

**Social Media Use, Media Credibility and Online Engagement among  
Young Adults in China**

Qiong Gong

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**Social Media Use, Media Credibility and Online  
Engagement among Young Adults in China**

Gebruik van sociale media, geloofwaardigheid van media, en  
online participatie onder jonge volwassenen in China

**Thesis**

to obtain the degree of Doctor from the  
Erasmus University Rotterdam  
by command of the  
rector magnificus

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by

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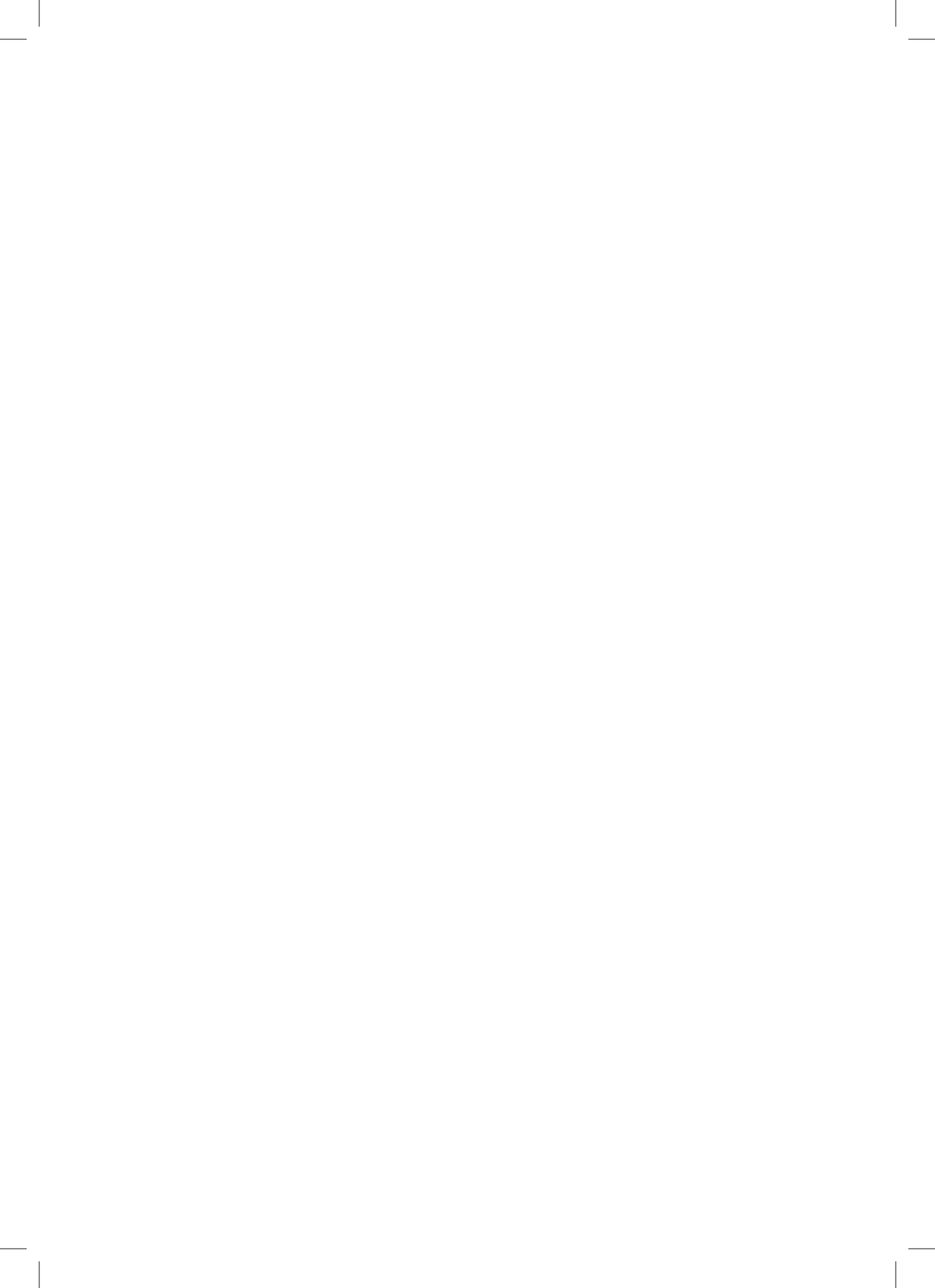
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July 2019, Rotterdam

## List of Acronyms

BIC	Bayesian information criterion
CAIC	Consistent Akaike Information Criterion
CNY	Chinese Yuan
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CNNIC	China Internet Network Information Center
LCA	Latent Class Analysis
NBS	National Bureau of Statistics of China
OLS	Ordinary Least Squares
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
UGC	User-generated Content

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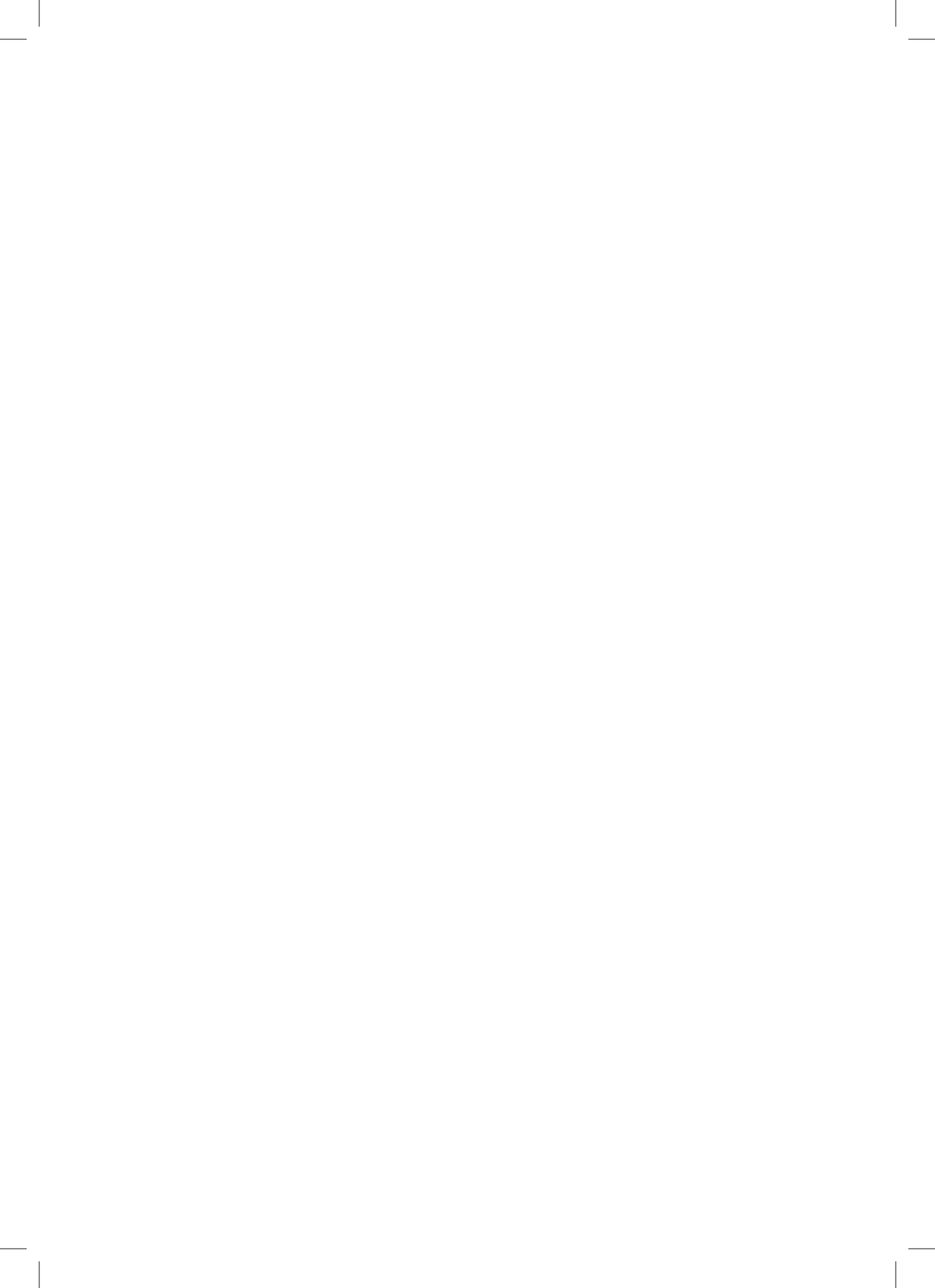




# Chapter 1

## General introduction







## I General introduction

### I.I Social media, credibility and trust in the digital age

Today we live in a complex media environment with an array of media options and various information sources available both online and offline that ranges from traditional media such as television and newspapers to social media such as Facebook (a social network) and YouTube (a content community). The rise of user-generated content (UGC) and the continued growth of social media have transformed the modalities of information diffusion, especially among young people. For young generations, social media in particular represent important sources for obtaining all sorts of information; on the other hand, this information is often unsolicited (e.g. messages from friends) (boyd, 2014; Hargittai & Hsieh, 2010; Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014). At the same time, the dissemination of fake or unreliable information has gained increasing public discussions worldwide in various domains in people's daily life (e.g. politics and health) (Kye, Shim, Kim, & Park, 2019; Westerman et al., 2014; Xingting Zhang, Wen, Liang, & Lei, 2017). This makes media credibility an important concern in the current media environment (Appelman & Sundar, 2016; Ardèvol-Abreu, Hooker, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2018; Westerman et al., 2014), particularly for the young generations, who have been found to pay more attention to the quality of information they receive from new sources than the older generation (Edgerly, 2017). The explosive growth of unreliable information online raises questions about how young people judge the usefulness and credibility of various media. Do they consider social media to be as credible as traditional media? Is their daily media usage related to the perceived credibility of traditional and social media? Further, how do these two media-related factors – use and credibility of the media – link to young people's further online activities?

The central concern of this dissertation is with the perceived credibility of information on traditional and social media. Credibility is a central element in trust (Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Tsfaty, 2010). Prior studies suggest that individuals' media use is closely connected to the perceived credibility of media (Kioussis, 2001; Tsfaty & Cappella, 2003), and both media usage and perceived credibility are associated with further online activities such as expressing opinions about government and politics, reviewing cultural products, and health-related information seeking (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Holt, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Ljungberg, 2013; Leguina, Arancibia-Carvajal, & Widdop, 2017; Lin, Zhang, Song, & Omori, 2016; Yun & Park, 2010). This dissertation will examine the relationship between media use, credibility, and online engagement in three important domains: politics, culture, and health, which are all strongly related to the perceived credibility of information in young people's daily life. In consequence, this

study aims to improve understanding of how young people assess information related to politics, culture, and health that they obtain from different traditional and social media platforms and to explore how the perceived credibility of these platforms impacts behaviors and forms of engagement vis-à-vis current topics in the contemporary media environment.

The focus is on the case of China, a country with a state-controlled media system, in which during the past decades a highly diversified ecology of social media platforms has emerged. With the rapid development of digital and mobile media technologies, the Internet and social media platforms have become increasingly widespread in the world, from the West to the East, and from democracies to countries with other forms of political systems (Boulianne, 2015). However, the existing literature has mainly focused on credibility-related research in well-established democracies (e.g. Westerman et al., 2014), whereas research that addresses non-Western countries and other political regimes is still scarce. Unlike most young people in Western democracies, today's generations of young people grow up and live in China without Google, Facebook, or Twitter but with a heavy dose of censorship. China represents a theoretically important case for examining media use, credibility, and online engagement in politics, culture, and health. First, China has the highest number of Internet users in the world (around 829 million Internet users: China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC], 2019) and Chinese websites such as Baidu (the fourth) and QQ.com (the sixth) are dominant among the top global websites (Alexa, 2019). Second, not only is China one of the fastest growing economic and political players in the world, but its media field has its own particular characteristics and circumstances, notably a political context that differs from that of Western countries owing to China's one-party system and the high level of censorship exercised by the government. Also, the level of trust in institutions in China is remarkably high by comparison to that of most Western democracies (L. Li, 2004; Shen & Guo, 2013; Steinhardt, 2012). Findings from Western countries may not apply to China, which is a less democratic environment. Third, it has been suggested that there are cross-cultural differences in media-related engagement (Morahan-Martin, 2004; Song et al., 2016). A wealth of comparative, cross-media studies on media credibility, usually presented in English, have been carried out in Western democracies and are about Western users, but media credibility has not been studied that often for other countries (AlMansour, Brankovic, & Iliopoulos, 2014; Jiang, 2019). Finally, China has witnessed a significant shift owing to rapid economic growth after the implementation of a set of major economic reforms policies in 1978. Chinese citizens have experienced huge changes associated with unprecedented economic development in the past two decades, in the fields of culture consumption and healthcare among others. Not only is China the most populous country in the world, but its income inequality is among the largest worldwide (Xie & Zhou, 2014).

In China, social media users are slightly younger than in the Western world (CNNIC, 2019), nearly 72 percent of them being under 40 years of age. This dissertation focuses on young adults in the broadly defined age group of 18 to 40, because young adults' media preferences are hugely different from those of the older generation, which grew up in a media environment where social media did not exist or had not become dominant (Edgerly, 2017). In addition, China's young adults are exposed not only to traditional media (e.g. television, radio, and magazine) in their daily life, but also to a variety of social media outlets developed in China (e.g. Sina Weibo, WeChat, Baidu Tieba, and Zhihu). As social media offer more possibilities for people to gather news and information related to various topics, there is increasing attention being paid to information overload and to a lack of credibility assessment (Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010) in such an abundant high-choice media environment. If one takes social media into account, the media impacts now may be different from what they were two decades ago.

Taken as a whole, this dissertation examines how individuals, and young adults in particular, evaluate the credibility of information derived from the media in the domains of politics, culture, and health and how the perceived credibility of traditional and social media links to media use and online engagement in the context of China. The overall aim of this project is to deepen understanding of social media use, media credibility, and online engagement in politics, culture, and health in the digital age. In the following sections, the main concepts and theories related to this research are presented and discussed, and this will provide the context for the four empirical studies that make up the main body of the text. Each empirical study conducted for this dissertation highlights a key domain – politics, culture, and health – painting an overall picture of the relationships between different kinds of media use, the credibility of traditional and social media, and online engagement among young adults in China (see Figure 1).

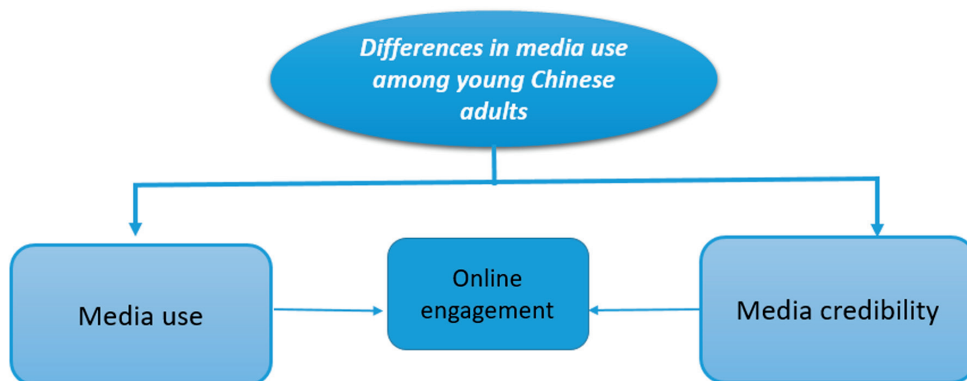


Figure 1 The Main Concepts Involved in This Study

## 1.2 Theoretical background

In order to understand the relationships between media usage, media credibility, and online engagement in the Chinese context, we need first of all to take a closer look at the Chinese media landscape. Then several concepts and relevant theories will be introduced. The second subsection will discuss differences in media use. The third will explain the concepts of credibility and trust, as well as several key variables linked to media, trust, and credibility in the domains of politics and health: media credibility and trust in institutions (i.e. political trust, trust in the media, and trust in the healthcare system). The final subsection will focus on how media use and credibility influence online engagement in politics, culture, and health-related domains.

### 1.2.I Understanding the Chinese media landscape

The Chinese media environment is unique. Since the introduction of economic reforms in the 1970s, it has shifted from being owned and financed by the state to commercial liberalization. At present, most media organizations receive funding through advertising revenues, though some of them continue to obtain small or indirect financial support from the government (Stockmann, 2013). However, all major newspapers as well as the main television and radio stations are still registered as organizations under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or under the government and are regarded as mouthpieces of the CCP (Freedom House, 2017). Just like the mass media, the Internet is also under tight state control (Freedom House, 2017). The authorities use a combination of policy measures, cybersecurity legislation, and technical solutions to control domestic websites and to block some foreign sites (Freedom House, 2017; J. Zhao, 2008). By the end of December 2018, China had 829 million Internet users, 73.3 percent of them being in urban areas (CNNIC, 2019). Also, mobile device use has become increasingly important. China counted 817 million mobile Internet users in December 2018, and the rate of using mobile phones to access the Internet was over 98 percent, by comparison to around 48 percent and 36 percent for desktops and laptops respectively (CNNIC, 2019). This trend of mobile device use has accelerated the popularity of social media usage.

The Chinese market is dominated by homegrown services, and the affordances of the Chinese social media platforms are quite diverse. The user profiles of these platforms show both similarities and differences, which make it worthwhile to examine how platforms are combined across media outlets among young adults. In this thesis I limit myself to a number of specific Chinese media platforms, namely four types of traditional media and eight social media forms. The four traditional media are television (both on TV set and online), newspaper (in print only), magazine (in print only), and radio (both on radio set and online). The selected eight Chinese social media platforms are Sina

Weibo, WeChat, Qzone, Zhihu, Baidu Tieba, Tianya Club, Douban.com, and Guokr (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 The Eight Selected Chinese Social Media

Social Media	Launch Time	General Description	Users' Characteristics	Platforms They Are Available on
Tianya Club	1999.02	Discussion forum (one of the most popular Internet forums)	Most of the active users are from southern China and other big cities	Desktop, mobile
Baidu Tieba	2003.12	Communication platform	Young; most of the active users are teenagers	Desktop, mobile
Douban.com	2005.03	User-generated content platform (e.g. related to movies, books, music, and offline events)	Mostly married; ages mainly between 31 and 35	Desktop, mobile
Qzone	2005.06	User-generated content platform (similar to MSN Space)	Young; most of the active users are teenagers	Desktop, mobile
Sina Weibo	2009.08	Communication platform (microblogging website, a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook)	Ages mainly between 18 and 25	Desktop, mobile
Guokr.com	2010.11	Online community platform for science and technology education	Young, well-educated, and science lovers	Desktop, mobile
WeChat	2011.01	Communication platform (comparable to WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram; also offers commerce and payment services)	Male rather than female; ages mainly between 18 and 35; number of senior users is increasing	Mainly on mobile, limited functions on PC version
Zhihu.com	2011.01	Discussion forum (the most popular question-and-answer website)	Ages mainly between 19 and 24 youth; predominantly single	Desktop, mobile

At the time the survey was conducted, the most popular Chinese social media platforms were Sina Weibo, WeChat, Qzone, Baidu Tieba, Douban.com, and Zhihu.com (CNNIC, 2017). Sina Weibo, a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook, came online in 2009 and became a very popular Chinese microblogging website. In the first quarter of 2019, it had approximately 465 million monthly active users and 203 million daily active users (Weibo Corp, 2019). WeChat (in Chinese Weixin, meaning “micro message”) is a

standalone messaging app by Tencent (one of the world's largest social media companies) that was launched in 2011. It had over 1.1 billion monthly active users in the first quarter of 2019 (Statista, 2019). WeChat's distinctive characteristic is that WeChat "friends" usually know one another offline (Gan, 2017). Whereas the social circles of Sina Weibo are normally open and public, those on WeChat are more exclusive and private, open only to family and friends (DeLuca, Brunner, & Sun, 2016). Qzone and Douban.com are both more oriented toward UGC. Qzone, as a bonded service to QQ by Tencent, is a social network that is used for writing blogs, sharing photos, and listening to music and is very popular among Chinese youths between 15 and 20 years of age (Apaolaza, He, & Hartmann, 2014). Baidu Tieba is an online community launched in 2003 by the largest Chinese search engine company, Baidu. Douban.com allows users to search or create content related to music, films, books, recent events, and activities in Chinese cities. Zhihu.com and Tianya Club can be described as discussion platforms. Zhihu.com is a question-and-answer website designed to provide users with expert knowledge, insights into various topics, and space for discussion. Tianya Club – the oldest platform in my sample – is seen as an Internet forum, but started to include blog, microblog, and photo album services as well. The last platform is Guokr.com, which is an online community focusing on science and relevant topics.

