform, such

as a higher level of anxiety during socialising and a higher level of risks towards personal privacy. This article also provides some suggestions for platforms and users to help platforms grow better and users use them more comfortably and safely. The development and current state of the Weibo platform is also summarised in this article. This can be an avenue to inform readers about the Weibo platform and the new media approach to socialising that it represents, as well as to understand how such a platform has brought both advantages and disadvantages to people's social lives.

However, there are some limitations to this article. It examines the development of Weibo in recent years and does not mention the early days of Weibo, nor does it go into detail about the development of microblogging and the impact of the platform's development and transformation. Also, the article is limited in the literature and may not provide a complete picture of the impact of Weibo. As a social networking site with a very large number of users, the impact of Weibo can hardly be summarised in a few different points. In order to study the impact of this platform on people's social lives, and thus the impact of other new media platforms on the social lives of users, it is necessary to study the impact of Weibo from each individual's perspective and to conduct studies that are more focused on the details of the individual.

In the future, more detailed qualitative research will need to be conducted on Weibo users and other need-to-know social platform users, taking into account the trends and current state of the platform's development. The nature and focus of social platforms will inevitably change as society develops and public opinion shifts and more research is needed to explore the implications of these shifts and impacts to ensure that people can use social media platforms better and that the platforms themselves can have a positive impact.

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