Social Media's Effects on the Citizens during the Covid Lockdown in Shanghai

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Abstract. This research paper examines how the use of content platforms such as social media, influenced citizens during the lockdown in Shanghai. Since social media were the channels that could connect people who were unable to go out, studying the properties and default settings of social media in this particular situation is useful to better understand the roles social media play in society. To elaborately illustrate the influence of social media on the residents of Shanghai, this research paper utilizes several theories, including the Uses and Gratifications Research, Social Network Theory, The Strength of Weak Ties, Bi-polar Communication Theory, and the conception of media literacy, organic solidarity, and digital inequality to support the claim of this research paper. Meanwhile, in order to better support the main argument, this research paper also utilizes interviews and related data. This paper indicates that during the lockdown of Shanghai, social media provided a platform that could fulfill residents' needs for safety and social interaction, and due to the existence of social media platforms, citizens who live close to each other built up small communities to sustain their lives better. However, due to the difference in social media literacy among various people, the inequality gap between residents in Shanghai has enlarged to a certain degree. It is significant to analyze the power of social media since social media has become one of the most imperative tools for the development of society, especially during Covid-19.

Keywords: Social Media, Covid-19, The Lockdown of Shanghai.

1   Introduction

The emergence of coronavirus has affected people's lives dramatically since 2020. Especially at the beginning of 2022, there was a massive outbreak in Shanghai, from a few cases per day at first to thousands per day at a later stage, and the government decided to restrict free access of citizens in Shanghai to control the epidemic effectively. During the lockdown of Shanghai, people did self-quarantine at home from March to May. When people lost the opportunity to socialize and work, social media became more significant in their lives. How social media affected citizens during the Covid lockdown of Shanghai became a big-ticket issue for understanding the relationship between social media and society. There is much previous research examining

the relationship between social media and humans during Covid-19 at a macroscopic level, indicating that social media help people to release their pressure and have contact with the outside world. For instance, Saijun Zhang indicates that, according to the survey, "social media can alleviate individual stress by reducing the sense of uncertainty and fatalism through information sharing and mutual support" [1]. However, few researchers studied the relationship between social media and society from a microscopic perspective, which is important to understand the power of social media.

Therefore, in order to understand the influence of social media on society, this research conducted an interview. Questions cover their situations during the lockdown, their access to living necessities, and their reaction to the lockdown. Also, within the theoretical framework which is mainly based on Blumler's theory of the initiatives of audiences, Émile Durkheim's Social Network Theory, the Strength of Weak Ties founded by Mark S. Granovetter, P.F. Lazarsfeld's Bi-polar Communication Theory, and the property of the medium founded by Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, this research paper highlights social media's roles in satisfying residents' needs for seeking safety and social relationships with the outside world and building up a "small society" that sustains people's lives [2-6]. Meanwhile, by criticizing the weakness of "organic solidarity" proposed by Émile Durkheim in *Division of Labor in Society* and utilizing the conception of digital inequality, the research paper also mentions that media literacy increased the inequality sharply between different people with various media literacy during the lockdown of Shanghai [3].

2   How Social Media Satisfied Citizens' Needs for Safety and Social Interaction

First of all, social media allow Shanghai residents to meet their needs for safety and social relationships during the Covid lockdown. In times of uncertainty, people tend to feel insecure and anxious when facing the highly contagious coronavirus. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, people need to maintain their fundamental need for safety, both for personal security and mental health and the need for social interaction [7]. Since residents in Shanghai could not go out of home or work at their offices, social media have become the only access for them to seek information related to Covid-19 and communicate with people outside of their rooms. According to Uses and Gratifications Research, Jay G. Blumler indicates that "the audiences are conceived of as active", and due to the different contents, exposures, and social contexts provided by media, people can choose what they want and utilize media to satisfy their needs [2]. During the lockdown of Shanghai at the beginning of 2022, most citizens tended to use Weibo, which is a Chinese services website offering micro-blogging, to look through the synchronous epidemic status and talk with other people they met online about the epidemic to fulfill their needs for social connection. Yulan Hu indicates that "according to statistics, as of February 4, 2020, the percentage of topics related to the epidemic on Weibo's hot search list exceeded 60%. The number of Internet users discussing the 'coronavirus' and 'global epidemic' reached 2.2 mil-