### 1.2.2 Different media uses and media repertoires

In the early stages of Internet use studies, scholars were concerned about unequal access and the differences between users and nonusers. Inequality of access (the "digital divide") was important, and so were the systematic differences observed between who was and who was not a user of certain types of media formats. As access increased almost to the point of becoming omnipresent, the focus shifted to differences in equipment, skill, and media use patterns (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; van Deursen & Helsper, 2015). Furthermore, researchers started to examine the outcomes of using new media, in other words to investigate who is most likely to benefit from using the Internet and the social media (van Deursen & Helsper, 2015). Recent studies show that young people do not spend much time on traditional media, and the boundary between interpersonal and mass communication is blurring (Edgerly, 2017; Sundar, 2008). However, most of these studies have focused on media usage in media environments with well-developed digital infrastructures and near-universal access. Internet access has become a standard for most Western populations (Scheerder, van Deursen, & van Dijk, 2017), but not in the non-Western world. In China, the Internet penetration rate is much lower. By the end of December 2018, the Internet penetration rate in China reached 59.6 percent overall and 74.6 percent in cities (CNNIC, 2019). In this general context, the present thesis proposes to examine the differences between traditional and social media use, the use of specific social media platforms, and media use patterns.

### **I.2.2.I Traditional versus social media**

There is ample evidence to suggest that social media are different from traditional media in many ways. First, these two media types often contain different information sources. Traditional media outlets normally rely for their sources on professional journalists, official authorities, organizations, and institutions (Jackob, 2010). Social media, on the other hand, contain more user-created and unsolicited information (e.g. Westerman et al., 2014). Also, in China social media have provided citizens with more diverse kinds of information than before, including critical information about political issues (Hassid, 2012). Traditional media are associated with editorial control and fact checking, and generally provide information selected by gatekeepers (e.g. editors, critics, and authorities). Social media have content from more sources (e.g. family, close friends, peers or strangers) and often lack of professional gatekeepers to check content (Song et al., 2016; Westerman et al., 2014). Second, by comparison to traditional media, social media not only offer easier and faster access to unlimited information at any time of day (Y. Li, Wang, Lin, & Hajli, 2018), but also provide more options for users who may wish to participate in activities and interact socially with others (C. Li, 2018; McKinley & Wright, 2014). For example, social media such as Facebook and Twitter offer users more opportunities to voice their opinions directly, in written political expressions and through interaction with others (Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson, & Seymour, 2011). In China the media system is politically oriented more than market-oriented, which may imply that, owing to the rise of the Internet, differences between state-controlled traditional media and more independent social media have augmented. Given the situation of state-controlled traditional media in China, media are regard as mouthpieces of the Party, traditional media in particular (H. Zhang, Zhou, & Shen, 2014). Although online platforms are also under the tight control of the Chinese government, there is more space for young adults to resort to opinions that are different from those of traditional media (Luo & Harrison, 2019). Understanding how traditional media are different from social media is helpful insofar as it leads to a better understanding of the credibility of traditional and social media in the eyes of young adults, as well as to a better understanding of further online engagement.

### **I.2.2.2 Comparison among particular media outlets**

In addition to the distinctions between traditional and social media outlets, there is also an increasing diversity among online media outlets and platforms (Johnson & Kaye, 2015, 2015; A. Smith, Fischer, & Chen, 2012). Varying functions and characteristics of social media formats result in differences in users' preferences for them, according to the information they seek. For example, individuals turn to blogs for in-depth information and for perspectives that they normally cannot obtain from other platforms (Johnson & Kaye, 2009). Also, users' characteristics are different across social media outlets. The connections of Facebook users tend to be real-life friends, and Facebook posts are



normally restricted to friends, while Twitter connections are typically among strangers and posts on Twitter are public (Johnson & Kaye, 2015). Platforms also differ in the user experiences they offer: some are arguably more entertainment-oriented, others more information-oriented. Whereas some platforms have become quite “mainstream” through the corporatization that often accompanies growth (van Dijck, 2013; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012), others remain more “niche.” Since each medium outlet has its own unique architecture and culture, differences in media use could be related to the precise nature of media platforms. It is thus necessary to investigate the differences between specific media outlets. Examining such differences (e.g. characteristics and functions) is vital if we wish to understand how young adults’ perception of the credibility of traditional and social media and their online engagement are shaped by each media option.

### 1.2.2.3 Media repertoires

Although there are differences across social media platforms, many studies still treat social media as a single media category (M. Chan, Wu, Hao, Xi, & Jin, 2012). With the growing variety of choice options and the compartmentalization of content types this often entails, audiences are possibly more tempted to engage in selective exposure, which means sticking to media that align with existing preferences (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). The strong diversification of social media platforms in the past decade calls for a more differentiated approach. It makes sense to consider a more fine-grained view of social media; this is also how media repertoire theory has analyzed patterns of media usage before the rise of online media (van Rees & van Eijck, 2003). To be sure, how various usages of new media in general are embedded within media repertoires has been documented (Yuan, 2011) and both user-centric<sup>1</sup> and audience-centric approaches have mapped the place of social media outlets in wider media networks (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). But, as far as I know, only few studies have yet distinguished social media repertoires at the level of individual users (e.g. Boczkowski, Matassi, & Mitchelstein, 2018).

The study of media repertoires has become pivotal owing to the rapid expansion of the media landscape in the past years (Taneja, Webster, Malthouse, & Ksiazek, 2012; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). “Media repertoires” refers to styles of media consumption, namely to the ritualistic or habitual ways in which individuals combine various sorts of media usage (print versus audiovisual, offline versus online, elite newspapers versus popular newspapers, etc.) or various media outlets (TV channels, newspaper titles, social media platforms, etc.) into a single bundle of practices (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006;

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<sup>1</sup> User-centric studies focus on media repertoires at the level of individual consumers and are mainly designed to describe typical users or to identify users’ types over a certain period of time (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012).



Reagan, 1996; Rubin, 1993; Yuan, 2011). Recent work on media repertoires has been inspired by three traditions in media usage research. First, the “uses and gratifications” framework has emphasized how individual and psychological factors – personal needs and preferences – predict media choice (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Rubin, 1993). Related to that, sociologically tinted lifestyle research outlined how membership of certain status groups (e.g., class, education) influences taste preferences and, subsequently, media choices (van Rees & van Eijck, 2003). Thirdly, structural factors such as access to media, program schedules, and audience availability have been found to determine media choices (McDowell & Sutherland, 2000; Webster, 2009; Yuan, 2011). This approach has mainly been adopted to explain the effect of program schedule characteristics on TV viewing (Cooper, 1993; Taneja et al., 2012; Yuan & Webster, 2006). More and more, these elements have been integrated into a model of “media duality” (Webster, 2011) in which both individual and structural or contextual factors affect media choices and shape media repertoires (Cooper & Tang, 2009; S. Kim, 2014; Taneja et al., 2012; Yuan & Ksiazek, 2011). Previous studies that combined individual and structural factors in order to explain media patterns have examined either a single medium, mostly television (Cooper & Tang, 2009; Yuan & Ksiazek, 2011), or media patterns across multiple media outlets, for example news exposure across television, radio, print media, and the Internet (Edgerly, 2015), or media usage of television, newspaper and Internet for various purposes (S. Kim, 2014). These studies indicate that audience characteristics (e.g. age, gender, and education), audience availability, and place of residence influence media usage (Cooper & Tang, 2009; S. Kim, 2014; Taneja et al., 2012). The present dissertation aims to investigate the patterns of media use across four traditional media and eight specific social media outlets among young Chinese adults by taking a user-centric (focusing on individual users; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012) and a repertoire-oriented approach.

### **1.2.3 Credibility and trust related to media**

Credibility and trust are important concepts related to media (Appelman & Sundar, 2016; Jakob, 2010; Kohring & Matthes, 2007), as they help us understand why people use certain media and not others, or why particular media usage can have impacts on users’ behaviors in the digital age. Media credibility and the related construct of trust in media have attracted scholarly attention in media and communication studies over the past decades (Appelman & Sundar, 2016; Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2018; Kioussis, 2001; Livio & Cohen, 2018; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). Credibility and trust are similar; but they are not the same concept (Fogg & Tseng, 1999). Credibility is a central component of trust (Jakob, 2010) and offers a reason to trust. It is assumed that, when users consider a medium or channel to be credible, they are more likely to trust that medium or channel (Kohring & Matthes, 2007).

### 1.2.3.I Media credibility

According to previous studies, credibility can be simply defined as believability (Fogg & Tseng, 1999) and is generally conceived of as a user-based perception (a judgment made by the users themselves) that has several dimensions: accuracy, fairness, trustworthiness, and depth (Fogg & Tseng, 1999; Johnson & Kaye, 2009; Metzger et al., 2010; Westerman et al., 2014). These dimensions are critical aspects that influence a user's assessment of the credibility of the information received, as credibility perceptions result from evaluating multiple dimensions simultaneously (Fogg & Tseng, 1999). In other words, in assessing credibility, a receiver makes a judgment of these components before arriving at an overall evaluation. The credibility judgment is also a key early stage in the persuasion process (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). This is why credibility helps us understand why users turn to certain media and how they decide what to believe.

Traditionally, credibility is conceptualized as consisting of three separate subsets: source credibility, message credibility, and medium credibility (Appelman & Sundar, 2016). Medium credibility or channel credibility research focuses mainly on the medium (or channel) through which the message is delivered (e.g. newspaper versus radio, television versus the Internet); research on source credibility is mostly about the characteristics of the source – that is, the entity that offers the news (e.g. the organization, the speaker, or the news organization) (Golan, 2010). Message credibility is more about the veracity of the content of communication (Appelman & Sundar, 2016). Thus media credibility is a complicated concept as the source, message, and medium outlets are difficult to separate in mediated communication (Appelman & Sundar, 2016). For example, it is often challenging to identify the original source of information that is retweeted or reposted through multiple sources. Although young adults receive news via mobile apps or email, the originating sources of news are, or relate mostly to, the online offerings of traditional media outlets (Antunovic, Parsons, & Cooke, 2018). Focusing on medium and message credibility, the present study concerns assessing whether young people regard the political information, arts and culture information, and health information that they receive on television, read in newspapers, or view on social media as fair, believable, accurate, or in-depth. This thesis examines the perceived credibility of information on politics, culture, and health that one gets from traditional media and from social media; then it explores how the credibility that people attribute to the information provided by these media relates to different forms of media usage and online engagement.

Prior studies on media credibility investigated for the most part the credibility of radio, newspapers, television, and the Internet and conducted cross-media comparisons (Johnson & Kaye, 2009; Kioussis, 2001; Metzger et al., 2010). People tend to rate different news technologies and outlets differently (Livio & Cohen, 2018). TV news has

been found to be judged as being more credible than newspapers (Stroud & Lee, 2013). Additionally, recommendations-based information is perceived as being more relevant and more credible (Metzger et al., 2010). More recently, also social media credibility has gained attention (Xiaoqing Li & Zhang, 2018; Warren, Sulaiman, & Jaafar, 2014).

Comparisons between traditional media and new media (Internet, social media) produce inconsistent results. One set of scholars found that the Internet is judged to be more credible than its traditional counterparts (Banning & Sweetser, 2007; Johnson & Kaye, 1998), yet another group of scholars report opposite results (Kioussis, 2001; H. Zhang et al., 2014). Furthermore, some other researchers argue that the credibility of traditional media and that of their online versions are rated similarly (Antunovic et al., 2018; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2008). A main reason why respondents rated the two types similarly is that, in the current, complicated media environment, the sources of social media and those of traditional media sometimes overlap. Online sources normally include digital versions of newspapers, as well as the websites and social media accounts of traditional TV channels. For example, people receive daily news by following the official accounts of CNN or BBC on Twitter. A recent study pointed out that, although young adults receive news via mobile apps or email, the originating sources of news are mostly traditional media outlets (Antunovic et al., 2018).

Previous studies have also provided evidence that media credibility is associated with different types of media usage (Johnson & Kaye, 1998, 2015; Wanta & Hu, 1994; Westerman et al., 2014). In general, there is a positive relationship between media usage and perceived media credibility (Kioussis, 2001; Tsfati, 2010; Wanta & Hu, 1994), as well as between media usage and trust in media (Lin et al., 2016; Tokuda, Fujii, Jimba, & Inoguchi, 2009; Yamamoto, Lee, & Ran, 2016). Exposure to or reliance on a medium was found to decrease media skepticism (subjective feeling of alienation from the media) and positively predicted perceptions of media credibility (Tsfati, 2010; Wanta & Hu, 1994). Kaye and Johnson (2017) demonstrate that credibility is the strongest measure of social media use with regard to its predictive effect on motivations for the use of social networking sites and blogs. Another study indicates that the more time people spend on a medium, the more credibility they tend to attach to this platform (Mehrabi, Hassan, & Ali, 2009). Conversely, when users perceive a medium as not being credible, they may switch to another platform, which they consider to be more trustworthy (Johnson & Kaye, 2015). Furthermore, the perceived credibility of media not only leads to different media choices among the options available (e.g. traditional media versus Internet-based information sources; see Kioussis, 2001 and H. Zhang et al., 2014); it also relates to different patterns of media use. For instance, Stavrositu and Sundar (2008) posit that individuals' broader media usage repertoire matters: the credibility of the Internet is associated with both newspaper usage and Internet usage, but newspaper credibility is

influenced only by Internet usage. In addition, the different use of media and media repertoires, as well as the perceived credibility of media, may lead to different levels of online engagement. For example, the credibility of online health information is a major factor in determining further online engagement – in the form of seeking more health-related information and showing willingness to share that information – after an initial search (Hou & Shim, 2010; Lin et al., 2016; Ye, 2010; Yun & Park, 2010).

### **1.2.3.2 Trust in institutions: Trust in media and political trust**

Definitions of trust are intrinsically multifaceted and not a single one has been accepted across the board (Corritore, Kracher, & Wiedenbeck, 2003; Williams, 2012). One of the reasons is that trust has been studied by scholars from different fields – philosophy, sociology, psychology, management, and electronic commerce (Bimber, 2001; Yuning Wu & Sun, 2009). The definitions of trust generally appeal to concepts such as expectation, vulnerability, confidence, and collaboration (e.g. Corritore et al., 2003; Rotter, 1971). For instance, Hosmer (1995) sees trust as the reliance of one person, group, or firm upon the voluntary acceptance, by another person, group, or firm, of a duty to recognize and protect the rights and interests of all those engaged in a joint endeavor or economic exchange. Trust also implies that individuals are making themselves vulnerable to other individuals, groups or institutions that may harm or betray them (Levi & Stoker, 2000). In the online world, trust is the act of a trustor, while trustworthiness is a characteristic of the object of trust (Corritore et al., 2003).

Trust also plays a vital role in relationships between the medium (or media) and the recipient, particularly when it comes to uncertain situations beyond personal experience (Jackob, 2010; Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Trust is a complex interpersonal and organizational construct (Tyler & Degoey, 1995). Although there are various types of trust, the current study is looking at trust in institutions (e.g. media organizations, government institutions). This notion of trust in institutions is taken here to relate primarily to the faith, beliefs, and expectations people have vis-à-vis institutions and to entail a certain confidence that the institutions in question observe the rules, serve the general interest, and, importantly, are reliable (Devos, Spini, & Schwartz, 2002).

Individuals' trust in media refers to people's belief that media institutions and journalists will perform their job of informing the public in a proficient and credible way (Coleman, 2012). In China, where both traditional and social media are tightly linked to the authorities, there is a great need to cast light on the differences between media credibility and trust in media. Whereas media credibility is about concrete information that people gather from media and about distinctions between various media types or outlets regarding the degree to which people are willing to accept their message as true, trust in media concerns all the media as a whole – as an institution – and normally pits

them against alternative sources of information (Jackob, 2010; Johnson & Kaye, 2009; Kiouisis, 2001). It is assumed that high levels of media credibility attached to a particular medium do not amount to trust in the media as a whole. As already noted, trust plays a key role in media–recipient relationships, and it leads to further usage – for example of alternative media information, or of non-media sources (Jackob, 2010; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003).

Besides trust in media institutions, numerous studies have examined trust in political organizations and other public institutions (de Haan & Bardoel, 2011; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Warren et al., 2014). Political trust is of vital importance in the study of political regimes and has been a major issue in political scholarship (Ariely, 2015; Cappella, 2002; Gauchat, 2012; Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Yamamoto et al., 2016). Political trust is traditionally conceptualized as citizens' basic evaluative orientations (Stokes, 1962) or affective orientations (Craig, 1993) toward the government predicated on citizens' normative expectations of how their government should operate (A. H. Miller, 1974). Importantly, in this dissertation political trust is taken to have two components: the belief that the political system (or some part of it) will produce preferred outcomes even if left untended (Shi, 2001); and the fact that, to some degree, citizens are confident that their government will exercise its powers in a way that is benign to all social groups. Earlier studies on political trust show that media usage, media credibility, and trust in media are often associated with citizens' confidence in their government (Aarts, Fladmoe, & Strömbäck, 2012; Ceron, 2015; Ceron & Memoli, 2015; de Haan & Bardoel, 2011; Hyun & Kim, 2015; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Shen & Guo, 2013).

