

A study on the impact of social capital on the career choice of young media practitioners—A diachronic analysis based on a municipal media practitioner in Xi'an

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Abstract: In recent years, the impact of social capital on media practitioners is mostly studied by college students or fresh graduates, and academics usually use questionnaires to study the willingness of this group to choose media careers and their influencing factors, mainly focusing on single factors such as professional identity and occupational identity. However, objectively speaking, career choice is a long-term dynamic process, and the social capital possessed by different individuals also has a large difference, with the increasing working years, social capital is constantly changing, and the influence on career choice also has the effect of temporal change. Therefore, the research on this issue should not only stay at a static stage or be limited to the individual stock of social capital, but also have a dynamic and comparative perspective. This study focuses on 20 young media professionals who held the same position (media editor) at a municipal media organization in Xi'an during the same year (2019). The oldest among them was born in 1989, and the youngest in 1998. We conduct a cross-sectional comparison of the impact of social capital on their career choices and observe how their career choices change over time as they accumulate social capital. Additionally, through participatory observation, we examine how the career choices of the subjects evolve during the process of social capital accumulation. Through participatory observation and in-depth interviews, we conclude that social capital plays an important role in the career choice and career development of young media practitioners.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the employment problem of the media industry has frequently triggered heated debates, and the dispute over the application of the new communication profession has become increasingly fierce. With the rapid development of the Internet and mobile technology, the media industry has ushered in unprecedented opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, parents, candidates, practitioners of the media industry for the development of the desire and pursuit of more and more high, on the other hand, "ordinary people's children are best not to engage in journalism" and other comments have repeatedly triggered the debate. This not only reflects the social debate on the employment prospect of journalism industry in the context of media transformation, but also reflects the potential impact of social capital on the media as a liberal arts industry. Social capital refers to the resources that are acquired or mobilised in purposive action and embedded in the social

structure^[1], and has an impact on the career development of journalism practitioners, such as increasing career opportunities and career referrals, and enhancing career development support and guidance.

Against this background, this study takes "Xi'an municipal young media practitioners" as the object of research, with the aim of focusing on this phenomenon from the whole to specific practitioners, crystallising the obvious problems, and providing reference value for this social phenomenon. The media environment in Xi'an is experiencing the convergence of traditional and emerging digital media, a change that not only brings new opportunities for the industry, but also makes social capital play an important role in the career paths of media practitioners. In Xi'an, young media practitioners are increasingly relying on their social networks, contacts within the industry, and referral systems when looking for career opportunities and support for career development. These social capital factors determine, to some extent, whether they can stand out in the competitive integrated media environment. Therefore, an in-depth study of how young media practitioners at the municipal level in Xi'an make career choices and develop under the role of social capital is important for understanding the changes in the local media environment.

2. Related concepts and theories

2.1 Social Capital Theory

The earliest to introduce social capital into the field of sociology was the French sociologist Piai Bourdieu, who in the 1970s defined social capital as a form of capital that is distinct from economic and cultural capital, and regarded social capital as an actual or potential aggregate of resources. Coleman published the article "Social Capital as a Condition for Human Capital Development" in the *American Journal of Sociology* in the late 1980s, which was the first time the concept of social capital was explicitly used in American sociology. With the gradual attention of scholars, the understanding of the concept of social capital and the definition of its content have gradually become clearer^[2].

According to the theory of "social capital", the resources embedded in the social network acquired and used by rational actors in their actions can make individual actions successful or benefit individual actions, i.e., the resources embedded in the social network enhance the effects of actions^[3]. Most of the domestic understanding of social capital is characterised by a local Chinese feature, which is the Chinese fact that relational networks are ubiquitous in life. Zhang Qizai, one of the earliest Chinese scholars to study social capital, argues that formally, social capital is a network of social relationships, which is "one of the most important relationships between people" and "an important way of resource allocation". Bian Yanjie defines social capital as an informal relationship, and he believes that social capital is a network of social relationships.