lion, with 30.75 billion readers, far exceeding the number of hot topics that usually appear" [8]. Specifically speaking, Internet users could search for information about the epidemic to alleviate their panic on Weibo. Meanwhile, they could also satisfy their social needs by discussing the epidemic with other Internet users. When Weibo users gathered together to see and discuss the same type of information, the "interest-driven genres of participation", which means that social media users make friends with other users that share the same interest or taste, was formed [9]. The uses and gratifications approach highlights "the audience as a source of challenge to producers to cater more richly to the multiplicity of requirements and roles that it has disclosed" [2]. In other words, due to the fact that media are very goal-directed, they will change and judge their algorithm according to users' needs. Therefore, citizens who used Weibo would see more and more information related to Covid-19 and meet more people who were in the same situation.

3   How Social Media Helped Citizens to Sustain Their Lives

3.1   Social Media Organized People into Small Communities to Get Resources

Secondly, the use of social media platforms by Shanghai citizens built up "small societies" among the neighbors, helping citizens to attain resources during a time period when resources were extremely scarce. During the lockdown of Shanghai, all transportation was shut down, and infrastructures such as shopping malls and convenience stores in the city were closed. At the beginning of the lockdown, residents were rushing to snap up resources such as vegetables and meats at the shopping malls. However, since the city was closed for approximately three months, residents' supplies were quickly depleted, which means that the basic needs of citizens at this time could not be fulfilled. How to attain resources became the most severe problem during these three months. Thanks to the emergence of platform capitalism, some digital infrastructures provided convenience for residents who had access to utilize social media. To better understand residents' situation in Shanghai, some people were interviewed and talked about how they got resources during this harsh time period. One of the interviewees said, "During the lockdown of Shanghai, we did not have the chance to go to supermarkets to buy resources; the only approach to attain resources is to buy orders on some apps such as Meituan. The delivery fees were high since there were just a few deliverymen in this particular situation, so our neighbors always bought groceries together online." In these small societies, they had a division of labor: each time, they selected a leader, and then they wrote down what each of them needed on a media platform that was similar to the Google Doc that can be operated online by multiple users. Next, the leader was responsible for recording what everyone needed in an excel sheet, such as the numbers of fruits and vegetables. Then the leader would match up with merchants to make the purchase on Meituan, which is a widely used online shop app in China. When the supplies arrived, the group members would help distribute the supplies together. According to the process of the group purchase, this small society composed of a block of buildings can be a reflection of "organic solidar-

ity" as each person had a very specific division of labor that also made each person, to some extent, dependent on each other [3].

3.2   Community Members with Weak Ties Work Efficiently Together

To better understand how each individual behaved in this "small society" with the use of content platforms, this research paper also analyzes the situation of the lockdown of Shanghai from the perspective of Social Network Theory. Based on the Social Network Theory, individuals or actors connect with each other through complicated networks [3]. During the lockdown of Shanghai, as people could not go outside their buildings, each neighborhood became a small society where people could virtually see their neighbors. By using social media platforms such as WeChat, the socio-centric network between neighbors was gradually built up, which includes each individual as the smallest unit. As Mark S. Granovetter examined in his research paper *The Strength of Weak Ties*, our society is made up of many different strengths of ties, "which are the combinations of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" [4]. The weak ties with acquaintances play a more imperative role in the development and innovation of the society, which can also apply to the "small societies" made up of neighbors using social media platforms as a channel of communication. To be more specific, before the lockdown of the city, people had strong ties with their family members, their colleagues, and their close friends. They hardly ever came into contact with their neighbors, especially in Shanghai, where people are likely to be busy and stressed, which means that people tend to have weak ties with their neighbors to a certain degree. When people cooperate with their neighbors with weak-tie relationships to attain resources by communicating on WeChat, neighbors with different backgrounds and skills could enlarge the possibility to attain more resources with diversity efficiently. For instance, in the interview, one interviewee replied that "one of our neighbors was good at cultivating plants, so he bought vegetable seeds and cultivated them. When these vegetables were mature enough to eat, he distributed them to some old people." It is surprising that these team members had few communications with each other before the lockdown in Shanghai, which can be a reflection of how the weak ties between human relationships help people to get more resources.