In China, citizens express high levels of confidence in the government. The high level of trust leads to more resilience in the aftermath of policy mistakes and administrative blunders (L. Li, 2004) and is of great benefit to officials and political institutions. Scholars link this high level of political trust in China to many factors such as political culture (Shi, 2001) and economic development (Zhengxu Wang, 2005). Drawing on data from the World Value Survey, Shen and Guo (2013) demonstrate that news consumption in general, and TV news consumption in particular, was positively associated with political trust. Political trust is one of the most important determinants of the stability of any political system (X. Chen & Shi, 2001), and how the possible different usage of traditional and social media influences political trust among young Chinese adults still remains unexplored in the digital era.

Apart from political trust, interpersonal trust is the other main kind or species of trust (Blind, 2007). Both political and interpersonal trust are key components in a society. This study also investigates another important case of trust in institutions, namely

trust in the healthcare system and how this matters for the perceived credibility of health and fitness information derived from the media.

#### **1.2.4 How do media usage and credibility relate to online engagement?**

The third main concept in my research concerns *online engagement*. In my dissertation I will examine how media usage and credibility affect online engagement in the fields of politics, culture, and health. In China, young consumers are increasingly engaging in various types of online activities in all sorts of domains: consuming cultural products, consulting a doctor online, participating in political events. Users are switching from traditional ways (e.g. radio playing or magazine reading) to social media (e.g. music blogs and online health services) to engage in online activities. Sina Weibo offers a platform for users' political participation (M. Chan et al., 2012) and Chinese college students engage in political discussion on online forums (Mou, Atkin, Fu, Lin, & Lau, 2013). Young people search for independent artists and their music on Douban.com (D. Tang & Lyons, 2016) and for health-related topics on Zhihu.com (Zhe Wang & Zhang, 2016). Scholars from various fields have debated over the role of social media – whether they contribute to people's participatory activities. For example, scholars had many discussions about whether social media are able to increase political participation among young citizens by increasing social interaction and by offering devices that appeal to youth (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Skoric & Poor, 2013; Vissers & Stolle, 2014). A growing body of literature has examined the relationship between media usage, particularly the increasing use of the Internet and social media platforms on the one hand and, on the other, online political engagement and cultural consumption (Boulianne, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Leguina et al., 2017), as well as health information seeking and sharing (Lin et al., 2016; Ye, 2010).

Just like the concept of trust, that of engagement has various definitions in different domains. Engagement generally refers to behavior that indicates a certain commitment to a topic or brand (Bimber, 2001; Boulianne, 2009). Moreover, online engagement refers to users' Internet-related behavior and is tied to Internet use (Egea, Menéndez, & González, 2006). Online engagement is mainly measured in terms of frequency of participation in various online activities (Blank & Groselj, 2014; Eynon & Malmberg, 2011; Holmes, 2011), and this behavior often comprises frequently and proactively searching for information, comparing information, and sharing information with others (Y. Li et al., 2018; McKinley & Wright, 2014; Yun & Park, 2010). For example, information seeking is one of the strongest predictors of social media use (Guo, Shim, & Otondo, 2010). A report of CNNIC (2017) shows that sharing information was the second top behavior that users perform on WeChat. As the Internet continues to expand globally, the understanding of how media use influences online engagement becomes increasingly indispensable.



Through the Internet, users can participate in numerous types of activities in this digital age: news gathering, making social connections, online gambling, funny videos sharing, and other entertainment activities (Blank & Groselj, 2014). Going online shapes Internet users' life chances and capacity for engagement in various important domains, but not all online activities are equally important (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008). There are many people who go online for entertainment rather than seeking health-related information (Madden & Rainie, 2003). To get a better understanding of young adults' online activities in their daily life, this dissertation will examine online engagement with politics, culture, and health.

#### **1.2.4.1 Online political engagement**

How are various forms of media usage and political trust connected to political engagement? This is a relevant question because it addresses the often theorized potential of the Internet to bring about social change (M. Chan et al., 2012; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). In the case of China, additional relevance lies in the question of how citizens use social media in a heavily restricted political climate. There is ample evidence from Western countries to suggest that media use relates to political dispositions such as engagement and interest (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014; Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2016; Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014). Scholars have hypothesized that the Internet, by affording bottom-up communication, can increase political engagement among citizens and bring a new impetus both to it and to trust (e.g., Bakker & De Vreese, 2011; Vissers & Stolle, 2014). Social media such as Facebook and Twitter enable citizens to voice their opinions directly, by giving them political expression in writing, and through interaction with others (van Dijck, 2013). Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) argue that the use of social media for keeping abreast of news has the potential to enhance civic engagement offline and online. In the Chinese context, a survey of 499 Sina Weibo users showed that social media use increased the willingness for political participation (M. Chan et al., 2012). Mou and colleagues (2013) found that online forum use was positively associated with online political discussion among Chinese college students. In line with these findings, the present study aims to investigate how media usage, in particular the use of social media, relates to political engagement; and it will do so by taking a repertoire-oriented approach designed to explore how distinct media patterns link to young adults' political engagement online in China.

#### **1.2.4.2 Online engagement with art and culture**

Another social domain that is covered in this thesis concerns the field of art and culture. By comparison to research on political communication in the context of China and cultural studies in the Western world, very few studies have focused on how Chinese audiences participate in and engage with the arts and with culture. It is a trend, both

in the West and in China that the young generation goes online to find and share cultural information, for example by searching for cultural events on Douban.com and by sharing cultural information with family and friends via WeChat. As digitalization and more ubiquitous equipment have enlarged the options to access cultural products, cultural consumption is more and more mediatized. Media are not only regarded as an important source to obtain cultural information, they also act as legitimating agents of cultural worth. Critics act as gatekeepers who select cultural products they find important and present them to their audiences (Debenedetti, 2006; Janssen & Verboord, 2015). Compared to new media such as blogs and cultural websites, legacy media such as newspapers and opinion magazines have more clout. However, as (young) audiences are increasingly turning away from the traditional media and toward the new media, reputations are likely to change in the near future. Thus it is worthwhile to examine how specific cultural activities are associated with different types of information sources.

Earlier studies have examined the relationship between media usage, particularly the increasing use of the Internet and social media platforms, and cultural participation (e.g. online music sharing and book information searching) (D. Lee, Yejean Park, Kim, Kim, & Moon, 2011; Leguina et al., 2017; M. Smith & Telang, 2016; Verboord, 2010). However, how online activities in cultural information searching and sharing are linked to certain cultural taste patterns still remains unexplored. The present study aims to deepen our understanding of how online engagement with the arts and culture links to media usage and credibility. It will do so by investigating cultural tastes and preferences among young adults and by trying to see how cultural consumption patterns in this population relate to online engagement with culture and the arts.

#### 1.2.4.3 Online engagement with health and fitness

The third domain for which I examine how media usage and the perceived credibility of distinct media types affect online engagement is health and fitness. Stronger reliance on Internet-based media has changed the way people engage in health-related activities. Nowadays it is increasingly common for people to seek health-related information on the Internet (Bundorf, Wagner, Singer, & Baker, 2006; Sundar, 2008). An empirical study reveals that around 33 percent of Chinese adults in Hong Kong are using the Internet monthly for health information (M. Wang, Viswanath, Lam, Wang, & Chan, 2013). Trust in social media-based information (the information provided on social media by peers) can direct users to further health-related engagement, such as looking for different options, alternative treatment, or medicinal information (Lin et al., 2016). Although social media usage is strongly linked to online engagement, it is likely that not all types of social media have similar influence (C. Li, 2018; McKinley & Wright, 2014). For instance, users who visit *online consulting groups* frequently tended to use



online health services for updates, but this behavior was not affected by the frequency of social network sites and chats usage (Mano, 2014). Also, platforms which are stronger in offering social support probably lead to more online engagement (C. Li, 2018; McKinley & Wright, 2014). It is thus necessary to examine how online engagement with health and fitness – in which a more active and critical disposition is displayed – is affected by differential media usage and by the credibility of various media outlets.

On the whole, this section intends to explore how differences in media usage (e.g. media repertoires, social support-oriented versus nonsocial support-oriented platforms) and the different types of media credibility (i.e. traditional media credibility and social media credibility) relate to online engagement in politics, culture, and health. The study makes reference to activities that may lead to more informed political engagement (e.g. seeking political information online and sharing politicians' opinions), participation in cultural activities (e.g. consuming and reviewing cultural products), and seeking and sharing health-related information in the Chinese context.

### I.3 Research Questions

In investigating the relationship between media usage, media credibility, and online engagement among young Chinese adults, this dissertation aims to answer the following main research questions:

**RESEARCH QUESTION 1** How strongly do different media uses and media repertoires link to young Chinese adults' perception of media credibility and to their trust in media in the fields of politics, culture, and health?

**RESEARCH QUESTION 2** To what extent do different media uses and media repertoires and different forms of media credibility relate to online engagement in the fields of politics, culture, and health among young Chinese adults?

### I.4 Method and Data

In order to garner insight into the relationship among differences in media use, traditional and social media credibility, online engagement in politics, culture, and health, a survey on credibility and trust among young adults between the ages of 18 and 40 in China was conducted for this project in 2016. The online survey research method makes it relatively easy to reach a large number of demographically diverse young people (from different provinces, with different education levels and incomes, etc.) who are interested

in social media. The data collection process consisted of two stages (see Figure 2). First, on May 21, 2016 a pilot survey was conducted among 120 selected respondents familiar with the Chinese media system. The questionnaire was adjusted and improved on the basis of their feedback after data analysis. Next, the revised questionnaire was distributed by the research agency wjx.cn, which has a database that covers all Chinese provinces. Only panel members in the age range of 18 to 40 were approached. Participants received compensation from the survey company. In total 1,033 valid responses (age:  $M = 29.7$ ,  $SD = 5.02$ ) were collected on July 7, 2016. This sample concerned respondents who completed the entire survey, with the final minimum response rate of 12.9 percent. Admittedly this response rate is relatively low, but it is common in web surveys (Shih & Fan, 2008; Yamamoto, Kushin, & Dalisay, 2015). There were slightly more female respondents (51.5 percent) participating in the survey. The sample contained a relatively large share of respondents with higher education (50.1 percent college graduates). Until December 2017, people with high school or vocational school educational levels and with junior college or higher education constituted respectively 24.5 percent and 18.6 percent of Chinese Internet users (CNNIC, 2019). Matching this overrepresentation of the highly educated, the majority of participants lived in cities (97.8 percent). Additionally, this overrepresentation seemed tied up with a disproportionately high representation of CCP members (Hyun & Kim, 2015; Hyun, Kim, & Sun, 2014). Around 33 percent of the respondents were CCP members, which was quite a bit higher than the 6 percent national percentage of CCP members (Hyun & Kim, 2015; Kennedy, Nagao, & Liu, 2018). However, Skoric, Zhu, and Pang (2016) note that the highly educated and metropolitan populations tend to be over-represented in Chinese survey samples.

As regards data analysis, the studies presented in this dissertation apply multiple quantitative methods, including ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions using IBM SPSS Statistics 25 and latent class analysis (LCA) by LatentGold. Some analyses are conducted using Stata 15. More specific explanations for the methods are addressed in each of the following empirical studies.

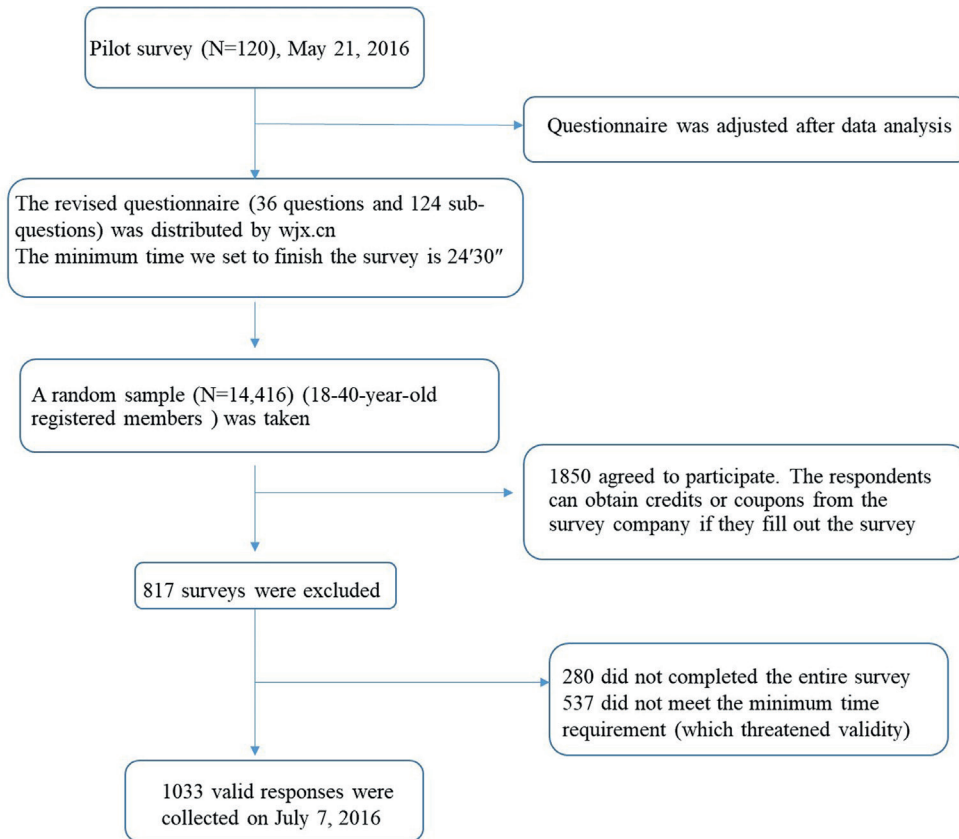


Figure 2 Data Collection

## I.5 Outline of this thesis

The overall research framework is presented in Figure 3. Each chapter's content and research questions are briefly discussed below.

Four empirical studies were conducted with the aim of achieving a better understanding of media usage, credibility, and online engagement among young adults in China. Chapters 2 and 3 will focus on the relationships between media usage, media credibility, political trust, and online engagement in politics. Then Chapter 4 will examine media usage and credibility in relation to engagement with the arts and culture. Chapter 5 will investigate media usage, credibility, and online engagement in the fields of health and fitness. This project compares the uses of the media at different dimensions. Chapter 2 centers on differences between traditional media use and social media use. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on differences in media use and cultural consumption by taking a repertoire approach. Chapter 5 centers on the different uses of specific media outlets.

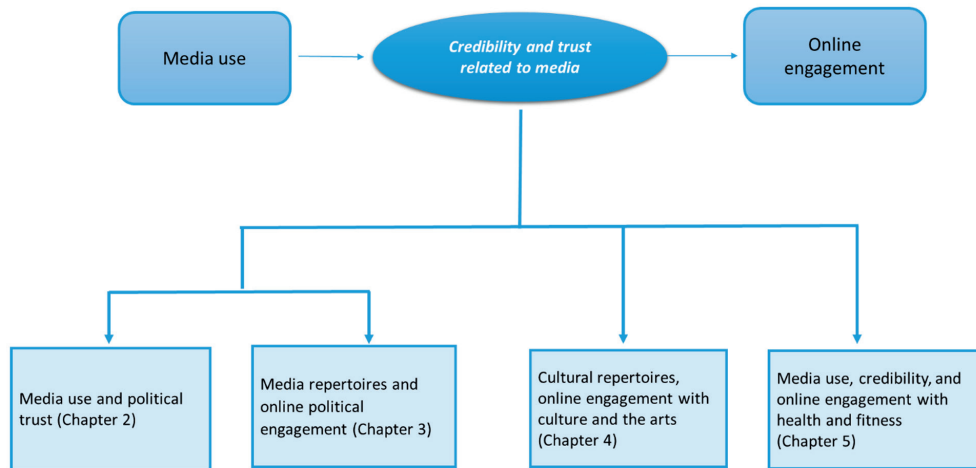


Figure 3 The Overall Framework of This Dissertation

### 1.5.I Politics

The first two chapters focus on the relationships between media use, the perceived credibility of political information on traditional and social media, political trust, and political engagement. Specifically, Chapter 2 examines how the association between usage of the media (traditional and social) and political trust can be explained by (1) the mediating roles of the perceived credibility of these media and (2) the moderating roles of trust in sources (both media and non-media ones) and CCP membership. To put it in broader perspective, the chapter investigates the different roles of traditional and social media within the relationship between media usage and political trust by way of seeking answers to two empirical questions in this area. (1) To what extent can we explain the said relationship through media credibility, trust in sources, and CCP membership among young Chinese adults? And (2) how do the roles of traditional and social media differ within the proposed relationship?

By taking a user-centric and repertoire-oriented approach, Chapter 3 investigates how young Chinese adults combine specific traditional media and social media platforms. Consequently this chapter examines the relationship between the media repertoires of young Chinese adults and their political preferences. The recently developed statistical application Step-3 models in LatentGold are used for analysis. Then the distal outcome option in LatentGold is used to estimate the effect of repertoires on political variables – namely political trust, political interest, and political engagement online – while controlling for other characteristics. This chapter attempts to answer three empirical questions. (1) How do young adults combine traditional media and specific social media and, in doing so, create their respective cross-media repertoires? (2) How do media

variables and the personal background predict young adults' cross-media repertoires? (3) How do distinct media patterns predict three political variables: political trust, political interest, and political engagement online?

### **I.5.2 Culture**

Chapter 4 examines how cultural taste patterns collected from young adults in multiple cultural domains relate to these people's media usage and sense or perception of media credibility, as well as to their online engagement with various forms of art and culture. After mapping the cultural repertoires of young Chinese adults, this chapter studies how media usage (and this covers, again, both traditional and social media) and the perceived credibility of media sources influence the patterns of media cultural consumption. I then investigate how the found repertoires impact the online cultural engagement of young people – that is, which taste patterns are tied to which uses of online media. In sum, this chapter tries to answer the following questions. (1) What kinds of clusters of cultural taste can be found in the Chinese context? (2) To what extent can the differences between Chinese cultural repertoires be explained through media variables, in particular through media credibility and media usage? (3) How much of young adults' online engagement with art and culture can we explain with the help of cultural consumption patterns and the two media variables?

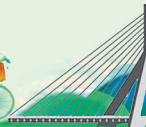
### **I.5.3 Health**

Focusing on health and fitness-related information, Chapter 5 examines how differential media usage across four traditional media outlets and eight Chinese social media platforms relate to the credibility of health and fitness information available on traditional and social media. Then, focusing on online health and fitness-related information-seeking and -sharing behaviors, the chapter goes on to predict the extent to which the use of different media platforms prompts individuals to participate in online health and fitness-related activities. It investigates young adults' perceptions about credibility of the health and fitness-related information available on traditional and social media; the use of social support-oriented versus nonsocial support-oriented social media platforms; the element of trust in the healthcare system; and the online health and fitness-related activities of the population under study. In sum, the study tries to answer the following questions. (1) How much does media usage correspond to young adults' perception of the credibility of health and fitness-related information they acquire through traditional and social media? (2) To what extent do differences in media use affect this perception? (3) To what degree can online engagement with health and fitness be explained by media usage and media credibility?

