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## **Trust, fear and social influence: on the use of social media in China's authoritarian governance regime**

VINCENT HOMBURG

**Abstract** This paper reports on the analysis of results of a survey among Chinese citizens about their intended use of social media to interact with government agencies and associated motivations. Citizens' use intentions were found to be correlated with citizens' trust in officials, social influence (peer pressure) and anxiety, but not with trust in government. These results provide building blocks for an explanatory theory of citizens' use of social media to interact with government, especially in an authoritarian regime like China's system of public governance. This explanatory theory is consistent with an institutional perspective on technology use, in which use intentions and behaviours are explained by norms, practices and taken-for-granted assumptions, rather than by rational cost-benefit considerations. The paper is concluded with recommendations for comparative research on antecedents of social media in government-citizen relations in various governance systems.

**Keywords:** • Social Media • Government - Citizen Interaction • Sina Weibo • China • Influence •

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## 1 Introduction

Today's social media channels offer governments improved ways to deliver public services to citizens. Inversely, social media provide citizens with new opportunities to provide feedback on policies, and/or initiate participatory initiatives (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2012; Kassen, 2013; Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013). Perhaps to the surprise of many Western observers, one of the frontrunners in the use of social media is the People's Republic of China, a country with an authoritarian, unitary governance regime. Various government agencies, public service providers and regulatory agencies use hundreds of thousands accounts on platforms such as Sina Weibo, Tencent, People and Xinhua Net, serving a target population of hundreds of million users (Chan, Wu, Hao, Xi, & Jin, 2012; Ma, 2014; Schlæger & Jiang, 2014).

The academic literature on government social media use in China has, until date, focused on uses of social media from a government point of view. It has been observed that online participatory initiatives and new online political discourses have emerged (Schlæger & Jiang, 2014; G. Yang, 2009). On the other hand, Sullivan (2012) commented that social media are increasingly being 'occupied' by officials working for propaganda departments and security bureaus in order to curtail activities of opposition groups like environmental NGOs and anti-corruption movements. Furthermore, literature indicates that in China, social media are monitored by government in order to 'gauge the water', that is, to measure, shape and suppress public opinions (Cairns & Carlson, 2016; Guo & Jiang, 2015; Xu, 2015; G. Yang, 2009), especially during natural disasters (Deng, Liu, Deng, & Zhang, 2015; White & Fu, 2012) or diplomatic incidents (Cairns & Carlson, 2016; Jiang, 2016).

Academic literatures have resulted both in political commentary of government use of social media in China as propaganda spaces (including issues of censorship (Sullivan, 2012; King, Pan & Roberts, 2013), as well as in descriptive and explanatory accounts of diffusion of social media among government organizations and its organizagional and technological antecedents (Ma, 2014; N. Zhang, Zhao, Zhang, Meng, & Tan, 2017). Suprisingly little attention has been given to the citizen side of social media use in government-citizen relations, with Medaglia and Zhu's (2016) account of university students' deliberative practice being a notable exception.

This paper focuses on China's citizens' expectations, intentions and motives in dealing with government using Sina Weibo, arguably China's most well-known social media outlet. We address the question to what extent and why Chinese citizens intend to use Sina Weibo to communicate with government. The question is relevant since on the one hand, there is little empirical research on the actual practice of social media use in authoritarian government regimes such as China's governance system, and, on the other hand, China is especially interesting because its online community members have been described as relatively young, wild, and outspoken (Hassid, 2012; G. Yang, 2009), which furthermore fuels an interest in how Chinese citizens deal with new political opportunities in the context of an authoritarian political regime (for a study on the government's responsiveness, refer to Meng, Pan & Yang, 2017).

## **2 Context: China's political system and the emergence of social media**

The People's Republic of China is structured into various administrative tiers: central level including autonomous regions (of which Tibet is one) and special autonomous regions (Hong Kong and Macau), provinces, prefectures, counties, districts, and towns and sub districts. Since the 1970s, more authority has been delegated to local governments.