3.3   The Opinion Leaders Play an Imperative Role during the Lockdown of Shanghai

It is also significant to pinpoint that the emergence of leaders in each "small society" not only assists people in getting resources but also positively gives people inspiration in this laborious time period. According to the Bi-polar Communications Theory, P.F. Lazarsfeld claims that the presence of opinion leaders is needed in the process of information dissemination through mass media [5]. In other words, information is often not disseminated directly from the mass media to the audience, but rather the opinion leaders integrate the information delivered by the mass media and then send it to the public. In the case of the lockdown of Shanghai, opinion leaders really did an

excellent job of influencing residents' minds and behaviors. A person's thoughts and behaviors are influenced by others, so the presence of opinion leaders can influence and change group behaviors and thoughts.

During the lockdown, many media influencers uploaded videos on some content platforms with the title #With Me or #Spend A Day with Me. They typically showed audiences what they did at home during the lockdown of Shanghai. One of the media influencers named Feifei, who always uploaded videos on TikTok, recorded a series of videos about how she spent her quarantine days at home. She is good at organizing items, so she taught audiences how to use the space in the refrigerator effectively and how to store vegetables longer. Indeed, during lockdown time, messages often conveyed content and information with anxiety. However, thanks to the emergence of these "opinion leaders" on social media platforms, they told their audiences that though we were in a difficult situation, we would overcome it ultimately. By reprocessing the messages, these opinion leaders positively influenced people's behaviors and minds, transmitting positive messages to their audiences.

4   Media Literacy Caused the Inequality among Different People

Thirdly, indeed, when Shanghai was closed for three months, social media platforms provided convenience to each "small society" since social media can be regarded as the only channel that connects them with the outside world, just as Émile Durkheim highlights, the formation of organic solidarity determines that the division of labor in the society gives every citizen a chance to contribute and harvest [3]. However, in the case of the lockdown of Shanghai, the conception of organic solidarity, which generalizes that everyone in this small society can find an identity that suits them, does not sufficiently take into account the minority groups.

In order to achieve zero cases in Shanghai, the government restrained citizens from going outside without permission. The only way to buy resources and have contact with families and friends was through social media. However, due to the difference in media literacy of various people, some citizens, such as senior people and uneducated residents, would be negatively affected to a large extent. To be more specific, since old people and uneducated citizens have lower media literacy, they did not know how to use social media such as WeChat to communicate with their families during the lockdown of Shanghai. Meanwhile, they probably had no chance to get enough resources to sustain their lives since they did not know how to participate in the process of group purchases with other neighbors. According to the statistics, "in 2020, China had 190.6 million adults aged 65 and over, accounting for 13.5 percent of the total population, and this number continues to increase" [10]. Therefore, there were millions of senior citizens affected by their lower media literacy during the lockdown in Shanghai. As Marshall McLuhan argues, "the medium is the message", which basically pinpoints that the medium itself has information properties, transmitting information to users who have access to certain media platforms [6]. When people own the ability to access social media platforms during this harsh time period, they simultane-

ously own the ability to get resources. On the contrary, if people have no access to use social media platforms, digital inequality, which is a term that describes "people who are more adapted to take advantage of technology tools became more privileged in this setting over those who are not", was generated [11].

As a result of the digital inequality between people who have access to social media and people who have difficulty using social media platforms, such as senior people and uneducated citizens, after the lockdown of Shanghai, lots of citizens decided to leave Shanghai. According to the statistics, "there was an overall outflow of population from Shanghai, and on July 30, the outflow index was 8679" [12]. The lockdown of Shanghai almost had no impact on people with higher media literacy, but due to the information asymmetry caused by the lower media literacy, people who decided to choose a new environment to live in were old people and uneducated people to a large extent. Therefore, in each "small society" with the framework of organic solidarity, there were some people who could not find their own identities and chose to exit from this "small society."

5   Conclusion

In a nutshell, in a time of severe epidemics, there is no denying that certain attributes of social media provide great convenience to people and society. Through social media like Weibo, people can find out what is going on all over the world and make friends online, which greatly eases the anxiety of the epidemic. Meanwhile, social media have created many small communities of people in a closed and limited environment, giving people a chance to better sustain their lives. Nevertheless, due to the various media literacy among Shanghai citizens, people with lower media literacy would not have effective and accurate access to information and resources during the epidemic, leading to inequality within the society. To better understand the phenomenon of inequality among different people in China, more research related to media literacy and population mobility after the lockdown of Shanghai needs to be done.

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