Finally, Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 summarize the findings of the previous chapters and discuss important theoretical, methodological, and practical issues. Furthermore,

these chapters identify the strengths and weaknesses of the research presented in the dissertation and offer suggestions for future studies.










# Chapter 5

• Social media use and health information seeking and sharing among young Chinese adults<sup>7</sup>



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<sup>7</sup> This chapter has been published as Gong, Q., & Verboord, M. (forthcoming). Social media use and health information seeking and sharing among young Chinese adults. *The Journal of Social Media in Society*.

## Abstract

This chapter sets out to determine who trusts health- and fitness-related information available in traditional and social media and what influences online engagement with health and fitness in China. The focus here is on differences in media use across four specific traditional media and eight social media outlets. Using the survey method, I classify the eight social media platforms into two types, on the basis of their characteristics; and the main criterion in my classification is whether these platforms are able to offer social support to users easily or not. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression is applied to predict perceived media credibility and online engagement with health and fitness. The results show that young adults who are less well educated, watch television and use the social support-oriented platforms WeChat and Qzone very frequently, and read newspapers and use Baidu Tieba sometimes are more likely to consider online health and fitness information to be credible. Also, being male, being better educated, and regarding health information supplied by media as credible, as well as using certain media platforms frequently are features associated with frequent engagement with health and fitness. The media outlets in question include magazines and three social support-oriented websites: Sina Weibo, WeChat, and Qzone. The chapter discusses implications of my results, along with limitations of the current study and directions for future research.

## 5 Social media use and health information seeking and sharing among young Chinese adults

### 5.1 Introduction

In 2016 Wei Zexi, a 21-year-old Chinese college student, died after receiving unsuccessful experimental treatment for a rare form of cancer at a state military-run hospital. He had learned of this treatment from a promoted result publicized on the Chinese search engine Baidu. Wei's death drew widespread attention from Chinese Internet users and raised questions about the credibility of health-related information delivered online (M. Liu & Hu, 2016). Nowadays it is increasingly common for people to seek health-related information on the Internet (Bundorf et al., 2006; Sundar, 2008). Millions of people turn to the Internet as their first source of information (Hesse et al., 2005; Rutsaert et al., 2013); young people in particular have developed this habit (McKinley & Wright, 2014). However, one of the biggest limitations of the Internet, and more specifically of social media platforms for health communication, is the sometimes inaccurate character of the information they release on health (Pant et al., 2012; Rutsaert et al., 2013; Xingting Zhang et al., 2017). In China, despite the fact that the Internet is an increasingly important source of information on matters of health (Cao, Zhang, Xu, & Wang, 2016), there has been, for a long time, a lack of valid health information obtainable online (S. Tang et al., 2008; Xingting Zhang et al., 2017). Thus on the one hand seeking health- and fitness-related information online has become widespread, while on the other hand the quality and credibility of this information often seems questionable. This dilemma raises questions concerning awareness of the quality of health-related information among various demographic groups, as well as more general questions about the link between media usage and media credibility when it comes to informing oneself on health matters.

Of course, besides the Internet, traditional media such as television and newspapers also play key roles in disseminating health-related information (Peng & Tang, 2010; M. Wang et al., 2013; Zheng Wang & Gantz, 2007). Yet little is known about differences in the credibility and trustworthiness of health-related information between various media outlets. This chapter attempts to explore how different media platforms affect or influence the perceived credibility of health-related information acquired from the media – traditional and social alike. Also, by comparison to traditional media, new media, particularly social media, have great potential to support health-related information searching (L. M. S. Miller & Bell, 2012). My research seeks to understand what stimulates online engagement with health, conceptualized as active behavior that takes the form of searching, comparing, and sharing health-related information online.

Previous studies have examined various factors that influence online engagement with health, such as socio-demographic factors (Bundorf et al., 2006), source characteristics (Cao et al., 2016), and social media usage (Mano, 2014). But, to the best of my knowledge, no study has compared the different effects of media use and media credibility on the question of online engagement with health. The present chapter attempts to fill in this gap: through data analysis of young Chinese adults, it aims to build a general image of *those who tend to trust health-related information online* and of *what influences online engagement with health*.

China represents a theoretically important case for an examination of the relationship between media factors and online engagement with health. First, although it has been suggested that there are cross-cultural differences when it comes to seeking and sharing online health information (Y. Li et al., 2018; Morahan-Martin, 2004; Song et al., 2016), most of the current studies on credibility in this area concern Western users and are carried out in an Anglo-Saxon context (AlMansour et al., 2014; Jiang, 2019). A study of this problem from the Chinese perspective would expand general knowledge of health information online beyond Western cultures. Second, the media environment has its own circumstances; and this is particularly true of the online environment in China, given the strict censorship exerted by the Chinese government. Notions of media credibility might work differently in such a system. Also, in China, social media users are slightly younger than in the Western world (CNNIC, 2019): nearly 76percent of them are under 40 years of age. My research focuses on young adults in the broadly defined age group of 18 to 40, because these are, Internet-wise, the most highly connected population segment (Fox, 2004) and their media preferences are hugely different from those of the older generation (Edgerly, 2017). People in this age group also pay more attention than the older generation to the quality of the information they receive from new sources (Edgerly, 2017). Besides, on top of the regular media, old and new, these people are exposed to a variety of social media outlets developed in China (as I mentioned in an earlier chapter, p.5).

This chapter tries to answer three questions. (1) What is the effect of media usage on young adults' perceptions about the credibility of health- and fitness-related information they get from traditional and social media? (2) How much do differences in the use of media affect the users' perceptions about the credibility of online-derived health- and fitness-related information? (3) To what extent can we explain the phenomenon of online engagement with health and fitness through the notions of media usage and media credibility? To address these questions, I use survey data collected in 2016 as part of the same research project described in previous chapters and I follow the same general pattern: first I compare the differences between young adults' perceptions about the credibility of health and fitness information across media platforms; then I predict online

engagement with health and fitness with the help of media variables and demographics. I conclude with a discussion and suggestions for future research.

## 5.2 Theoretical framework

### 5.2.1 Explaining the credibility of health- and fitness-related information in the media in China

Over the past two decades, the environment in China has experienced huge changes associated with unprecedented economic development. Most notably, air pollution has become a major public health issue, given the rapid urbanization and industrialization. The problem of air pollution caused an explosion in the numbers of those seeking health information online, and recent years saw a proliferation of discussions on air pollution-related issues conducted nationwide on Chinese social media (Shiliang Wang, Paul, & Dredze, 2015). In the meantime, the general improvement in the quality of people's lives, driven as it was by income growth, has created an increasing need for more mundane types of health information (e.g. how to work out properly and effectively). This is not surprising, considering that the consumption of sports and fitness activities per capita in the Chinese population increased by 39.3 percent in the first half of 2018 (NBS, 2018).

Although the Internet is one of the major media outlets for people to gather information on health (Peng & Tang, 2010; Redmond, Baer, Clark, Lipsitz, & Hicks, 2010), most health information found on Chinese websites is unreliable and very complicated to understand (Cao et al., 2016; Jiang & Street, 2017). One survey shows that more than 60 percent of users were concerned about the quality of the health information on WeChat (Xingting Zhang et al., 2017), one of the largest Chinese social media platforms in the world. Apart from the Internet, mass media also play important roles in disseminating health-related information (Cline & Haynes, 2001; Peng & Tang, 2010; Redmond et al., 2010). An empirical study with 1,000 sampled Beijing residents shows that around 65 percent of these participants selected TV programs, 63 percent identified print media outlets (newspapers and magazines), and 44 percent chose radio programs to receive health information (S. Liu, Yao, Lin, Jia, & Zhang, 2003). Health-related reports can differ across media types. For instance, health-related news tends to be short, fleeting, and normally without follow-up information on television (Gantz & Wang, 2009). More in-depth and diverse information is provided on social media, for example professional advice and networking with peers (Van de Belt et al., 2013). Thus there are considerable differences among media outlets for people with health-related interests, questions, and concerns. Unlike traditional media, social media offer health-

related information that comes not only from health professionals, but also from peers who experience similar health concerns (Song et al., 2016; L. Zhang & Jung, 2018).

It has been widely accepted that people tend not to use a source that they do not trust (Tsfati, 2010). Kiouisis (2001) found a positive correlation between media use and media credibility. Also, some scholars suggest that traditional media are judged to be more credible than their online counterparts (Kiouisis, 2001; H. Zhang et al., 2014), although social media have become a key source of health information (Rutsaert et al., 2013). Given the differences that exist between traditional and social media, individuals evaluate the credibility of traditional media and that of Internet-based information (both with their respective sources) differently (Kiouisis, 2001; H. Zhang et al., 2014). I expect that the credibility of health- and fitness-related information from media sources will be evaluated differently in the case of traditional media and in that of social media; and I also believe that this is likely to be shaped by individuals' media usage. In consequence, I propose the following hypothesis, which is informed by the findings mentioned above and adapted to the unique media environment in China:

**H1** Young adults will perceive and rate the health- and fitness-related information they get from traditional media as more credible than the corresponding information they get from social media.

Even among social media outlets, varying functions and characteristics of social media platforms result in differences in users' preferences for health-related information (L. Zhang & Jung, 2018). Some social media platforms offer easy ways for users to gain social support; one of these is Baidu Tieba, the largest online community in China. Previous studies indicate that the Quitting Smoking subgroup on Baidu Tieba provides Chinese smokers with emotional and information support, which contributes to the success of quitting smoking (C. Li, 2018); and WeChat seems to be a desirable platform for users to gain informational support (Oh, Lauckner, Boehmer, Fewins-Bliss, & Li, 2013). Social support has been shown to play a key role in maintaining individuals' mental and physical health (C.-Y. Liu & Yu, 2013). Albrecht and Adelman (1987, p. 19) define social support as "verbal and nonverbal communication between providers and recipients that helps manage uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other or the relationship and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one's life experience." Zhao and Zhang (2017) find that social support is emphasized as one of the critical benefits to users of health-related social media settings. In this chapter, I argue that distinguishing between social media with and social media without social support orientation can help us understand the differences between young adults' perceptions about the credibility of the health- and fitness-related information available in traditional and social media – or, put otherwise, the different degrees of credibility

that young adults bestow on this kind of information. The social support-oriented social media offer platforms on which users can interact with friends and family in order to gain emotional support, for example WeChat and Q zone, or platforms on which they can find acquaintances or even strangers with similar health concerns and receive informational support from them, for example WeChat (L. Zhang & Jung, 2018) and Baidu Tieba (C. Li, 2018); and some of these platforms also offer expert knowledge and official accounts coming from health professionals. I expect that these media exert a stronger influence on the item of perceived credibility than do social media without an orientation to social support, since such platforms engage the role of others, who have the relevant experience (and these can be both peers and experts). On the basis of this argument, I formulate the following hypothesis:

**H2** The use of social support-oriented media is associated with a stronger influence on the perceived credibility of health- and fitness-related information available on social media than the use of social media without a focus on social support.

## 5.2.2 Explaining online engagement with health and fitness

I discussed the impact of media use by focusing on two elements: the nature of this use in the specific process of seeking health information; and the role of social support. In this section I intend to focus on the interactions that occur on the Internet, particularly on social media sites, around health- and fitness-related needs – in other words I will look at online engagement with health and fitness. Online engagement generally refers to behavior that indicates a certain amount of commitment to a topic or brand. Often behavior of this kind comprises frequently and proactively searching for information, comparing information, and sharing information with others. Online engagement involves liking, commenting, and sharing health-related information (L. Zhang & Jung, 2018). Given that information seeking is one of the strongest predictors of social media use (Guo et al., 2010) and that sharing information was the second most common activity performed by users on WeChat (CNNIC, 2017), the present chapter focuses on the online seeking and sharing of health- and fitness-related information.

How is the credibility of various media outlets connected to online engagement? Answering this question is critical not only because of growing concerns about the accuracy and credibility of online information on health, but also in view of the popularity of online engagement with health and fitness. According to a national survey, 72 percent of American adults have searched for health information online (Fox, 2014). Around 33 percent of Chinese adults in Hong Kong have used the Internet monthly, for searches on health-related topics (M. Wang et al., 2013). In China, one of the great benefits to users who go online prompted by health concerns is that they need not worry less about their privacy (Cao et al., 2016). This may be true especially for people with sensitive health-

related problems, such as issues regarding sex and mental health. Compared to users in the United States and South Korea, Chinese youths in Hong Kong are significantly more likely to participate in computer-mediated communication for personal health issues (Lin et al., 2016). Previous studies found that trust in and credibility of online health information is a major determinant of further online engagement in the form of seeking more health-related information and showing willingness to share it after one successful search (Hou & Shim, 2010; Lin et al., 2016; Ye, 2010; Yun & Park, 2010). Trust in social media-based information (e.g. in the information provided on social media by peers) can direct users to further health-related engagement, such as searches for different options for treatment, alternative treatment, or medicinal information (Lin et al., 2016). Hence I expect that the credibility of the media as perceived by young adults is associated with the latter's online engagement with health and fitness.

While social media usage is strongly linked to online engagement, it is likely that not all types of social media will have similar influence: again, platforms that are stronger in offering social support will probably lead to more online engagement (C. Li, 2018; McKinley & Wright, 2014). Mano (2014) shows that individuals seeking online health information are prompted by their social media usage: the more they use social media, the more likely they are to search for health information online. He also provides evidence that different forms of social media influence online health behavior in different ways and that not all social media outlets are of equal quality in terms of users' engagement with health. More specifically, users who visit *online consulting groups* frequently are, according to Mano, more likely to use online health services for getting updates, but this behavior is not affected by the frequency of social network sites and chats usage. The results presented above indicate that not only differences in using traditional and social media impact the level of online health engagement; distinctions as to which social media platforms are used are also likely to generate differences in engagement. I expect that media usage across platforms is associated with these online behaviors to various degrees. Guided by the arguments presented here and by previous research, I formulate the following hypotheses:

**H3a** Young Chinese adults' online engagement with health and fitness is positively affected by their perceptions about the credibility of the health- and fitness-related information they get from social media.

**H3b** Young Chinese adults' online engagement with health and fitness is positively affected by their perceptions about the credibility of the health- and fitness-related information they get from traditional media.



**H4** The use of social support-oriented social media is associated with more online engagement with health and fitness than the use of social media without a focus on social support.

## 5.3 Methods

### 5.3.1 The data

For a comprehensive presentation of the data collection process I followed in my research for this entire dissertation, including the present chapter, see 2.3.1, p.36.

### 5.3.2 Measurements

**Credibility of health- and fitness-related information in the media.** To compare the levels of the perceived media credibility, the respondents were asked to rate the believability, accuracy, fairness, depth, and trustworthiness of the health- and fitness-related information they found in traditional and social media on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much; see also “Media credibility” at 2.3.2 for a general presentation). This credibility measurement followed the measurements of previous studies (Johnson & Kaye, 2009). Scores for the five measures of credibility were combined into two scales, for traditional and for social media respectively.

**Media use.** Four types of traditional media use and eight Chinese social media platforms were measured by asking participants to specify, on a 5-point scale (0 = never, 5 = almost daily), how often they used each social platform (see “Media usage” at 2.3.2, with more details; also cf. “Media use” at 3.4.2). I classified the eight social media outlets into two types, according to whether they are (easily) able to offer their users any social support. Social support-oriented platforms tend to provide emotional support, instrumental support, and informational support (Trepte, Dienlin, & Reinecke, 2015). The group of social support-oriented social media consists of Weibo, WeChat, Qzone, and Baidu Tieba. The other group consists of Zhihu.com, Tianya Club, Douban.com, and Guokr.com.

**Online engagement with health and fitness.** I measured young adults’ online engagement with health and fitness by averaging five items measured on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all, 5 = very frequently) and then creating an index out of them (CNNIC, 2017). Respondents were asked how often they had “read blogs or microblogging of health and fitness-related information,” “shared with others of health and fitness-related information,” “posted comments of health and fitness-related information online,” “followed social media accounts related to health and fitness,” or “participated in health and fitness-related activities.” Again, these items form a reliable scale (Median = 3.40,

Cronbach's alpha = 0.86). See, for comparison, the corresponding sections in previous chapters ("Online engagement with arts and culture" at 4.3.3.2, p. 79 and "Online political engagement" at 3.4.2, p.55)

*Control variables.* I take into account socio-demographic characteristics, since these have been found to influence individuals' perceptions of credibility (Y. Kim, 2016; Ye, 2010) and online engagement (Manierre, 2015; Mesch, Mano, & Tsamir, 2012; M. Wang et al., 2013). For details concerning these characteristics and their measurement, see especially the section "Socio-demographic variables" at 4.3.3.3 (p. 79), and also "Demographics" at 3.3.2 (p. 56).

*Trust in the healthcare system.* I also expect that the trust people put into the healthcare system will have an effect on the likelihood of their engaging in health-related activities (see also Tokuda et al., 2009). So I include a measure of trust in my analysis. The questionnaire asked respondents to answer the question "How much do you trust the healthcare system?" on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Trust in the healthcare system (Median = 5.00) is a single-item measure.

### 5.3.3 Analytical design

First, this chapter examines the differences in media usage across the twelve outlets and their impacts on the perceived credibility of health and fitness-related information derived from traditional and social media. OLS regression is applied to predict the perceived credibility of health-related information on traditional and social media among young adults from their media usage, from demographic factors, and from trust in the healthcare system. Then, by applying the least squares method again, I go on to predict young adults' online engagement with health and fitness from their perceptions about media credibility, from their media usage, from demographic factors, and from trust in the healthcare system.

## 5.4 Results

### 5.4.1 Descriptive results

Out of the four traditional media outlets, television has the highest frequency of usage (Median = 4.00). The respondents are less likely to use radio (Median = 3.00), magazines (Median = 3.00), and newspapers (Median = 3.00). For the social media platforms, the frequency of WeChat usage (Median = 5.00) is the highest and Guokr.com (Median = 2.00) scores the lowest. The rate of use for all the social support-oriented social media – WeChat, Qzone (Median = 4.00), Sina Weibo (Median = 4.00), and Baidu Tieba (Median = 3.00) – is significantly higher than the rate of use for most traditional media (except television). Regarding the credibility assessment of health- and fitness-related

information in the media, descriptive results show that young adults' ratings are higher for traditional media (Median = 5.60, Cronbach's alpha = .94) than for social media (Median = 5.20, Cronbach's alpha = .94). This implies that Hypothesis 1 is supported.

#### 5.4.2 Who tends to trust health and fitness-related information?

Table 5.1 compares young adults' assessment of the credibility of information provided by traditional versus social media in matters of health. I estimate three models for both dependent variables: one contains only the demographic variables, another contains the media variables, and yet another contains everything. When comparing the explained variances in the models for the credibility of social media and the credibility of traditional media, I find that the former are better explained by the predictors than the latter (Model 1: Adj.  $R^2$  = 25.2 percent vs. 4: 25.6 percent; Model 2: 18.6 percent vs. Model 5: 22.1 percent; Model 3: 31.2 percent vs. Model 6: 34.5 percent). Regarding my first research question, the results show that media usage is significantly related to how young adults perceive the credibility of health- and fitness-related information in both traditional and social media. Controlling for the socio-demographic variables does not really alter the effects of media variables. The socio-demographic variables have limited impact. It seems that it is not so much the personal background that makes respondents give higher credibility to health information on media, as it is their media usage.