In this study, youth media practitioners as micro-individuals, social capital is the social relationship network they have, and the different social relationship networks and the difference in the amount of social capital make the individual's ability to use the social relationship network and gain different benefits. In Chinese society, where relationships and friendships are important, from the perspective of social networks, do media practitioners have an advantage in their career development if they have more social relationships? Therefore, this paper focuses on the social capital of this group and how they can utilise this network of relationships to gain benefits and make career choices^[4].

2.2 Social capital and career choice

Social capital is an important theoretical tool in the study of career choice and development. The social capital possessed by individuals can help solve the problem of "information asymmetry" in the labour market and help individuals obtain employment information and opportunities. Based on the

observation of reality, especially in Chinese society, some studies have found that the resources embedded in an individual's social network and how they are utilised affect the outcome of job search. It has also been found that those who are rich in social capital are more likely to acquire occupational status; conversely, the level of occupational status will also bring the same amount of social capital to the practitioner^[5]. Some scholars classify the social capital of individuals in career development into two main categories: prioritised social capital and self-acquired social capital. Assumptive social capital includes the resources that an individual obtains through innate conditions, such as family background and the material and interpersonal networks it brings. Self-acquired social capital, on the other hand, encompasses resources that individuals actively seek and accumulate during the socialisation process, such as social networks, occupational skills and knowledge.

In this study since all the research subjects joined the same position at the same time, it can be assumed that they have the same initial value of self-acquired social capital in their own organisations. The focus of attention is whether the research subjects used prior-acquired social capital in acquiring this position, i.e., did family relationships help in the acquisition of this position? How did the self-acquired social capital of these study participants change over the 4-year period? How did the amount of self-acquired social capital accumulated affect their career choices?^[6] These findings will provide some insights into how social capital influences career choice and development in local media environments, and provide valuable references for media organisations, educational institutions and policy makers.

3. Research Methodology and Data Collection

3.1 Research Method

In conjunction with the theoretical framework of this paper and the purpose of the research, this study used a qualitative research methodology, which specifically included participant observation and in-depth interviews, to gain a deeper understanding and insight into the research topic. The choice of this research method is based on the fact that the author herself is in a former colleague relationship with all 20 research subjects, all of whom joined the organisation in 2019 and left in 2022 due to further education, but with whom she has maintained contact in the meantime, and is therefore able to obtain more comprehensive information. Secondly, the author and the research subjects have similar experiences in terms of work experience and career choices, and can understand the deeper meanings of some of their words, and as an "observing participant", she can comprehensively understand the working environment of young media practitioners and the actual use of social capital.

3.2 Selection of Research Subjects

This study takes 20 young media practitioners as research subjects, who joined the same organisation in the same year in the same position. The common work experience of this group makes them ideal subjects for analysing the impact of social capital on career choice. All the research subjects have similar career beginnings, which enables them to demonstrate the specific impact of the accumulation and change of social capital on career choice in the course of their career development.

4. Data collection methods

This study uses long observation interviews combined with supporting data collection methods. During the interviews, the researcher communicated with the research participants face-to-face or online. The interviews were conducted over a long time span in order to provide a comprehensive

and long-term understanding of the participants' career development experiences. The interviews centred on the following areas:

- (1) Exploring whether the study participants were influenced by prior social capital, such as family relationships, when acquiring their current positions and what impact this had on their career choices;
- (2) How study participants have accumulated self-acquired social capital through self-effort and professional network building over the past four years, and how this accumulation has changed;
- (3) Investigating the specific impact of the accumulation of self-acquired social capital on the study participants' career choices, including whether changes in their career choices occurred as a result of the accumulation of social capital as they progressed through their careers.

The interviews will use open-ended questions to encourage study participants to describe in detail their career experiences and changes in social capital. Each interview is expected to last between 60 and 90 minutes and will be audio-recorded and transcribed into textual material. The interview data will be processed through thematic analysis to identify themes and patterns related to social capital accumulation and career choices. Through these methods, the study will be able to explore in detail the impact of social capital on the career choices of young media practitioners and reveal the role of social capital in career development and its changes over time.