Since about 2011, local government agencies have enthusiastically embraced the emerging social media technologies, albeit with a special focus on unilateral, top-down communication. Topics of communication that takes place on the newly emerged social media channels include quotes from top-level politicians, public service announcements, human interest stories, and morning- and afternoon general wisdom sayings (Schläger & Jiang, 2014). Chinese citizens, on the other hand, are reported to be willing to voice their opinions on social media. Topics of discussions initiated by citizens include dissatisfaction with government performance, corruption, problems caused by socio-economic changes (Hassid, 2012; G. Yang, 2009) and environmental issues (Li, Homburg, de Jong, & Koppenjan, 2016; Li, Koppenjan, & Homburg, 2017). Sullivan notes that Chinese government's possibly biggest fear is the emergence of a coalition of laid-off workers, dispossessed homeowners, unemployed graduates, hungry farmers and ethnic and religious minorities that shares grievances online and may challenge the regime (Sullivan, 2014). Therefore, Chinese authorities tolerate on-

line debates and feedback as long as they are specific, localized and do not contain threats of collective action (Cai, 2010; Meng, Pan & Yang, 2017). Authorities, on the other hand, seem to impose regulations on Internet providers to monitor online communication and to prevent protests from gaining traction (Qin, Strömberg & Wu, 2017). Chinese government's attempts to allow citizens to vent their anger as long as systemic problems are not explicitly addressed are referred to in the literature as 'consultative Leninism' (Tsang, 2009) and 'networked authoritarianism' (MacKinnon, 2011; Tsai, 2016).

### **3 Design of a survey of adoption and diffusion of social media in China**

#### **3.1 Research strategy**

Academic literatures have reported quite extensively on in-depth case studies of social media use during citizens protests in China (Deng et al., 2015; White & Fu, 2012) and local governments' experiences with social media (Ma, 2014; Schlæger & Jiang, 2014). Until date, more large-n, quantitative studies of use of social media (particularly Sina Weibo) by Chinese citizens, has been lacking.

In the study this paper reports upon, we conducted a survey among Chinese citizens living in the province of Hunan, People's Republic of China, with which citizens' use of Sina Weibo was described, as well as with which candidate explanatory variables of social media could be constructed and assessed. It must be stressed that until date no adoption and diffusion theories exist that take into account particularities and sensitivities of the Chinese context, and therefore, the research objective of this study is to contribute to an explanatory theory of social media use in an authoritarian governance system context, rather than to test an existing theory. From the analysis of the results of the survey, constructs and relations between constructs are suggested as to be able to produce rather than strictly test an explanatory account of Chinese citizens' use of Sina Weibo to interact with government.

### 3.2 Theoretical foundation of the questionnaire and measurement of constructs

Frequently used starting points for studies of individuals' uses of technology are adoption and diffusion models such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Technology, Organization and Environment model (TOE) and the Unified Model of Acceptance and Utilization of Technology (UTAUT and UTAUT2). In existing tests of these kinds of theories and their derivatives in the context of electronic public service delivery in the United States (Carter & Bélanger, 2005; Carter & Schaupp, 2009; Carter, Christian Shaupp, Hobbs, & Campbell, 2011), the Netherlands (Horst et al., 2007), India (Rana, Dwivedi, Williams, & Weerakkody, 2016), China (Mensah, 2017) and Hong Kong (Venkatesh et al., 2016), over time, more emphasis has been put on institutional factors including citizens' *perception of risk, privacy concerns and anxiety* (Min et al., 2008; Q. Wang, Yang, & Liu, 2012; Lai & Shi, 2015; Carter et al., 2011; Rana, Dwivedi, & Williams, 2013), *trust in government* (Chong, Ooi, Lin, & Bao, 2012) and *peer pressure* (Venkatesh et al., 2016) as predictors.

In the current study, we conceptualized *anxiety* and *risk* as an individual's negative affective reaction due to envisaged unappreciated social media activity (X. Li, 2013) or incompetence in dealing with the system (Rana et al., 2013; Rana et al., 2016). For the questionnaire we included slightly adapted Likert items borrowed Venkatesh et al., (2011) to measure anxiety and risk.