Table 5.1 OLS Regression Models predicting media credibility of health and fitness-related information on traditional and social media

	Traditional Media Credibility			Social Media Credibility		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<b>Demographics</b>						
Gender (1=Female, 2=Male)	.01	----	.02	-.03	----	-.00
Age	.04	----	.02	.04	----	.02
Education	-.00	----	-.02	-.05~	----	-.07*
Parents' education	.04	----	.00	.06*	----	.03
Income	.08*	----	.02	.08*	----	.00
Trust in HealthCare System	.47***	----	.39***	.48***	----	.38***
<b>Traditional Media Usage</b>						
TV	----	.15***	.13***	----	.13***	.11***
Newspaper	----	.08~	.05	----	.11**	.09*

*Continue*

Table 5.1 OLS Regression Models predicting media credibility of health and fitness-related information on traditional and social media

	Traditional Media Credibility			Social Media Credibility		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Magazine	----	.15**	.11**	----	.09*	.05
Radio	----	-.00	-.03	----	-.01	-.03
<b>Social support-oriented Social Media Usage</b>						
Sina Weibo	----	.05	.02	----	.07*	.04
WeChat	----	.06~	.05*	----	.09**	.09**
Qzone	----	.08*	.04	----	.14***	.10**
Baidu Tieba	----	.07*	.06~	----	.08*	.06*
<b>Non-Social support-oriented Social Media Usage</b>						
Tianya Club	----	.02	.03	----	.04	.06
Zhihu.com	----	.06	.01	----	-.00	-.02
Douban.com	----	.02	-.00	----	-.04	-.03
Guokr.com	----	.01	-.02	----	.09*	.06
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	25.2%	18.6%	31.2%	25.6%	22.1%	34.5%
<b>F value</b>	58.80	20.64	26.98	60.04	25.36	31.15

Notes Reported effects are standardized (beta) coefficients. Standardized effects. Significance levels: ~  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

The second research question examines whether certain media outlets are given more weight by influencing the media credibility of health and fitness. The results indicate that the effects of the twelve media platforms on the credibility of health and fitness-related information are different, as predicted. Specifically, regarding the perceived credibility of health information on traditional media, television (Model 2:  $\beta = .15$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Model 3:  $\beta = .13$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and magazine usage (Model 2:  $\beta = .15$ ,  $p < .01$ ; Model 3:  $\beta = .11$ ,  $p < .01$ ) are positively related to it. In Model 3, the social support-oriented platforms WeChat ( $\beta = .05$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and Baidu Tieba ( $\beta = .06$ ,  $p < .10$ ) are the only two social media outlets that reach the significance level needed to predict traditional media credibility when controlling for demographics. With regard to the credibility of social media, traditional media outlets still retain their influence: television ( $\beta = .11$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and newspapers ( $\beta = .09$ ,  $p < .05$ ) are all significantly related to social media credibility in Model 6. Almost all the social support-oriented platforms are associated with social media credibility: WeChat ( $\beta = .09$ ,  $p < .01$ ), Qzone ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and Baidu Tieba ( $\beta = .08$ ,  $p < .05$ ); the only exception is Sina Weibo (in Model 5 without control

variables,  $\beta = .07, p < .05$ ). All the social media without a focus on social support fail to reach the significance level, which implies that H2 is supported. The results also show that the effect of the social support-oriented platforms is clearly larger for social media credibility in Model 6 than for traditional media credibility in Model 3. And certain traditional platforms (television and magazine) exert a stronger influence on predicting the perceived credibility of traditional media than that of social media.

So then, who tends to trust health information found online? Given the results we've looked at, young adults who are less educated, watch television and use WeChat and Qzone very frequently, and read newspapers and use Baidu Tieba sometimes are more likely to rate online health and fitness information as credible.

### 5.4.3 Online engagement with health and fitness

My third research question asked how media variables linked to young adults' online activities relate to health and fitness. Table 5.2 shows the results of an OLS regression analysis of the factors that influence online engagement with health and fitness. It was found that both

Table 5.2 OLS Regression Models predicting online engagement with health and fitness

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<b>Demographics</b>				
Gender (1=Female, 2=Male)	.12***	----	.15***	.15***
Age	.03	----	.04	.04
Education	.21***	----	.19***	.14***
Parents' education	.08**	----	.01	.01
income	.19***	----	.05	.05
<b>Trust in HealthCare System</b>				
Media usage				
TV	----	-.01	.03	.01
Newspaper	----	.10**	.07~	.05
Magazine	----	.13***	.15***	.13***
Radio	----	.10***	.07*	.07*

*Continue*

Table 5.2 OLS Regression Models predicting online engagement with health and fitness

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<b>Social support- oriented Social Media Usage</b>				
Sina Weibo	----	.12***	.14***	.13***
WeChat	----	.11***	.11***	.10***
Q zone	----	.04	.11***	.09***
Baidu Tieba	----	.007	.01	-.01
<b>Non-Social support-oriented Social Media Usage</b>				
Tianya Club	----	.10**	.08*	.08*
Zhihu.com	----	.11**	.05	.05
Douban.com	----	.01	.02	.02
Guokr.com	----	.05	.06~	.06~
<b>Media credibility</b>				
Social media credibility	----	.09*	----	.10**
Traditional media credibility	----	.10**	----	.08*
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	25.2%	42.1%	44.8%	46.5%
F value	59.07	54.45	47.35	45.63

Notes Reported effects are standardized (beta) coefficients. Standardized effects. Significance levels:  
 ~  $p < .10$  \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

traditional and social media outlets affect the likelihood that young people participate in online engagement with matters of health.

In Model 2 almost all the traditional outlets are significantly related to online engagement; this applies to reading magazines ( $\beta = .13, p < .001$ ), listening to the radio ( $\beta = .10, p < .001$ ), and reading newspapers ( $\beta = .10, p < .01$ ). But the effect of radio and newspapers becomes smaller or disappears when controlling for media credibility and demographics in Models 3 and 4, and the newspaper influence even disappears when controlling for credibility in Model 4. Similarly, the effect of some social media platforms is lowered to predict health engagement online when taking demographics and media credibility into account in Model 3 and 4 by comparison to Model 2, including Tinaya Club and Zhihu.com. On the contrary, Sina Weibo ( $\beta = .13, p < .001$ ), WeChat ( $\beta = .10, p < .001$ ), and Qzone ( $\beta = .09, p < .001$ ) still demonstrate strong influence on online engagement when we control for media credibility in Model 4, which implies that H4 is supported. Also, the results indicate that the perceived credibility of both traditional

and social media is significantly associated with online engagement in Models 2 and 4. Hence one can accept H3a and H3b.

Aside from media variables, some socio-demographic factors are also significantly linked to the online engagement. Gender and education are the only two demographics to influence the engagement in all models. The influences of income and parents' education disappear when controlling for demographics and media credibility in Models 3 and 4. As in the case of predicting media credibility in Table 5.1, trust in the healthcare system in Table 5.2 appears to be an essential predictor of online engagement with health in Models 1 and 3. However, the effect of trust in the healthcare system disappears in Model 4. Thus, when we take media credibility into account, trust in the healthcare system no longer affects participation in online health-related activities.

Given these results, we can conclude that there are large differences between those who engage in online health and fitness activities and those who do not. The main differences between these two groups are linked to media use, perceived media credibility, and characteristics. Male young adults who are more educated and evaluate health information from the media (and especially from social media) as credible are more likely to participate frequently in online activities related to health and fitness. Most importantly, young adults who often use certain media platforms – magazines, radio, three of the social support-oriented platforms (Sina Weibo, WeChat, and Qzone), and Tianya Club – do tend to belong in this group.

## 5.5 Discussion and conclusions

When individuals are increasingly turning to the Internet for health- and fitness-related information, the relatively low credibility of what one finds online – pointed out in various studies – is becoming a global problem. Despite many studies focusing on specific health cases or media platforms (or both), there is not enough knowledge and understanding of the overall patterns according to which young adults – who grew up with the Internet and social media – use and trust media outlets as part of their everyday information retrieval. This chapter is an attempt to discover those overall patterns. It sets out to show how people in this group assess the credibility of health information coming to them from all sorts of media types and outlets, and how this process is in turn related to their regular media consumption and its wider patterns in the Chinese environment. Besides comparing traditional media with social media, I distinguish between two broad types of social platforms: platforms that offer social support options and platforms that don't. I also investigate how online engagement with health and fitness – in which a more active and critical disposition is displayed – is affected by media usage and credibility.

My major findings and contributions in the area delimited here are twofold. First, I find that the credibility of health information can be explained through very similar sets of factors, regardless of whether that information derives from traditional media or from social media. Both television watching and print media usage affect credibility in a positive way. The importance of television's impact on media credibility fits in with the results of an earlier study on the topic: out of six media types, television was rated as the most credible – the other five being newspapers, the radio, magazines, the Internet, and the mobile phone (J. Wu, 2016). The results for print media do raise questions: reading magazines is associated with the higher credibility of traditional media, while reading newspapers is associated with social media credibility. Perhaps this points to specific media usages: magazine reading could still primarily involve health magazines in print, whereas newspapers, may become increasingly associated with their online versions. The impact of social media usage on credibility follows rather the media classification: it is weak and very limited in the case of traditional media credibility, but stronger in the case of social media credibility. Particularly for social media credibility, two social media platforms stand out – WeChat and Qzone – probably thanks to their distinctive characteristics: on the one hand, their users are often connected to real-life friends; on the other hand, their structures are privacy enhancing by comparison to those of other outlets (e.g. access to profiles and posts requires the personal approval of existing users) (L. Zhang & Jung, 2018). Media users tend to trust recommendations from people they are familiar with, and East Asians seem to show more trust than Americans in experience-based health information sources – that is, in information that reflects someone else's experience of dealing with a medical problem (Song et al., 2016). Finally, it should be noted that socio-demographic characteristics have little impact. I only found evidence that higher-educated youngsters consider health-related information coming from social media not to be too trustworthy.

Second, this chapter also investigated how media variables (use and credibility) are linked to young adults' online engagement with health and fitness. I find evidence that social media usage prompts online engagement with health, which is in line with previous research (Mano, 2014; L. M. S. Miller & Bell, 2012). The effect is stronger for social media outlets with social support affordances, for example Sina Weibo, WeChat, and Qzone. There is also an effect of traditional media, but not as one expects it. Reading magazines and, to a lesser degree, listening to the radio increase one's online engagement with health, while watching television and reading newspapers do not. Again, we may observe the impact of health magazines here. Readers of such magazines perhaps go online in order to combine the printed information with newer, more up-to-date information or to share what they learned. The same may apply to radio listeners. Thus the positive effect of the forms of media usage suggests that young adults "mix and match" their information diets. I also found evidence that both traditional

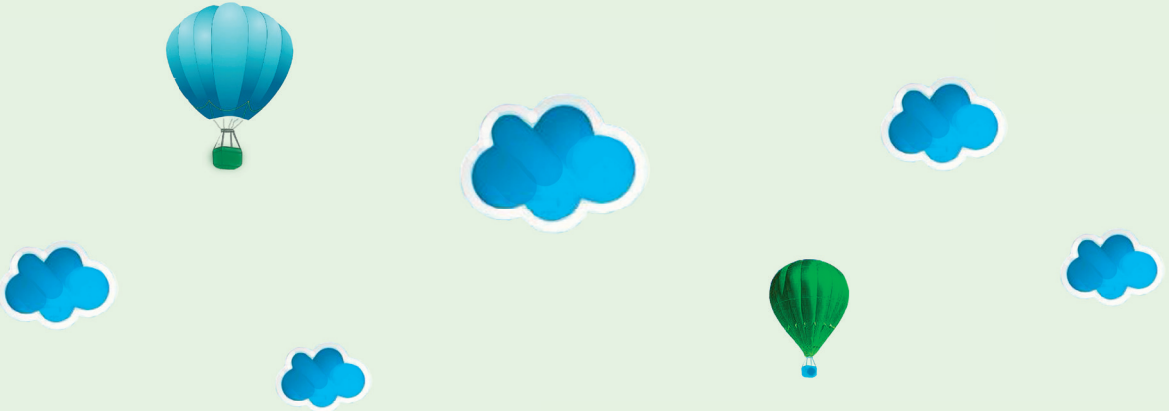


media credibility and social media credibility predict young adults' online engagement (Lemire, Paré, Sicotte, & Harvey, 2008; Lin et al., 2016). Finally, I found effects from demographic variables. Higher-educated people show greater online engagement with health and fitness, which is consistent with the results of prior studies (Bundorf et al., 2006; Cotten & Gupta, 2004; Manierre, 2015; Mesch et al., 2012). Yet interestingly, the effect of gender contradicts previous findings: the results from my sample indicate that young Chinese men are more likely than young Chinese women to search and share health-related information online. The traditional role of housewives in dealing with matters of health has been emphasized in many cultures; women are supposed to spend more time than men on family issues, for instance caring for the sick, the children, and the elderly (e.g. Manierre, 2015). However, China has the highest proportion (over 90 percent) of dual-earner couples in the world (Lu, Lu, Du, & Brough, 2016). Disparities in findings related to the sex gap may be partly explained by the fact that the division of labor in the Chinese household is vastly changing. Yet I would recommend further investigation into the discrepancy between men and women in the matter of chasing information about health.

Although this chapter offers several significant contributions, some of its limitations should be borne in mind when interpreting these findings. First, as noted on earlier occasions, the higher-educated and metropolitan populations tend to be overrepresented in Chinese survey samples (Skoric, Zhu, & Pang, 2016). My results, too, relate predominantly to young adults with the same characteristics of highly educated and living in the city. Future studies should focus on more diverse and representative samples. Second, the research I carried out for this study did not ask about specific websites or types of sources. Also, more variables could be included in the analysis, for instance health literacy and stages of health conditions. Third, I did not measure young adults' motives for media use and online engagement. Motivation is relatively difficult to measure in a survey, since it can differ over time and across situations whenever individuals go online. Future studies could nevertheless focus on specific goals of online engagements. Also, as new generations of Chinese patients are increasingly gathering information on health with the help of the Internet and social media, it would be interesting to know the role of e-patients in distinguishing between expertise-based (e.g. professional/authoritative sources) and experience-based information sources in China. Finally, given that the most traditional media have online editions that offer similar content, the credibility of the health information that flows from traditional mass media can be transferred to the Internet (Ye, 2010). Further studies should consider distinguishing between online editions of traditional media and Internet-based media, although this is a challenging task in the increasingly larger and more complex media environment.

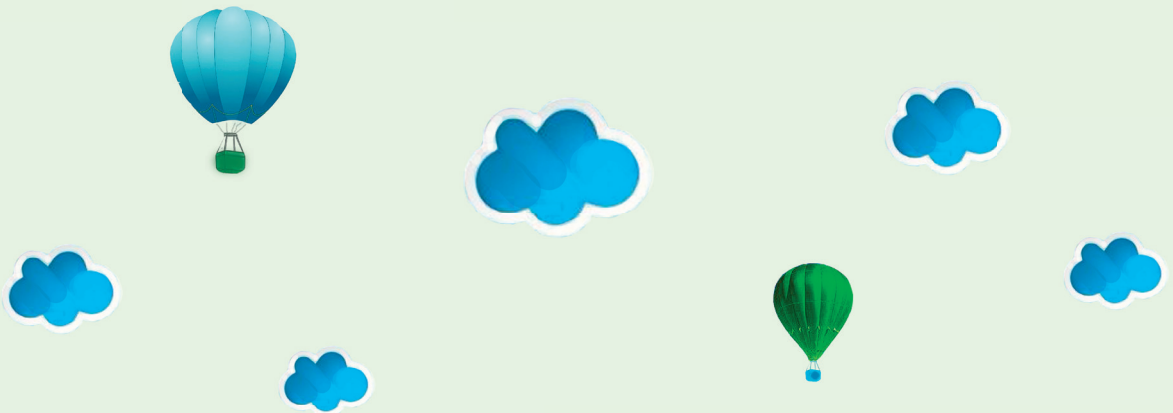
Nonetheless, this chapter provides a general framework for comparing the credibility of the health information available in the two major types of media, traditional and social, by focusing on differences in media use; and it deepens our understanding of how online engagement with health and fitness is affected by differential media usage and media credibility, particularly in the Chinese context. My research shows that the assessment of media credibility works increasingly in the same way for traditional media and social media. This makes it challenging to counter the rise of low-quality information on the Internet. Nevertheless, there are substantial differences between social media platforms, and these differences offer starting points for shaping a new policy, designed to achieve better health communication. Policymakers and authorities should be aware of the differential use of media outlets and of the targeting of young adults according to their socio-economic backgrounds.





# Chapter 6

## General conclusion and discussion



## 6 General conclusion and discussion

Young Chinese adults find themselves in a remarkable situation: there has been an enormous growth of online media outlets through which they can obtain and distribute information, but at the same time there is still censorship exercised by the government. The rise of the social media and of user-generated content has added another dimension to information diffusion, since many people, the young in particular, have incorporated both as permanent, normal features of their everyday media use (boyd, 2014; Hargittai & Hsieh, 2010). For the young, the transition from traditional media to social media involves a move from editor-based text to non-edited, bottom-up text; and this kind of shift brings up the question of how credible the information is that comes from social media. Arguably the information posted on social media is often unsolicited, and there is a lack of professional gatekeepers in the online world (Song et al., 2016; Westerman et al., 2014). Still, social media platforms have the potential to enable Chinese citizens to receive more diverse information than before, which is a good thing (e.g. Hyun & Kim, 2015; Xueqing Li & Chan, 2017). But here is the rub: online, young people might come across a story that differs from versions they find in newspapers and on national television channels. How, then, do they view the information they obtained from traditional and from social media? How credible do they perceive each of these segments of information to be?

I have studied young adults' media usage in the rapidly changing media context of China; this dissertation presents the results of my research. More specifically, I focused on how young adults perceive the credibility of the information they find in the media in three selected fields: politics, culture, and health. As the current literature has mainly focused on the study of credibility and trust in well-established democracies, research that addresses non-Western countries and other political regimes is still scarce. This research aims to improve our understanding of the credibility with which young adults in China invest media sources, along with their trust, media use, and online activities. This is a promising line of investigation because during the past decades a highly diversified ecology of social media outlets has emerged in this country, in a state-controlled media system.