It should be noted that, based on the respect for the privacy of the interviewees, this paper will blur the information such as the names of many specific schools or the names of the people who appeared in the interview process. At the same time, the author will intersperse part of the relevant literature as a support in the process of presenting and analysing the interview data, so as to present the interviewees' perspectives on the basis of the original interview data as faithfully as possible and with more justification.

5. Research Findings and Analyses

The 20 research subjects in this paper consisted of 13 women and 7 men, with women coded as W1-W13 and men coded as M1-M7. 7 of them had left the municipal media, of which 2 chose to go to higher education, 1 took the public examination to enter the system, 1 switched to a new profession, and 2 jumped to other media organisations. 6 out of the 20 used their prioritised social capital to enter the post, i.e. 6 of the 20 people entered the position by using their social capital, i.e., building bridges through family or friends to successfully obtain employment opportunities, and 14 people entered the position through social recruitment, i.e., interviewing for the position only from the unit's publicly posted job postings. It is worth noting that by analysing the data, it was found that only one of the six study participants who used their prioritised social capital left their job, and the reason for their departure was to re-enter the campus by entering postgraduate studies. After analysing all the data in depth and studying them, the conclusions drawn are as follows:

5.1 Empowering Social Capital Helps Reduce Job Search Costs

In the labour market, due to the incomplete nature of job seekers' possession of job information, it is necessary to pay a high cost to obtain valuable information about job requirements. Social capital helps to facilitate the flow of job information, which can help individuals obtain information and opportunities for employment in a short period of time at a small cost. In the media industry, innate social capital is often accompanied by higher levels of trust, especially when recommended by acquaintances. M4 learnt about the recruitment needs of this media organisation through his family connections, which enabled him to quickly obtain an interview in a competitive job market. He stated that *"my family friends and relatives helped me with a lot of useful information, which made me go through a lot fewer detours in my job search."* During the job search process, people with strong innate social capital can receive support from their networks in a variety of ways, including career

advice, CV revision, and interview preparation. For example, W3 received career counselling and references through her extensive network of family and friends, all of which greatly improved her chances of successful job placement. By analysing the data, it can be concluded that empowering social capital significantly reduces the cost of job search for individuals by providing easy access to information^[7], enhanced trust and supportive networks, enabling young media practitioners to find suitable career opportunities more efficiently.

5.2 Media practitioners who enter positions through acquaintances' introductions are more stable

Introduced by acquaintances, media practitioners are able to provide a higher degree of career matching, a lesser period of onboarding adjustment, and a wealth of resource support and trust, which, together, significantly increase the stability of their career and reduce the turnover rate. This is evidenced by the fact that only one of the six study participants who used prioritised social capital in this study left the job. As the referrer had knowledge of the media environment and team culture and was able to provide practical information about the position, this enabled the new employee to adapt to the work environment more quickly and reduced the difficulties and discomfort at the beginning of the induction period. *"Through my friend's introduction, I got a more detailed understanding of the company's internal situation and job requirements. After joining the company, I was able to adapt to the team and workflow more quickly, thus reducing the period of discomfort at work (W1)."* "As I was recommended by a family member, I felt the company's trust in me when I joined. I quickly got to know many of my colleagues and received their help and support. This networking made me feel more comfortable and stable at work (W10)."