The concept of *trust* is generally associated with perceptions of safety, and more precisely defined as actor A's expectations that while B has the capacity to harm A, B refrain from doing so. By accepting the vulnerability, A possesses trust; by refraining from exploiting vulnerability, B is trustworthy (Frederiksen, 2014; Pavlou & Gefen, 2005). In a Chinese cultural context, trust can be thought of as being composed of two distinct concepts. The first one is trust in institutions (*institutional trust*), that is, the belief that an individual citizen has in administrative, legal and societal institutions such as the Chinese Communist Party, government apparatus, councils, courts, associations, media and complaints bureaus (Q. Yang & Tang, 2010). In the questionnaire we included adaptations of Likert items taken from Yang & Tang, 2010. The second one is related to intricate and pervasive relational networks called *guanxi* (Yen, Barnes, & Wang, 2011). *Guanxi* consists of feelings of empathy and solidarity (*ganqing*), reliability and sincerity

(*renqing*) and reliance and sincerity (*xinren*) and it can be developed in relations between citizens and very specific government officials to protect citizens against administrative hurdles or unforeseen risks. This notion is referred to as *interpersonal trust*. Interpersonal trust was operationalized using items taken from Poppo, Zhou, & Li (2016) and Reich-Graefe (2014).

Peer pressure refers to a form of social influence beyond one's own personal considerations, to an individual's conformation to the expectation of other people. In this study, social influence was measured using items that were adapted from Venkatesh's (2016) operationalization.

The dependent variable in this study was *intention to use Sina Weibo to interact with government*. We chose for intention to use rather than actual use since asking for intention is, in a Chinese context, considered to be less sensitive than asking for actual behaviors, and because in the literature it is reported that intentions are adequate predictors of actual behaviors (de Lange & Homburg, 2017).

### **3.3 Questionnaire design and data gathering procedures**

Following the definitions and operationalization of theoretical constructs reported in section 3.2, we compiled a 71-item questionnaire in English. We thoroughly discussed possible sensitivities in the questionnaire, and subsequently had the questionnaire translated into Mandarin. We then piloted the questionnaire using a panel of Chinese students, on the basis of which several formulations of items were changed. Then, we asked another interpreter to translate the adapted Mandarin questionnaire back to English so that misinterpretations could be checked, discussed and corrected whenever necessary.

Once the questionnaire was developed, we asked various China-based companies specializing in marketing and opinion polling to gather data among citizens living in Hunan, located in the South-Central part of the Chinese mainland. Perceived sensitivity of the subject matter turned out to be prohibitive for many companies to carry out the survey. Eventually, data were gathered by a Shanghai-based survey company using an online survey tool. Responses from 1572 citizens could be recorded. Data were scanned and screened for kurtosis and unengaged responses based on standard deviations of Likert items and time it took for

respondents to complete the survey. Data from five respondents were dropped because of distrustful characteristics (age). Ten unexpected missing values were replaced by the median of nearby data points, following general data screening guidelines (Gaskin, 2017).

## **4 Descriptives, analyses and model construction**

### **4.1 Demographics**

Respondents were 914 men (58%) and 658 women aged 15 to 67 (men:  $M = 36.9$ ,  $SD = 8.4$ ; women:  $M = 34.6$ ,  $SD = 7.0$ ). the majority of the respondents (86%) reported to be living in an urban area. Professional activities included going to school (3%), working in the public sector (30%), working in the private sector (60%), keeping house (3%), and something else (2%). The highest level of completed education was junior high school and below (2%), senior high school (8%), college (37%), university (49%) and postgraduate (3%). Monthly salary ranged from less than RMB 2000 (3%), 2001-5000 RMB (23%), 5001-8000 RMB (39%), 8001-12000 RMB (27%) and above 12000 RMB (6%).

### **4.2 Scale construction and reliability of variables**

As we slightly adapted existing items by means of which the various constructs were to be measured, and items were translated back and forth, possibly resulting in less than optimal coherence of items, we carried out an exploratory factor analysis in order to identify the underlying structure of the measured variables in the questionnaire. First of all, the factorability of all Likert items in the questionnaire was examined. A cross table analysis of all items showed that many items correlated at least .3 with at least one other item, suggesting factorability. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .968 and thus well above the commonly recommended value of .6, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ( $\chi^2(1176) = 31145.577$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). The diagonals of the anti-image correlation matrix were above .5 with the exception of the items on anxiety. Finally, the communalities were all above .3, further confirming that each item shared at least some common variance with other items. Given the above considerations, factor analysis was deemed to be suitable with all items. Factor analysis was carried out using maximum likelihood extraction method since the variables were generally normally distributed. Since our dataset was relatively



large (more than 1500 observations), we decided to opt for ProMax rotation. Eventually, a five-factor solution explaining 44.9% of the variance could be identified (see table 1).