Moreover, in this thesis I developed a three-pronged comparison between media uses, in order to do justice to the differences that exist between traditional and social media outlets as well as to the increasing diversity of online media outlets and platforms (see Figure 6). I started by comparing how much use young adults make of traditional media with how much use they make of social media. Then I zoomed in on specific media outlets; more specifically, I contrasted various distinctive social media platforms that are available in the current Chinese media ecology. Third, I analyzed how young adults

combine media types and outlets in repertoires. These approaches to measuring media use have been employed in different ways in my dissertation, depending on the point of focus specific to each chapter. As a whole, this study aims to discover how much young adults place trust in different media outlets and to examine how this distribution impacts behaviors and forms of engagement in the contemporary media environment in China. The four empirical studies that make up this thesis were conducted so as to lead me to answers to two main research questions:

**RESEARCH QUESTION 1** How strongly do different media uses and media repertoires link to young Chinese adults' perception of media credibility and to their trust in the media in the fields of politics, culture, and health?

**RESEARCH QUESTION 2** To what extent do different media uses and media repertoires and different forms of media credibility relate to online engagement in the fields of politics, culture, and health among young Chinese adults?

In order to answer these research questions, I conducted a survey among 18–40-year-olds in China. The survey was specifically built for this project. Various statistical methods were combined and employed to analyze the data collected for this dissertation. In this final chapter I will start with a summary of the key findings, then I will discuss their various implications. I will end the chapter by mapping out a few directions for future research.

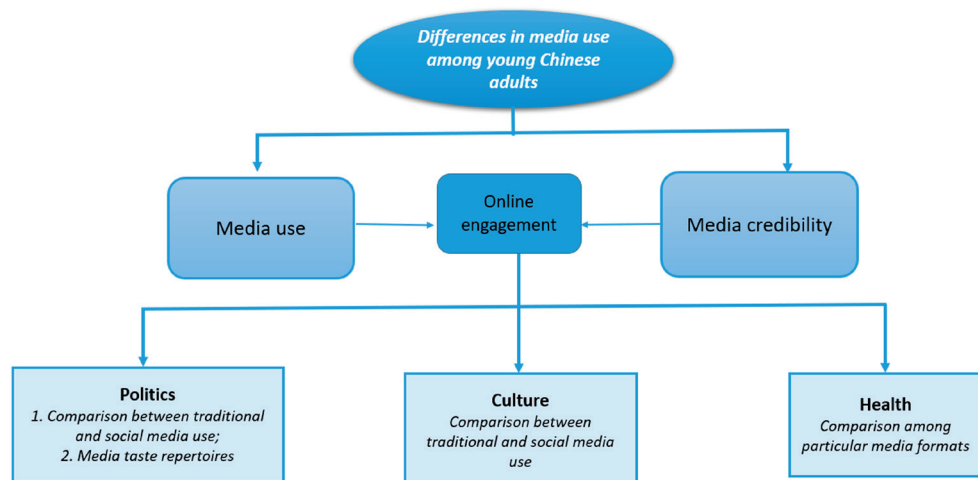


Figure 6 Comparisons between Media uses along Three Different Dimensions in Three Domains

## 6.I Summary of main findings: answers to the research questions

To answer my research questions, I will summarize separately the main outcomes of the analyses that I carried out in the three fields listed above. I proceed in this way because in each field I focus on different comparisons and aspects of media use and the sets of media repertoires are different – hence the results are different too. In Chapters 2–5, the question of a correspondence between differences in media use and young adults’ perceptions of media credibility and trust (i.e. Research Question 1) was examined by focusing on three items: the political trust displayed by young Chinese adults; their trust in media sources; and their perception of the credibility of cultural and health information.

### 6.I.I Politics

In Chapter 2 I investigated how young adults’ media usage influences their political trust and what affects the strength of the influence of media consumption on this trust. I did this by comparing the different roles of traditional and social media. I focused particularly on the mediating role of media credibility and the moderating effect of trust in media and non-media sources. Another component that I considered here is Chinese Communist Party (CCP) membership. Although an important structural factor in the Chinese political system, CCP membership does not seem to affect the strength of the relationship under investigation. This could be explained by the fact that many young adults are eager to join the CCP mainly for the sake of improving their employment chances and enjoying tangible material benefits (Kennedy et al., 2018).

Media credibility is important to many young adults. Whether they consider the political information offered on Chinese media to be accurate, fair, or believable has proved to impact their political trust; in other words, trust in media institutions fosters trust in the political sphere. Both traditional and social media usage are positively associated with young adults’ trust in the government, but the effect of traditional media was found to be stronger than that of social media. This finding confirms that the consumption of different media types does have a distinct influence on young adults’ political trust (Aarts et al., 2012; Moy & Pfau, 2000). Also, young adults’ daily media consumption influences their political trust indirectly, through perceptions related to media credibility. It should be noted that the perceived credibility of the media explains only part of the relationship; there are still large and direct effects of media usage on trust in the Chinese government. In addition, by comparison to the perceived credibility of the political information gathered from social media, the credibility invested in traditional media has a stronger effect on young adults’ political trust. Whether young adults trust media or non-media sources was found to strengthen the relationship between traditional media usage and political trust, but did not affect the relationship between social media usage



and political trust. Social media often contain more user-generated content than the government-controlled traditional media and offer more diverse views on current public issues (Shen & Guo, 2013). This may imply that young Chinese adults who tend to be more trustful of sources outside the media system do regard various social media platforms as important sources of information.

In addition to the comparison between traditional and social media use, I also applied, in Chapter 3, a media repertoire approach in which I studied how young adults combine various types of traditional media and social media platforms. Although many scholars have paid attention to media repertoires (Edgerly et al., 2018; S. Kim, 2014; Taneja et al., 2012; Yuan & Ksiazek, 2011), inventories of repertoires composed of both traditional and social media items, in a Chinese context, have not yet been made. By applying latent class analysis (LCA), I identify six distinct repertoires of media use among young adults. The clusters that define these repertoires can be ranged in ascending order. Those in the first category are very limited; they are the repertoires of minimal users. The next two categories display some specific media orientation; these are repertoires associated with what I call digitally focused and communication-oriented users. The fourth category shows a relatively diverse character; I labeled its users moderate omnivores. The last two categories contain repertoires that mix many traditional media types and social media platforms; they belong to what I call voracious omnivores and print-interested users.

The second step in my research consisted in examining how young adults in these different clusters perceive political information. The results indicate that moderate omnivores, digitally focused users, and minimal users share a relatively low ranking of the perceived credibility of political information in the media – social media in particular. Communication-oriented users, voracious omnivores, and print-interested users perceive the political information available in the media, both social and traditional, as moderately credible. Moreover, these six media repertoires are associated with different levels of political trust. Voracious omnivores and especially print-interested young adults tend to trust the government most, while minimal and digitally focused users display the lowest levels of political trust. Thus it seems that young adults with patterns of omnivorous media use are more likely to show high levels of trust in the Chinese government.

### 6.1.2 Culture

Chapter 4 focused on the case of culture. I examined media usage and the perceived credibility of information on cultural events in traditional and social media by employing a repertoire-oriented approach. Applied to cultural participation activities, LCA identified five distinct patterns of cultural consumption. The users who produced these patterns were labeled media-focused cultural omnivores, media-oriented cultural

consumers, all-round cultural omnivores, minimal cultural consumers, and book-focused minimal cultural consumers.

My findings imply, first of all, that the phenomenon of “cultural omnivorousness” is found in the context of China as well (D. Zhu, 2017). Further, Chinese consumers associated with various cultural repertoires differ in their demographic background, which is in line with the conclusion of Western studies; but the impact of parents’ education and income, for example, is more limited here than elsewhere (van Hek & Kraaykamp, 2015; D. Zhu, 2017). Second, young Chinese adults who have distinct cultural taste repertoires seem to perceive and rate differently the credibility of the cultural information they get from traditional and social media. My results indicate that some young cultural consumers (especially the all-round cultural omnivores and the media-focused cultural omnivores) tend to use both social media and traditional media more frequently than do users from the other clusters (especially the minimal cultural consumers and the book-focused minimal cultural consumers); they also tend to rate higher the credibility of cultural information they get from both.

This leads me to a twofold conclusion. On the one hand, young adults’ everyday media consumption is closely related to their cultural repertoires. On the other hand, how credible they judge the cultural information in the media to be also predicts the type of cultural repertoire they will build. It appears that young adults with omnivorous cultural tastes tend to trust most the cultural information publicized in the media, both traditional and social.

### 6.1.3 Health

In Chapter 5 I focused on the credibility of health-related information in the media. Although for many Chinese users the Internet constitutes an increasingly important source of information on matters of health (Cao et al., 2016), some scholars argue that for a long time there has been a lack of valid information in this field (Tang et al., 2008; X. Zhang et al., 2017). Hence I undertook to examine how young adults assess the credibility of health-related information available on twelve different media outlets.

Besides comparing traditional media with social media, I also distinguish here between two main types of social platforms, namely platforms that offer social support options and platforms that don’t. The results show that how the credibility of health information in traditional and social media is perceived can be explained by differences in media usage. Young adults who often watch television and use print media tend to trust the information on health that they find in both traditional and social media. My findings concerning the impact of TV viewing on media credibility are in agreement with the conclusion of an earlier Chinese study of media credibility, where television was

found to be rated by Chinese viewers as the most credible medium (Wu, 2016). Not surprisingly, higher levels of social media usage are associated with greater credibility of the social media in general. But, more interestingly, I found large differences between individual social media platforms. In particular, frequent users of the platforms WeChat and Qzone tend to consider online information on health most credible. This could be explained by the distinctive characteristic of WeChat and Qzone: online “friends” on these platforms are often friends or family members in real life, offline (Zhang & Jung, 2018). Moreover, results indicate that the use of social support-oriented media correlates with influence on perceptions of credibility more than does the use of social media without a focus on social support. Also, young adults who use social support-oriented platforms tend to trust the health information available in the media, but this effect is larger for the credibility of social media than for the credibility of traditional media. Thus I conclude that, overall, health information is trusted – or believed to be credible – mostly by young adults who watch television, who use WeChat and Qzone frequently, and who regularly read newspapers and use Baidu Tieba.

These results bring me to the answer to Research question 1. The findings imply that the media usage of Chinese young adults is related to their trust in institutions and to the degree to which they find the information available in the media credible. Political trust tends to be higher among young adults who use traditional media than among young adults who use social media. Also, young users with more omnivorous media repertoires are more likely to trust the Chinese government. The results regarding the perceived credibility of information in the media are slightly different in each domain. However, overall, both the use of traditional media and the use of social media have a positive impact on perceptions regarding the credibility of information – and I mean here not just the information provided by young adults’ preferred media, but all mediated information.

My second research question addresses the issue of how media use and perceived media credibility lead to online engagement among young adults. Again, I distinguish between the perceived credibility of traditional media and that of social media, and I focus on the same fields of politics, culture, and health. Online engagement refers here to users’ Internet-related behavior (Egea et al., 2006). Following previous studies (Blank & Groselj, 2014; Eynon & Malmberg, 2011; Holmes, 2011), I measure online engagement mainly through frequency of participation in different online activities such as searching for information, comparing information, and sharing information with others (Y. Li et al., 2018; McKinley & Wright, 2014; Yun & Park, 2010).

### 6.I.4 Online political engagement

In Chapter 3 I examined how the patterns of media use displayed by young adults predict participation online. Previous studies suggest that media use relates to political engagement (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012, 2014; Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2016; Xenos et al., 2014), and scholars have hypothesized that the Internet can breathe new energy into political engagement (e.g. Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Vissers & Stolle, 2014). The findings in Chapter 3 indicate that young adults' online political activities are mainly shaped by their media use patterns.

The composition of these repertoire matters a lot. Young people who rely on multiple media platforms tend to show higher levels of political engagement. Voracious omnivores and print-interested users fall into this general category. The findings imply that more omnivorous media repertoires are positively linked to online participation in political matters, while repertoires with heavier reliance or more exclusive on social media platforms are less likely to correlate with participation in political activities online. It should be noted that, in China, more diverse media repertoires are associated with more intense political practice online. Although social media outlets are an essential part of these diversified repertoires, traditional media remain important for young adults. Media use patterns that host traditional media show higher political engagement. In China, all major newspapers are organizations registered under the CCP or the government and are regarded as voicing the CCP's viewpoints (Freedom House, 2017). Thus, young adults' preference for print is strongly connected to political involvement based on information provided by media which are most strongly associated with the Chinese government. However, by comparison to traditional media credibility, young adults' perception of the credibility of social media seems to be a more important factor in explaining who among them will partake in online political activities and why. Whereas previous studies have emphasized that the use of social media can increase individuals' civic and political participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012, 2014; Skoric, Zhu, Goh, et al., 2016; Xenos et al., 2014), I argue that how much people trust the political information they find on social media also matters. Young adults who perceive this kind of information as credible are more likely to participate in online political activities.

### 6.I.5 Online engagement with arts and culture

Moving now to culture, I examined the kinds of factors that influence young adults' online activities in this field. I found cultural repertoires to be useful predictors of online cultural engagement. Regardless how often my participants use different media outlets or how much they trust the cultural information they find in the media, it is their cultural consumption repertoires that seem to shape their online cultural activities. Online cultural engagement is also boosted when young adults rate more highly the credibility of cultural information in the media, social and traditional alike. To be sure, the impact

of credibility of information is higher when the perception of credibility relates to social media than when it relates to traditional media; and it is clear that social media exert greater influence on predicting online cultural engagement than do traditional media. I did not find any significant impact of the factors of educational background and income on online cultural engagement. This perhaps implies that the Internet – social media in particular – opens opportunities for people from different backgrounds to participate in cultural practices more easily than they could in the past.

### 6.1.6 Online engagement with health and fitness

In Chapter 5 I investigated the factors that influence young adults' online seeking and sharing of information on health, disease, fitness, and related themes. The results show that social media usage prompts online engagement with health matters (Mano, 2014; Miller & Bell, 2012). The effect is stronger for social media outlets with social support affordances, for example Sina Weibo, WeChat, and Qzone (in my study). There is also evidence that forms and degrees of credibility accorded to traditional and social media predict young adults' online engagement (Lemire et al., 2008; Lin et al., 2016). Young adults who evaluate the medical information they find in the media (social media in particular) as credible are more likely to participate frequently in health-related online activities. Both traditional and social media outlets affect the likelihood of online participation in and engagement with matters of health. Finally, among young adults, males and the highly educated are the ones most likely to participate in online activities of health.

Taken together, the answers to my second research question amount to the following: across all three fields in which I conducted my investigations, young adults who have greater trust in the information supplied in the media – social media in particular – tend to participate in online activities more frequently. Also, repertoires with more diverse media items are associated with stronger political engagement, and social media outlets are an important part of these repertoires. For health engagement, we see that it can also matter which specific social media platforms are used. Young adults who are in the habit of using platforms with social support orientations (Sina Weibo, WeChat, and Qzone) tend to participate more frequently in online activities related to health. Overall, in China social media exert greater influence on predicting young adults' online engagement than do traditional media.

## 6.2 Implications

In this digital age, young Chinese adults perceive differently the information they receive in traditional and in social media; and their online activities are related to their daily

media consumption and to how much they trust various media outlets. The results of this dissertation have implications for policymakers and for the wider discussion concerning differences in the use of social media. Previous studies have largely concentrated on the relationship between social media use and forms of online engagement (e.g. political engagement) in well-established democracies (Boulianne, 2015, p. 531). Research that addresses non-Western countries and other political regimes is still scarce (Skoric, 2011; Skoric, Zhu, Goh, et al., 2016). The present dissertation offers a view on China, a country with two important characteristics: on the one hand, strict media censorship; on the other hand, many locally based media outlets and platforms. For this reason, the implications of the four empirical studies gathered here will also be relevant, at a general level, to policymaking in less democratic countries.

Like the research of Skoric, Zhu, and Pang (2016), this dissertation shows that there is a positive relationship between social media use and political expression and participation in China, just as in Western democracies (Boulianne, 2015). The implications of my results are slightly different, though. In general, young adults rate the credibility of political information provided by traditional media more highly than its social media counterpart, despite the fact that they spent more time online than on traditional media. This finding is in line with Kiouisis (2001) and H. Zhang et al. (2014), who suggest that traditional media are still more credible than “bottom-up” online media. But I argue here that the perceived credibility of the information available in traditional media and in social media works differently when it comes to young people’s trust in the government and in media institutions and to their online activities in politics, culture, and health. When compared to the traditional media, which are fully controlled by the government, social media contain, at least in principle, more user-generated content and offer a variety of points of view on current policies and social issues (Shen & Guo, 2013). Yet it should be noted that the CCP has rapidly adapted to the new technology ecology and has employed social media to its own advantage (Hassid, 2012; Hyun & Kim, 2015; Sullivan, 2014).

Whereas politics is sensitive to censorship, the fields of culture and health are less controversial. As far as culture goes, both social media usage and the credibility of cultural information culled from social media exert greater influence on young adults’ online cultural activities than do their traditional media counterparts. This suggests that policymakers should stay attuned to the influence of social media on young adults’ cultural life and should try to improve the quality of cultural material on popular social media outlets, in order to boost cultural consumption among people from different backgrounds. As for health, unlike previous studies (e.g. Wu, 2016), which emphasize the importance of television’s impact in this field, the present thesis demonstrates that magazines and, to a lesser degree, radio can also be important media tools for increasing

young Chinese adults' appetite for the online seeking and sharing of health-related information. Now, most Western studies have focused on the workings of Facebook and Twitter in health communication (e.g. C.-Y. Liu & Yu, 2013). By contrast, I investigated here the role of some specific, homegrown social media outlets with a social support orientation. Certain Chinese social media – WeChat, Sina Weibo, and Qzone – appear to exert a strong influence on young adults' health- and fitness-related activities online. It might be argued that not all types of social media have the same influence in China. Platforms that offer social support are stronger and seem to encourage young adults in their willingness or readiness to participate in online activities related to health (C. Li, 2018; McKinley & Wright, 2014). To achieve better health communication, policymakers and authorities should be aware of the groups of young people targeted by popular social media outlets and of the different affordances of the media themselves. In the Chinese context, more attention should be paid to social support-oriented media such as the ones investigated in my study.

One of the results of this research is to have demonstrated the usefulness of taking a media repertoire approach across platforms of traditional and social media outlets, combined. Whereas Boczkowski and colleagues (2018) show the distinct meanings attributed to social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, my study takes the distinctiveness of social media platforms to a superordinate level, incorporating it into an analysis of how these individual platforms combine to form actual repertoires. The finding that such cross-media repertoires affect young people's online political activities implies that future research should take differences between social media platforms more seriously. One aspect to be studied is the role of social support-oriented social media in shaping young people's trust in mediated information related to health. Again, it should be noted that not all social media have the same influence on users' perceptions of credibility. I argue that distinguishing between social media according to what their affordances are might be helpful in making us understand differences in the trust that young adults place in information derived from social media. There are substantial differences between various social media platforms.

Lastly, this dissertation contributed to the study of online engagement (e.g. Mano, 2014; Choi, 2016) and of its relation to trust in information from the media – both traditional and social (Hou & Shim, 2010; Lin et al., 2016; Ye, 2010; Yun & Park, 2010). In the Chinese context, previous studies suggest that usage of Sina Weibo increased people's willingness to participate in political activities (Chan et al., 2012), and college students' use of their online forum was positively correlated to engagement in political discussion online (Mou et al., 2013). Although the present dissertation did not investigate how young adults' dealings with social media lead to, or determine, their online political activities, it examined how patterns of media use found among young



adults are associated with online political activities. It remains to be seen whether this study captures online political engagement in its fullest range.