5.3 Practitioners in the media trait have a wide range of channels and opportunities to access social capital

Practitioners in the media industry are able to effectively access a wide range of social capital through their occupational traits and diverse channels of activities^[8]. Through frequent contacts and interactions, they have not only built up a rich network of social relationships, but also made use of the opportunities and platforms in the media trait to further expand and deepen these relationships. The nature of the work of media practitioners determines that they interact frequently with professionals in different fields, entrepreneurs, government officials, academic experts, and so on. For example, journalists meet interviewees from a variety of fields in the course of their interviews, and this wide range of contacts provides a broad platform for them to accumulate social capital. *"Media work has allowed me to connect with people from many different fields. Whether at press conferences or in in-depth interviews, I have had the opportunity to build strong or weak relationships with interviewees. Such a network of relationships has enabled me to gain better access to information as well as accumulate a lot of social capital (W7)."* In addition, media practitioners have the opportunity to engage with a variety of personalities in different interview scenarios (e.g., press conferences, feature stories, investigative interviews, etc.). Each scenario is an opportunity to expand social capital, as M5 stated, *"I found that professional reporting and good communication not only enhanced my professional credibility, but also allowed me to gain the trust of my interviewees. This trusting relationship allowed me to build more social capital by making it easier to make connections in future interviews."*

5.4 Accumulation of self-acquired social capital can give practitioners more career options

The accumulation of self-acquired social capital significantly enhances practitioners' career

choices. By proactively building and utilising social networks, individuals are able to obtain more career opportunities, industry information and support, and thus have more choices and flexibility in their career development^[9]. This accumulation of capital not only contributes to the accuracy of career decision-making, but also enhances an individual's career competitiveness and provides a broad space for career development. M2, who has already left the media organisation, found a more suitable development direction for herself through an interview assignment. *"During an interview, I met the boss of my current company. He is in the education self-media business, and his entrepreneurial ideas deeply impressed me and helped me find the right career direction for me."*

5.5 Media practitioners who are good at accumulating social capital are better able to adapt to the transformative needs of media

In today's rapidly changing media environment, media transformation has become an important issue. With the development of technology and the changing needs of users, media practitioners need to continuously adjust and optimise their working methods to adapt to the new market demands^[10]. In this process, social capital - i.e., the resources and opportunities gained through building and maintaining social relationships - becomes an important factor. Media practitioners who are good at accumulating social capital have a clear advantage in facing the process of media transformation. Social capital not only helps them acquire and share information more effectively, but also facilitates collaboration with other industry players and enhances their career opportunities and brand influence. During media transitions, practitioners' reputations and influence can help them find more opportunities in emerging fields. w4 spoke of this: *"The power of personal branding and social networking cannot be ignored during transitions. By working with leading industry figures, I was able to access more opportunities and build my reputation in new areas."*

6. Conclusion

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the impact of social capital in the career choices of young media practitioners, focusing on the roles of prioritised and self-acquired social capital and exploring them in the context of the ephemeral data of a municipal media person in Xi'an. Through the study, it is shown that social capital plays a key role in media career development and has a significant impact on career choice and adaptation to media transition.

It was found that those young practitioners who were able to enter the media industry with the help of their family background or pre-existing relationships usually showed higher stability and lower mobility in their initial careers. This suggests that prior social capital not only provides more opportunities for job seekers, but also enhances career stability to a certain extent. Second, the unique openness and diversity of the media industry enables practitioners to acquire self-acquired social capital through a wide range of channels. The data show that over the past four years, the accumulation of self-acquired social capital of media practitioners has increased significantly, and this change has enabled them to have more autonomy and flexibility in their career choices. The increase in self-acquired social capital not only expands the space for career choices, but also enhances the practitioners' sense of control and confidence in their career development. In addition, media practitioners who are good at accumulating social capital show stronger adaptability in the process of adapting to media transformation. Through the effective use of social capital, these practitioners are able to quickly access the latest industry information, participate in cross-disciplinary cooperation, and maintain a competitive edge in the transition process. Meanwhile, strong social capital also enhances practitioners' sense of professional identity, giving them a higher degree of identification and sense of belonging to their professional roles and industry prospects.

This study reveals the multidimensional impact of social capital in media career choice and

development. Social capital not only helps young media practitioners lower their career entry threshold, but also gives them more options and adaptability in their career development. As the media environment continues to change, the accumulation of social capital will continue to be an important factor in career success, and media practitioners should actively utilise and expand their social capital to adapt to future career challenges and opportunities.

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