**Table 1: results of factor analysis (maximum likelihood extraction, ProMax rotation)**

	Behavioral intention	Social influence	Anxiety and risk	Interpersonal trust	Institutional trust
Q17	.667				
Q18	.684				
Q19	.633				
Q28		.463			
Q29		.485			
Q30		.401			
Q31		.476			
Q38			.806		
Q39			.878		
Q40			.880		
Q41			.796		
Q42				.452	
Q43				.589	
Q44				.625	
Q45				.698	
Q46				.586	
Q47				.590	
Q48				.615	
Q49				.679	
Q50				.509	
Q51				.557	
Q52				.649	
Q53				.365	
Q54					.376
Q55					.430
Q56					.445
Q57					.596

	Behavioral intention	Social influence	Anxiety and risk	Interpersonal trust	Institutional trust
Q58					.625
Q59					.569
Q60					.553
Q61					.741
Q62					.744
Q63					.609
Q64					.713
Q65					.746

**Table 2: reliability, descriptives and bivariate correlations of variables**

	Cronbach's alpha	Mean (SD)	Behavioral intention	Social Influence	Anxiety	Interpersonal trust	Institutional trust
Gender (1=female)		0.42	-.046	-0,03	-0,02	.022	-.138
Age		35.9 (7.9)	-0,43	-0,40	-0,29	-0,07	.018
Area (1=Urban)		0.87	-0,10	-0,10	-0,03	-0,12	-0,13
Education (1=University & postgraduate)		0.52	-0,08	-0,03	0,04	-0,05	-0,09
Job (1=Civil servant)		0.30	-0,04	-0,02	-0,09	-0,05	-0,03
Behavioral intention	.708	1.68 (.55)	1				
Social Influence	.762	1.96 (.63)	.500	1			
Anxiety and risk	.895	3.50 (1.09)	-.358	-.170	1		

Interpersonal trust	.854	1.95	.535	.628	-.253	1
		(.50)				
Institutional trust	.891	1.88	.414	.575	-.104	.685
		(.51)				1

Subsequently, internal consistency of the identified factors was measured using Cronbach's alpha (reported in table 2). All measures for consistency were acceptable; no improvements could be made by dropping items from the scales. Subsequently, composite scores were created for each of the factors based on the mean of the items factor loadings greater than .3. Table 2 furthermore lists means and correlations between various variables.

### 4.3 Model construction

In order to construct a basic multivariate explanatory model with one dependent variable (behavioral intention) and four independent variables we conducted a multiple linear regression analysis.

Before the actual regression was implemented, we checked the following model assumptions for multiple regression analysis following guidelines set out by Field (2009). Multicollinearity was checked by inspecting the correlations of the independent variables in Table 5 and by inspecting the VIF values of each independent variables. As none of the correlations are above .7, and all VIFs were below 4, this assumption is met (Belsley, 1991). Homoscedasticity was checked using a scatterplot of standardized residuals and predicted values; no anomalies were found. Independent errors were checked using the Durbin-Watson statistic and the value of 1.910 revealed no problems associated with this assumption. The assumption of normally distributed errors was tested via inspection of unstandardized residuals. Whereas the Q-Q plot revealed a relatively normal distribution, the Shapiro-Wilk test for normality ( $SW = .972$ ,  $df = 1572$ ,  $p < 0,01$ ) suggested normality was not met.

The impacts of the variables social influence, anxiety, interpersonal trust and institutional trust on behavioral intention to use social media to communicate with governments (controlling for age and gender, and for area, education and job type) are assessed using multiple linear regression analysis. A significant

regression equation was found for gender and sex ( $F(2, 1569) = 3.645, p < 0,05$ ), gender, sex, area, education and job type ( $F(5, 1566) = 6.805, p < 0,001$ ) as well as for gender, sex, social influence, anxiety, interpersonal trust and institutional trust ( $F(9, 1562) = 112.507, p < 0,001$ ). Coefficients and significance levels of the various independents are reported in Table 3.