The young generations in China clearly are prolific in their online activities of searching and sharing cultural information, and this reflects specific cultural preferences. What is less clear is how purchase options specific to the Internet fit into these patterns: the survey did not ask for behaviors related to buying, downloading, or streaming cultural products.

In the sphere of seeking and sharing health-related information online, my findings provide evidence that both social media usage (Mano, 2014; Miller & Bell, 2012) and the amount of trust with which young adults invest the information they find in the media (Lemire et al., 2008; Lin et al., 2016) are related to online engagement with health issues (Mano, 2014; Miller & Bell, 2012). Importantly, highly educated young adults are more likely than others to go online for medical information – which is consistent with the conclusion of prior studies (Bundorf et al., 2006; Cotten & Gupta, 2004; Manierre, 2015; Mesch et al., 2012). At the same time, the effect of gender contradicts previous findings. Young Chinese males are more likely than young Chinese females to search and share health-related information online, which is the opposite of what was found in other cultures (e.g. Manierre, 2015).

### 6.3 Limitations and directions for future research

If we wish to keep improving our understanding of how different types of media usage and media repertoires are related to both media credibility and online engagement, we will have to identify still more specific mechanisms and outcomes. This dissertation deals with one single country; this is its first limitation. Future research should expand to other nations – and it would certainly benefit from comparing media credibility and engagement in those cultures and in China. There are many cross-cultural differences in individuals' daily media consumption and online activities. This opens new ground for exploration; for example, the reasons behind the gender difference found in this study in the area of health-related information-seeking behavior would repay study. A range of comparative studies of this kind could advance our understanding of media consumption and online activities both in China and beyond.

Second, the sample of young adults that I gathered for this research contains an element of demographic bias in the form of an overrepresentation of highly educated and urban residents. I have explained why this imbalance suits the specific circumstances of my topic, but future research should find ways to integrate respondents from rural areas and with



lower educational levels. Additionally, this research examined the relationships between media use, credibility, and online engagement through quantitative methods. Future research may adopt qualitative methods as well, to get a more in-depth understanding of how media credibility is related to online activities. For example, Metzger and colleagues (2010) used focus groups to identify participants' social means of credibility assessment. Such approaches may contribute to unraveling still further the relationship between media use, credibility, and online engagement.

Third, this research investigates how credibility and trust are linked to differences in media use and online engagement; and it does so by focusing on trust in political and media institutions. Future studies might consider exploring how media use relates to within-person trust or to trust in commercial institutions – as reflected, say, in online shopping and dating behaviors. For instance, Bilgihan (2016) demonstrates that trust is the most important antecedent or precondition of e-loyalty for millennials as customers in online shopping; and it is also one of the key predictors of consumer attitudes toward online shopping (Akroush, Al-Debei, & Ashouri, 2015).

Finally, this dissertation has examined media variables as the main factors that influence credibility, trust, and online engagement. Future studies could take more factors into account: types of information, motivations for media use, and various goals of online engagement. For example, one could distinguish between expertise-based and experience-based information sources, as well as between information-oriented and entertainment-oriented media, in order to better understand media usage, credibility, and online engagement. Also, Rains (2007) found that mistrust of entertainment-oriented media as sources of health information decreased the odds of people's using the Web, whereas trust in information-oriented media and entertainment-oriented media predicted behavior and perceptions favorable to using the Web – the Web being an alternative to traditional media for information-seeking purposes. And my last point is a generalization of an observation I have already made in a narrower context (see section 5.5, p. 109): since most traditional media have their own online editions, the perceived credibility of traditional mass media can be transferred to the Internet. Distinguishing between online editions of traditional media and Internet-based media is another valid avenue for future research – if a challenging one, in the increasingly complex media environment we are inhabiting.



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## Appendix C

### Survey of Media Use among Young Chinese Adults

#### Part I. About You

1. In which year were you born?

\_\_\_\_\_

2. What is your gender?

Female  Male

3. What is your highest level of education completed?

*If you are a student now, choose your current education*

Less than primary school  Middle School  High School  
 Some College (2 or 3 year vocation/technology school)  
 University (4/5 years)  Beyond Master degree

4. What is your parents' highest level of education completed?

*Choose the highest level attained by either the mother or the father*

Less than primary school  Middle School  High School  
 Some College (2 or 3 year vocation/technology school)  
 University (4/5 years)  Beyond Master degree

5. Are you from the Han ethnic group?

Yes  No

6. Do you have a religious belief?

Yes  No

7. What is your political affiliation?

Communist Party Member  Non Communist Party Member  
 Prefer not to say

8. Not counting people at work or family at home, about how many other friends or relatives do you keep in contact with at least once a year?

0-2  3-5  6-10  11-20  21-40  >40

9. Of these friends and relatives that are contacted at least once a year, about how many would you say you feel really close to, that is, close enough to discuss personal or important problems with?

- 0       1       2       3       4       5  
 6       7       8       9       10        
 11-15       16-20       >20

10. To what extents does each of the following statements apply to you?

*The extent is measured on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1= Very untrue to 7= Very true.*

	1=Very untrue	2	3	4	5	6	7=very true
Most people can be trusted or you can't be too careful							
Most People try to take advantage of you or try to be fair							
Most of the time people helpful or mostly looking out for themselves							

11. What is your current occupation?

- Student       Official       Company employee  
 Entrepreneur or self-employed       Migrant worker (service & factory worker)  
 Agriculture worker       Professional worker       Unemployed  
 Retired

12. What is your income (before taxes)?

- No income       Less than 500 CNY per Month  
 501-1000 CNY per Month       1001-1500 CNY per Month  
 1501-2000 CNY per Month       2001-3000 CNY per Month  
 3001-5000 CNY per Month       5001-8000 CNY per Month  
 8001-10000 CNY per Month       10001-20000 CNY per Month  
 20001-50000 CNY per Month       More than 50000 CNY per Month

13. Where did you grow up and where do you live now?

*If you grew up in many places, choose a place where you spent most of time from the range of age 3-18 years old.*

	Grew up	Live now
Village		
Town		
Small city (below Half million)		
Middle city (Half million-5 million)		
Big city (5 million- 10 million)		
Super big city (Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Tianjin)		

## Part 2. About Your Media Use

14. How often do you use the following kinds of media?

	Never	Less than once a month	Couple of times per month	Couple of times per week	Almost daily
TV (both on TV set and online)					
Newspaper (only in print)					
Magazine (only in print)					
Radio (both on radio set and online)					
Internet (computer/laptop)					
Internet (mobile/tablet)					



15. How often do you get information on the following topics through media in general?

	Never	Less than once a month	Couple of times per month	Couple of times per week	Almost daily
Politics					
Economics					
Education (policies, educational issues)					
Health & Fitness					
Fashion					
Sports					
Arts & Culture (popular & classical)					
News on celebrities and entertainment					
Foreign affairs					

16. Do you use social media (such as Sina Weibo and WeChat)?

- Yes → please go to questions 17       No → please go to questions 20

17. What is the time you spend on social media per day (on average)?

- <1 hours       1-2 hours       2- 3 hours       3- 4 hours  
 4- 5 hours       5-6 hours       >6 hours

18. How often do you use the following social media?

	Never	Less than once a month	Couple of times per month	Couple of times per week	Almost daily
Sina Weibo					
WeChat					
Qzone					
Sina Blog					
Baidu Tieba					
Tianya Club					
Douban					
Guokr					



23. How much do you trust the following items?

	No trust	2	3	4	5	6	Full trust
Health care system							
Education system							
Charity organizations							
Science							

24. How do you think our society influenced by what people say about big public issues via social media (e.g., Guo Meimei and the Red Cross Scandal and The Dengyujiao incident)?

- I think this mainly has a positive influence
- I think this has mainly has a negative influence
- I don't think this has much influence on society

### Part 3. About Politics

*The next questions are about your interest and trust in politics.*

25. To what extents does each of the following statements apply to you?

*The extent is measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1= Very untrue to 5= Very true.*

	1= Very untrue	2= bit untrue	3	4= bit true	5= very true
I think it is relevant to know what is going on in politics					
I like talking about politics with friends					
I think it's very important to be informed about current political issues					
I am not interested in politics at all					
I think it is meaningless to talk about politics					

26. How often do you engage in each of the following political activities via social media?

*The extent is measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1=Not at all to 5=Very frequently.*

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very frequently
Reading news on topics related to politics or public affairs					
Reading blogs or microblogging commenting related to politics or public affairs					
Sharing with others on topics related to politics or public affairs					
Posting comments in online discussion groups related to politics or public affairs					
Visiting social media accounts of the government and public administration institutions					
Signing online petitions					

27. People sometimes get political information via social media. How do you evaluate the political information offered by social media?

*The extent is measured on a 7-point scale with 1 for Not at all and 7 for very much.*

Political information on social media is...	Not at all	2	3	4	5	6	Very much
Believable							
Fair							
Accurate							
In-depth							
Trustworthy							

28. People sometimes get political information via traditional media (e.g., newspapers and TV). How do you evaluate political information offered by traditional media?

*The extent is measured on a 7-point scale with 1 for Not at all and 7 for very much.*

Political information on traditional media is...	Not at all	2	3	4	5	6	Very much
Believable							
Fair							
Accurate							
In-depth							
Trustworthy							

29. How much do you trust the government?

*Trust level is measured on a 7-point scale with 1 for No trust and 7 for Full trust.*

	No trust	2	3	4	5	6	Full trust
Political trust							

## Part 4. About Arts & Culture

*The next questions are on your interests in arts and culture. By that I mean activities such as watching movies, reading books, visiting museums etc.*

30. To what extent does each of the following statements apply to you?

*The extent is measured on a 5-point scale with 1 for Very untrue at all and 5 for Very true.*

	1= Very untrue	2= bit untrue	3	4= bit true	5= Very true
It's important for me to be up to date with what is going on in arts and culture					
I follow closely what is going on in arts and culture					
I am always looking for tips on arts and culture					
I like talking about arts and culture with friends					
I think it's relevant to know about arts and culture					
I am not interested in arts and culture at all					

31. How often do you engage in each of the following activities via social media?

*The extent is measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1=Not at all to 5=Very frequently.*

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very frequently
Reading blogs or microblogging related to arts and culture					
Sharing with other topics related to arts and culture					
Posting comments in online discussion groups or social networking sites related to arts and culture (e.g., about films, music)					
Following social media accounts of the experts and enterprises about arts and culture (e.g., artist, music reviewer, film company)					
Recommend new films, books or music products					

32. When you get information on new culture products (e.g., film, book) on social media, how do you evaluate the information on social media?

*The extent is measured on a 7-point scale with 1 for Not at all and 7 for very much.*

Arts and culture information on social media is...	Not at all	2	3	4	5	6	Very much
Believable							
Fair							
Accurate							
In-depth							
Trustworthy							

33. People sometimes get information about new culture products (e.g., film, book) on traditional media, how do you evaluate the information on traditional media?

*The extent is measured on a 7-point scale with 1 for Not at all and 7 for very much.*

<b>Arts and culture information on traditional media is...</b>	<b>Not at all</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>Very much</b>
Believable							
Fair							
Accurate							
In-depth							
Trustworthy							

34. People sometimes get information about new culture products (e.g., film, book), how often do you participate in the following art and culture activities?

	<b>Never</b>	<b>Less than once a month</b>	<b>Couple of times per month</b>	<b>Couple of times per week</b>	<b>Almost daily</b>
Playing computer games					
Visiting pop concerts					
Visiting classical concerts or opera					
Visiting art exhibitions					
Watching movies (at home or in cinema)					
Watching TV series					
Reading a book (not for school)					

35. Are you interested in the following arts and culture activities? If so, would you say you are mostly interested in Chinese or foreign arts and culture events

	Not interested	Mostly Chinese	Some Chinese/ Foreign	Mostly foreign
Playing computer games				
Visiting pop concerts				
Visiting classical concerts or opera				
Visiting art exhibitions				
Watching movies (at home or in cinema)				
Watching TV series				
Reading a book (not for school)				

## Part 5. About Health and Fitness

*The next questions are on health and fitness. By that I mean activities such as doing sports, keeping your body in shape, but also advice and tips on health issues. And experts are doctors and fitness trainers.*

36. To what extent does each of the following statements apply to you?

*The extent is measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1= Very untrue to 5= Very true.*

	1=very untrue	2=bit untrue	3	4=bit true	5=very true
I follow closely news on health and fitness					
For me it's important to be up to date with health and fitness information					
I am always looking for tips on health and fitness					
I like to be informed about health and fitness					
I find information on health and fitness very interesting					
I am not interested in information about health and fitness at all					



37. How often do you engage in activities about health and fitness via social media?

*The extent is measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1=Not at all to 5=Very frequently.*

	Not at all	2	3	4	Very frequently
Reading blogs or microblogging related to how to stay healthy					
Sharing with others topics related to how to stay healthy					
Posting comments in online discussion groups or social networking sites related to how to stay healthy					
Following social media accounts of the experts and enterprises about how to stay healthy (such as a famous yoga teacher, Nike+ Rub Club)					
Participating some online activities of how to stay healthy (like joining online challenges of sports, sharing your own workout record through social media)					

38. When you get information on health and fitness issues on social media, how do you evaluate the information on social media?

*The extent is measured on a 7-point scale with 1 for Not at all and 7 for very much.*

Health and fitness information given by experts on social media is...	Not at all	2	3	4	5	6	Very much
Believable							
Fair							
Accurate							
In-depth							
Trustworthy							

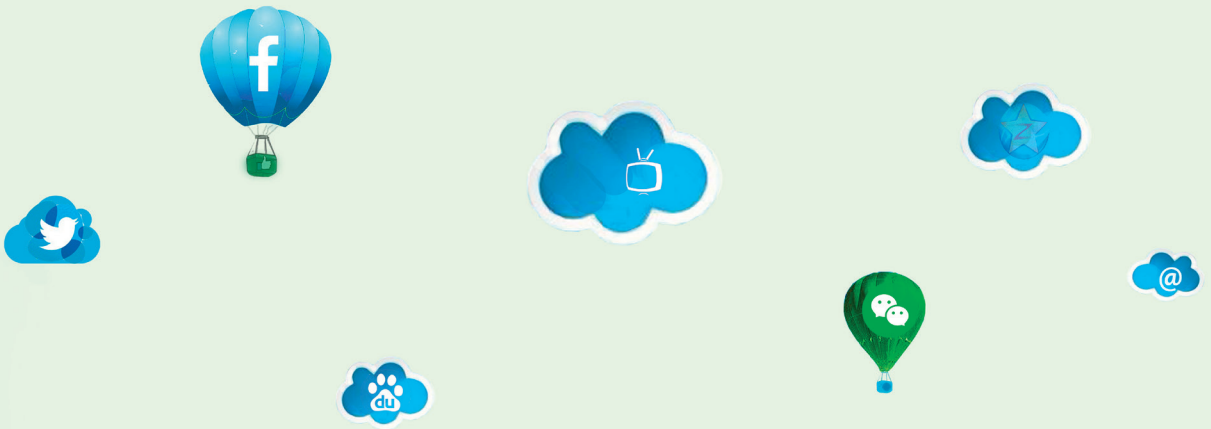
39. When you get information on health and fitness issues on traditional media, how do you evaluate the information on traditional media?

*The extent is measured on a 7-point scale with 1 for Not at all and 7 for very much.*

<b>Health and fitness information given by experts in traditional media is...</b>	<b>Not at all</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>Very much</b>
Believable							
Fair							
Accurate							
In-depth							
Trustworthy							

**Thank you very much for participating!**





# Summary



## Summary

Social media outlets are becoming increasingly available in China, especially to young adults –by which I mean 18–40-year-olds (the demographic studied here). On these platforms they can gather information on matters of interest to them and share their opinions with others in the media environment, under strict censorship. Two features of this situation are of great significance. On the one hand, there is a lack of professional gatekeepers online – and the information that can be found on social media is normally unsolicited. On the other hand, the rise of social media enables Chinese citizens to receive information that is much more diverse and variegated than ever before.

The explosive growth of this element of diversity or heterogeneity in the information propagated online raises questions about how young adults perceive the information they obtain from the media in general, both traditional and social. How is young adults' daily media consumption related to their trust in media and to their online activities? To get an in-depth understanding of how these people perceive the credibility of various media outlets in country's rapidly changing mediatized environment, I studied media usage by selecting a sample of participants in the 18–40 age group and by focusing on topics of politics, culture, and health. The present dissertation is the result of this attempt to understand the workings of and interconnections between credibility, trust, media use, and online activities among young adults in contemporary Chinese culture and society; and one should bear in mind that research on such matters in non-Western democracies and political regimes is scarce. Drawing on data collected online in China, this dissertation consists of four studies that deal – from different angles – with relationships between media use and repertoires, traditional and social media credibility, and online engagement in politics, culture, and health among young adults. In a nutshell, I investigated how much young adults trust the various media outlets at their disposal and how this affects behaviors and forms of engagement vis-à-vis topical issues in the fields of politics, culture and health in the country's contemporary media environment.

The first question I asked in Chapter 1 was this. How strongly do different media uses and media repertoires link with young adults' perception of media credibility and with their trust in the media in the fields of politics, culture, and health? I was interested in exploring how the use of traditional and social media, the formation and existence of different media repertoires, and the consumption of material on specific social media outlets all impact my participants' assessment of the credibility of the media. As for online activities among the population under study, I also asked to what extent different media uses and media repertoires and different forms of media credibility relate to online engagement in the same three fields of politics, culture, and health.

The second chapter centers on the relationship between media usage and an important form of trust in intuitions: political trust. It examines, first, how the effect of young adults' traditional and social media usage on their political trust can be explained through the perceived credibility of the information provided by traditional and social media; and, second, how the strength of the relationship between usage and trust is modified by young adults' trust in their sources – both media and non-media – and by their membership of the ruling party. I also investigated here, of course, the different roles of traditional and social media within the relationship under study. On the basis of the results I obtained from ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis, the conclusion can be drawn that both traditional media usage and social media usage are positively related to my participants' – and, by extension, to young adults' – trust in the government; but traditional media seem to have a stronger influence than social media. Also, when it comes to political information, the perceived credibility of traditional media has a stronger effect on young adults' political trust than the perceived credibility of social media. In my research, the strength of the relationship between traditional media and political trust was modified only by the participants' trust in media sources, not by their party membership.

The chapter emphasizes the continuing relevance of traditional media for young Chinese adults in political matters. However, it should be noted that social media outlets play an important role, too, in building young adults' political trust. This research helps us understand the underlying mechanisms through which various media affect individuals' political trust differentially and the factors that moderate the relationship between media consumption and young adults' trust in the government.

Chapter 3 explains how various types of media (four traditional and eight social media outlets) get combined into distinct cross-media repertoires, and how patterns of media use predict political involvement. Using the Step-3 approach of latent class analysis (LCA), I identified six distinctive media consumption repertoires. Young adults in each of these repertoires perceive the political information differently from the others and have their own, specific levels of trust in the government; for example, users with omnivorous media repertoires are more likely to trust the Chinese government. Furthermore, the composition of these repertoire matters a lot in young adults' online political activities. More omnivorous patterns of media use are positively correlated to online engagement in political matters. Overall, my findings in this area contribute to the literature on media repertoires by showing what the media repertoires of young adults in a non-Western context look like and what political implications such distinct patterns of media use may have. Scholars should neither treat social media en bloc, as an undifferentiated whole, nor limit themselves to extremely popular platforms such as Facebook and Sina Weibo. More fine-grained distinctions should be made between the

uses of different social media outlets, if we wish to investigate and explain how social media affect individuals' political involvement.

Chapter 4 analyzes culture consumption patterns and the online engagement with art and culture among young adults; and it does so by taking, again, a repertoire-oriented approach. This chapter examines how young adults' use of the media and trust in the cultural information they find in them influence their online cultural activities. I identified five distinctive cultural repertoires and showed that cultural omnivores are popular in China. My results here also indicate that the participants' cultural repertoires are mainly shaped by their parents' education, their own income, the credibility they invest the media with, and their media consumption. By comparison to traditional media, social media exert a greater influence on predicting both cultural repertoires and online cultural activities. By centering on the cultural repertoires of young adults, their trust in the cultural information offered by differed media, and their online activities, the chapter highlights the role of social media in these people's cultural life, including their online seeking and sharing of information about art and culture.

The final empirical chapter deals with social media use for purposes of finding and sharing information on health. It compares how young adults perceive the credibility of health- and fitness-related information in traditional and in social media, and tries to discover the factors that influence young adults' online searches for and exchanges of such information. The chapter does so by focusing on media use across specific media outlets and affordances. OLS regression was applied to predict the participants' trust in the health information they obtained from various media and their information seeking and sharing. The results indicate that young adults who are less educated, who watch television frequently, who use the social support-oriented platforms WeChat and Qzone, and who sometimes read newspapers and use the platform Baidu Tieba are more likely to trust the health information offered by both traditional and social media. Also, the features of being male, being well educated, considering the health information offered by social media credible, and frequently using magazines together with three social support-oriented media – Sina Weibo, WeChat, and Qzone – tend to correlate with the feature of seeking and sharing health and fitness information online. This chapter suggests that not all social media have a similar influence on young adults' online practice, and we should distinguish between social media according to their affordances. In the Chinese context, policymakers and authorities should focus on social support-oriented media such as Sina Weibo, WeChat, and Qzone.

Chapter 6 concludes this dissertation by answering the research questions raised in Chapter 1 and discussing the implications of the research presented here. I focused on young adults' media use, on the credibility of the media in these people's eyes, on the



trust they place in media, and on their online activities in politics, culture, and health. This dissertation contributes to the existent literature in various ways: it enhances our understanding of media consumption and online activities in this young demographic in a non-Western context; it separates the different roles of traditional and social media in the formation of young adults' trust in institutions and of the credibility they attribute to the information they receive from various media outlets and platforms; it contributes to a literature of comparisons between media uses in the fields of politics, culture, and health; it reveals some of the practical implications of young adults' online activities in this digital age; and it provides directions for future research. Comparative studies of media use and online engagement should be conducted between China and other cultures. Qualitative research methods, if applied in addition to quantitative ones, could lead to a better understanding of young people's daily media consumption and online life. Besides media factors, future studies should also pay heed to factors such as types of information and motivations for online engagement.

## Samenvatting

Er is een steeds grotere beschikbaarheid van sociale mediakanalen in China, vooral gericht op jongvolwassenen, waarmee de leeftijdsgroep van 18-40-jarigen bedoeld wordt (de in dit proefschrift onderzochte bevolkingsgroep). Op deze platforms kunnen zij, onder strenge censuur, informatie verzamelen over onderwerpen die hen interesseren en hun meningen met anderen in de mediaomgeving delen. Twee kenmerken van deze situatie zijn van groot belang. Aan de ene kant is er een gebrek aan professionele poortwachters online, en de informatie die op sociale media aangetroffen kan worden is meestal ongevraagd. Anderzijds stelt de opkomst van sociale media Chinese burgers in staat om informatie te ontvangen die diverser en gevarieerder is dan ooit tevoren.

De explosieve groei van dit element van diversiteit of heterogeniteit in online verspreide informatie, roept vragen op over welke perceptie jongvolwassenen hebben van informatie die zij krijgen via de media in het algemeen, zowel traditionele als sociale media. Hoe is de mediaconsumptie van jongvolwassenen gerelateerd aan hun vertrouwen in die media en aan hun online activiteiten? Om goed te begrijpen hoe deze mensen de geloofwaardigheid van verschillende mediakanalen beoordelen in het snel veranderende medialandschap van China, heb ik het mediagebruik van jongvolwassenen onderzocht door een steekproef van deelnemers te selecteren uit de leeftijdsgroep van 18-40 jaar, waarbij ik me heb toegespitst op politieke, culturele en gezondheidsthema's. Deze dissertatie heeft als doel de werking en de onderlinge samenhang van geloofwaardigheid, vertrouwen, mediagebruik en online activiteiten van jongvolwassenen binnen de huidige Chinese cultuur en samenleving beter te begrijpen. Hierbij moet rekening gehouden worden met het feit dat onderzoek naar deze materie in niet-Westerse democratieën en politieke regimes schaars is. Deze dissertatie is gebaseerd op in China online verzamelde gegevens en bestaat uit vier onderzoeken die zich vanuit verschillende oogpunten richten op de relaties tussen mediagebruik en -repertoires, de geloofwaardigheid van traditionele en sociale media en de online betrokkenheid bij politiek, cultuur en gezondheid van jongvolwassenen. Ik heb, in een notendop, onderzocht in hoeverre jongvolwassenen verschillende beschikbare mediakanalen vertrouwen en welke invloed dit vertrouwen heeft op gedrag en vormen van betrokkenheid ten aanzien van onderwerpen en kwesties op het gebied van politiek, cultuur en gezondheid, in het huidige medialandschap van China.

De eerste vraag die ik in Hoofdstuk 1 stelde was: Hoe sterk is het verband tussen het mediagebruik en de media repertoires van jongvolwassenen en hun perceptie van de geloofwaardigheid van en het vertrouwen in diverse media op het gebied van politiek, cultuur en gezondheid? Ik wilde achterhalen in hoeverre het gebruik van traditionele en sociale media, de vorming en het bestaan van verschillende mediarepertoires en de

consumptie van specifieke sociale mediakanalen invloed hebben op de inschatting die mijn deelnemers maken van de geloofwaardigheid van de media. Met betrekking tot de online activiteiten van de onderzochte groep onderzocht ik ook in welke mate verschillen in mediagebruik en media repertoires en verschillende vormen van geloofwaardigheid van media gerelateerd zijn aan online betrokkenheid bij diezelfde drie thema's, politiek, cultuur en gezondheid.

Het tweede hoofdstuk richt zich op de relatie tussen mediagebruik en een belangrijke vorm van vertrouwen in instituties: vertrouwen in de politiek. Hierin onderzocht ik ten eerste hoe de invloed van het gebruik van traditionele en sociale media door jongvolwassenen op hun vertrouwen in de politiek verklaard kan worden door middel van de gepercipieerde geloofwaardigheid van informatie die wordt aangeleverd door traditionele en sociale media en, ten tweede, in hoeverre de sterkte van de relatie tussen gebruik en vertrouwen beïnvloedt wordt door het vertrouwen van jongvolwassenen in hun bronnen, zowel media als niet-media, en hun eventuele lidmaatschap van de Chinese Communistische Partij (CCP). Ik heb hier uiteraard ook de verschillende rollen van traditionele en sociale media binnen de onderzochte relatie onderzocht. Op basis van de uitkomsten van regressieanalyse volgens de kleinste kwadratenmethode, kan de conclusie getrokken worden dat zowel het gebruik van traditionele als van sociale media positief gecorreleerd is aan het vertrouwen van mijn deelnemers en, bij extensie, van jongvolwassenen in de overheid, maar dat traditionele media een sterkere invloed lijken te hebben dan sociale media. Als het gaat over politieke informatie, heeft de gepercipieerde geloofwaardigheid van traditionele media een sterker effect op het politieke vertrouwen van jongvolwassenen dan de gepercipieerde geloofwaardigheid van sociale media. In mijn onderzoek was de sterkte van de relatie tussen traditionele media en politiek vertrouwen uitsluitend afhankelijk van het vertrouwen van deelnemers in mediabronnen, niet van hun partijlidmaatschap.

Het hoofdstuk benadrukt de blijvende relevantie van traditionele media voor jonge Chinese volwassenen in politieke kwesties. Er dient echter opgemerkt te worden dat bij jongvolwassenen ook sociale mediakanalen een belangrijke rol spelen bij het opbouwen van politiek vertrouwen. Dit onderzoek helpt ons bij het begrijpen van de onderliggende mechanismen waarmee verschillende media invloed hebben op het gedifferentieerde politieke vertrouwen van individuen, en de factoren die de relatie tussen mediaconsumptie en het vertrouwen van jongvolwassenen in de regering bepalen.

Hoofdstuk 3 beschrijft hoe verschillende soorten media (vier traditionele en acht sociale mediakanalen) worden gecombineerd in onderscheiden mediaoverstijgende repertoires en hoe patronen van mediagebruik tot een voorspelling van politieke betrokkenheid kunnen leiden. Met behulp van de 3-stappenbenadering van latenteklasseanalyse heb ik

zes verschillende mediaconsumptierepertoires geïdentificeerd. Jongvolwassenen met deze onderscheiden mediarepertoires nemen politieke informatie op verschillende manieren op en hebben een eigen, specifiek niveau van vertrouwen in de regering. Gebruikers met een omnivoor mediarepertoire hebben over het algemeen meer vertrouwen in de Chinese overheid. Verder heeft de samenstelling van deze repertoires een grote invloed op de online politieke activiteiten van jongvolwassenen. Meer omnivore patronen van mediagebruik zijn positief gecorreleerd aan online betrokkenheid bij politieke zaken. Mijn bevindingen op dit gebied dragen bij aan de literatuur over mediarepertoires, door te laten zien hoe mediarepertoires van jongvolwassenen in een niet-Westerse context eruit zien en welke politieke implicaties dergelijke verschillende patronen kunnen hebben op het mediagebruik. Ook dienen onderzoekers sociale media niet als een eenheid, als een ongedifferentieerd geheel te beschouwen, of zichzelf te beperken tot bijzonder populaire platforms zoals Facebook en Sina Weibo. Er moet een fijnmaziger onderscheid gemaakt worden tussen gebruik van verschillende sociale mediakanalen, als we de invloed van sociale media op de politieke betrokkenheid van individuen willen onderzoeken en verklaren.

Hoofdstuk 4 analyseert cultuurconsumptiepatronen en de online betrokkenheid bij kunst en cultuur van jongvolwassenen. Hierbij wordt eveneens een repertoire-georiënteerde benadering gebruikt. In dit hoofdstuk wordt onderzocht hoe het mediagebruik van jongvolwassenen en het vertrouwen in de culturele informatie die zij daar aantreffen, invloed hebben op hun online culturele activiteiten. Ik heb vijf verschillende culturele repertoires geïdentificeerd en heb aangetoond dat culturele omnivoren in China veel voorkomen. Mijn resultaten hier lijken er tevens op te wijzen dat de culturele repertoires van deelnemers voornamelijk gevormd worden door het onderwijs van hun ouders, door hun eigen inkomen, de geloofwaardigheid die zij aan de media toekennen en door hun mediaconsumptie. In vergelijking met traditionele media oefenen sociale media een grotere invloed uit op de voorspellende waarde van zowel de culturele repertoires als de online culturele activiteiten. Door de aandacht te richten op de culturele repertoires van jongvolwassenen, hun vertrouwen in de culturele informatie die wordt aangeboden door de diverse media en hun online activiteiten, benadrukt het hoofdstuk de rol van sociale media in het culturele leven van deze mensen, waaronder het online zoeken en delen van informatie over kunst en cultuur.

Het laatste empirische hoofdstuk gaat over gebruik van sociale media ten behoeve van het zoeken en delen van informatie over gezondheid. Hierin wordt vergeleken in hoeverre jongvolwassenen de geloofwaardigheid van gezondheid- en conditiegerelateerde informatie in traditionele en sociale media waarnemen, en er wordt een poging gedaan om de factoren bloot te leggen die de online zoektocht van jongvolwassenen naar en het uitwisselen van dergelijke informatie bepalen. In het hoofdstuk wordt de nadruk

gelegd op het mediagebruik via specifieke mediakanalen en affordanties. Hierop is gewone regressieanalyse toegepast om een voorspelling te maken van het vertrouwen van deelnemers in de gezondheidsinformatie die via verschillende mediakanalen verkregen is en het zoeken en delen van deze informatie. De resultaten tonen aan dat laagopgeleide jongvolwassenen die vaker televisie kijken, die gebruik maken de sociale ondersteuningsgeoriënteerde platforms zoals WeChat en Qzone, die soms kranten lezen en het platform Baidu Tieba gebruiken, met meer waarschijnlijkheid vertrouwen op gezondheidsinformatie die zowel op traditionele als op sociale media wordt aangeboden. Ook hoogopgeleide mannen, het beschouwen van gezondheidsinformatie op sociale mediakanalen als geloofwaardig en het gebruik maken van tijdschriften in combinatie met drie sociale ondersteuningsgeoriënteerde media - Sina Weibo, WeChat en Qzone, is vaak gecorreleerd met het kenmerk van het zoeken en delen van online informatie over gezondheid en conditie. In dit hoofdstuk wordt beargumenteerd dat de invloed van verschillende sociale media op de online praktijk van jongvolwassenen niet gelijk is en dat we onderscheid moeten maken naargelang hun affordanties. Binnen de Chinese context moeten beleidsmakers en autoriteiten nadruk leggen op sociale ondersteuningsgeoriënteerde media zoals Sina Weibo, WeChat en Qzone.

Hoofdstuk 6 sluit deze dissertatie af met een antwoord op de onderzoeksvraag die in Hoofdstuk 1 werd opgeworpen en bespreekt de implicaties van het hier gepresenteerde onderzoek. Ik heb mij voornamelijk gericht op het mediagebruik van jongvolwassenen, op de geloofwaardigheid van media in de ogen van deze mensen, op het vertrouwen dat zij hebben in de media en op hun online activiteiten gerelateerd aan politiek, cultuur en gezondheid. Deze dissertatie draagt op verschillende manieren bij aan de bestaande literatuur. Mijn onderzoek verstrekt ons begrip van mediaconsumptie en online activiteiten van 18 tot 40-jarigen binnen een niet-Westerse context; het scheidt de verschillende rollen van traditionele en sociale media in de vorming van vertrouwen van deze jongvolwassenen in instituties en de geloofwaardigheid die zij toekennen aan de informatie die ze ontvangen via verschillende mediakanalen en platforms; het draagt bij aan een comparatieve literatuur over mediagebruik binnen politiek, cultuur en gezondheid; het onthult enkele praktische implicaties van de online activiteiten van jongvolwassenen in dit digitale tijdperk en het geeft richting aan toekomstig onderzoek. Tussen China en andere landen en culturen zou nader vergelijkend onderzoek ten aanzien van mediagebruik en online betrokkenheid uitgevoerd moeten worden. Kwalitatieve onderzoeksmethoden kunnen, indien toegepast naast kwantitatieve benaderingen, leiden tot een beter begrip van de dagelijkse mediaconsumptie en het online leven van jongvolwassenen. Naast mediafactoren moeten toekomstige onderzoeken ook aandacht schenken aan factoren zoals informatietype en motivaties voor online betrokkenheid.

## Curriculum Vitae

Qiong Gong holds a research Master's in Communication (2011–2014) from the East China Normal University, Shanghai, and a Bachelor's in Management (2007–2011) from the South-Central University for Nationalities, Wuhan. During her studies she worked as a student journalist for the school newspaper in Wuhan and as a marketing intern for a public relations and marketing agency in Shanghai.

In September 2014, Qiong embarked on a PhD program at the Erasmus Research Centre for Media, Communication and Culture (ERMeCC) at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Between 2014 and 2019 she participated in various international conferences and workshops. She is also a member of the ERMeCC PhD Club and attends their bimonthly meetings.

Qiong is interested in both quantitative and qualitative research – in media and communication as well as in culture studies. In applying these methods she is led above all by a desire to understand how young people engage with the media.

## Portfolio

### Courses attended during the PhD Project

- *How to survive your PhD* (September to December 2014, 2.5 ECTS)
- *Research Design* (September 2014 to December 2014, 5 ECTS)
- *Advanced Quantitative Research Methods* (September 2014 to February 2015, 5 ECTS)
- *Advanced Research methods 1: Qualitative Data Analysis. How to generate conclusion from qualitative data* (October -November 2015, 2.5 ECTS)
- *Popular academic writing and using social media* (October-November 2015, 2.5 ECTS)
- *Doing the literature review* (November 2015 - March 2016, 2.5 ECTS)
- *English academic writing for PhD candidates* (November 2015 - March 2016, 2.5 ECTS)
- *How to get your article published* (November 2015 - March 2016, 2.5 ECTS)
- *Brush up your SPSS skills* (November 2017, 1 ECTS)
- *Shut up and write* (December 2017, 2.5 ECTS)
- *Self-presentation: confidence, focus, persuasion* (November 2018, 2.5 ECTS)

### Presentations at conferences and academic workshops

- Conference “24 Hours of Communication Science” (Etmaal), Amsterdam, the Netherlands, February 2016.
- International Conference on Communication and Management, Athens, Greece, May 2016.
- DSA2016, “Politics in Development,” Oxford, UK, September 2016.
- Conference “Innovative Methods in Communication Research” (Etmaal), Tilburg, the Netherlands, February 2017.
- RMeS Winter School–University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, February 2018: oral presentation.
- 2018 Conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), Eugene, Oregon, USA, June 2018.

### Manuscripts submitted for publication

- **Gong, Q.**, & Verboord, M. (forthcoming). Social media use and health information seeking and sharing among young Chinese adults. *Journal of Social Media in Society*.

- **Gong, Q.**, Verboord, M., & Janssen, S. Cross-media usage repertoires and their political impacts: The case of China. [Revised and resubmitted to the *International Journal of Communication*.]
- **Gong, Q.**, Verboord, M., & Wang, Y. Media usage and political trust among young adults in China: The mediating role of media credibility and the moderating roles of trust in sources and political membership. [Submitted to *Mass Communication & Society*.]
- **Gong, Q.**, Verboord, M., & Janssen, S. Cultural consumption repertoires and online engagement with the arts and culture in the digital age: The case of China. [Submitted to *International Journal of Consumer Studies*.]

### Reviewing experience

- Peer review (three articles): The 68th Annual International Communication Association (ICA) Conference, November 2017.
- Peer review (one article): *New Media & Society*, July 2018.