**Table 3: regression results on Behavioral Intention (\*  $p < 0,05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0,01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0,001$ )**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Beta (significance)	Beta (significance)	Beta (significance)
Age	-0,050*	-0,066*	-0,055*
Gender	-0,053*	-0,057*	-0,062**
Area		-0,088**	-0,035
Education		-0,069**	-0,036
Job Type		-0,025	-0,037
Social Influence			.247***
Anxiety and risk			-.247***
Interpersonal trust			.279***
Institutional trust			.045
	$\Delta R^2 = .003$ (adj)	$\Delta R^2 = .018$ (adj)	$\Delta R^2 = .390$ (adj)

## 5 Conclusion and discussion

The results presented in the previous section provide core components of a theory that explains why Chinese citizens, living in an authoritarian governance regime, intend to interact with government using Sina Weibo. Regression results indicate that intention to use may be explained by (1) interpersonal trust, (2) social influence and (3) negatively, by anxiety and (perceived) risk. Altogether, these variables champion an institutional explanation of social media use in a state regime with limited freedoms and heightened levels of societal surveillance, emphasizing the pressures of values in interpersonal, social environment (trust in government officials, and anticipated expectations of nearest and dearest), and of norms (conformance to expected behaviors, whereas deviance may be sanctioned).

The explanation that may emerge from these statements is that citizens in China's authoritarian regime are pressured by expectations from their respective social environments to use social media to interact with government, whereas fears of sanctions holds them back. There are, however, a number of limitations and rival explanations that must be considered.

The first one is related to the association between social media use intentions and trust. In existing UTAUT and UTAUT2 frameworks, it is hypothesized that trust impacts use intentions and ultimately may impact use behavior. However, it may be argued that recurrent use of social media may inversely impact trust, either institutional trust or trust in individual officials. Cross-sectional studies like the one this paper reports on, however, are incapable of demonstrating the direction of causation. Therefore, other methods, such as longitudinal studies of individual citizen's experiences and motivations, could be employed to contribute to explanatory theories related to this issue.

The second one is related to the finding that anxiety and risk are negatively related to citizens' social media use intentions. It must be noted that in China, a social credit system (SCS) is under development that ranks and rates citizens based on their offline (smoking where smoking is not allowed, breaking traffic rules) and online (posting fake news) behaviors. Under a more fully developed SCS, scheduled for 2020, specific social media behaviors may face much more tangible repercussions (rewards and sanctions) than in the current situation. In the current study it was not possible to incorporate citizens' anticipations on SCS, but future research on social media uses in China should arguably take implications of SCS into account.

The third one is arguably an even more challenging one. In the current study, the focus was on theory construction of social media use in a specific unitary authoritarian governance regime, which led to specific inferences about antecedents of citizens' use of social media in contacts with governments. At this moment, however, we cannot attribute these inferences to the overarching authoritarian regime. It does, however, point to new avenues for comparative research: as various state structures (think of authoritarian unitary regimes like China, compared to Western state structures such as liberal welfare state regimes, corporatist regimes, and socialdemocratic regimes) with each structure having specific levels of centralization, checks and balances and transparency, to name

just a few attributes of state structures. Comparative, large-n research on social media use in citizen-government relationships could throw light on possible interactions between citizens' preferences and motives for using social media to interact with government, and attributes of overarching state structures. In such a way, a much more informative theory of antecedents and impacts of social media in government-citizen relationships could be constructed.

The fourth one is that the current study is based on survey data, and the use of survey data that are gathered for academic purposes is rather sensitive in a Chinese context. Privacy concerns in an authoritarian governance regime are different than those in Western liberal democracies, and possible respondents' biases (or discretion) may exist and may have affected the analyses. Given limited experience with studies that are based on survey data on political communication in China, it is very hard at this moment to assess whether and if so to what degree biases may have affected the outcomes of the analyses.

As a final note, this study – even when considered in the light of the limitations mentioned above – does suggest a number of new research directions and perspectives on future research. The first one, arguably, is to furthermore explore how citizens' anxieties, trusts and societal pressures shape interactions between government and citizens in countries generally, and in authoritarian governance regimes in particular. At local governance levels in China, participative and grassroots initiatives are taking shape and these initiatives are tolerated and sometimes even encouraged as long as they do not pose a threat to those in power. The interactions and their ramifications are at this moment in time far from clear and this observation warrants further qualitative and quantitative study of how new technologies are adopted and used, both in government-initiated, as well as in more bottom-up inspired initiatives. A second one is that also in the Western world, there is an ongoing debate about the political role of social media platforms. Further investigations could shed light on the roles of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in the Western world, and Sina Weibo and WeChat in the Chinese context, in shaping and possibly framing political discourse.

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