WeChat use among Chinese college students: Exploring gratifications and political engagement in China

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ABSTRACT

Given the potential of social network sites in democratization, this study explored the relationship between WeChat use, gratification seeking, and political engagement through WeChat in China. A survey of 307, young adult, WeChat users found: (1) WeChat use for entertainment and recognition needs predicted political engagement through WeChat; (2) WeChat use and browsing news and information about a particular political issue on WeChat were positively associated with political engagement through WeChat; and (3) the relationship between WeChat use and political engagement through WeChat was moderated by browsing news and information on WeChat.

With the increased penetration of Internet service and spread of social network sites (SNS), China has become the country with the world’s most active environment for SNS (Chiu, Ip, & Silverman, 2012). By 2015, the number of SNS users in China reached 410.5 million, and 61.6% of them are mobile SNS users (Statista, 2016a, 2016b). Even though the Chinese government has blocked access to Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other U.S.-based SNS, SNS users in China have access to local SNS like Weibo and WeChat—developed by Chinese Internet services companies (Chiu et al., 2012). WeChat—similar in design to WhatsApp—was launched in 2011 and is the most popular mobile app and SNS in China (Millward, 2016). By the end of 2015, WeChat had 762 million monthly active users worldwide, and roughly 91% of them were from China; moreover, around 639 million users accessed WeChat on a smartphone (Smith, 2016).

Like WhatsApp, WeChat enables users to send messages in multiple formats (e.g., voice, texts, and pictures) to either a single person or a particular group of individuals (through WeChat Group Chat or Tagging); users may also make audio or video calls (Keating, 2016). Unlike WhatsApp, WeChat enables users to post text messages, photos, stickers (e.g., emoji), and short videos to Moments (a function that is similar to the News Feed of Facebook) and “Like” or comment on others’ posts (Keating, 2016; Lily, 2014; Sandel & Ju, 2015). In addition, WeChat serves as a platform for entertainment, shopping, and transactions (Kuo, 2014). The features of WeChat underlie an
“information-rich environment” where users can spread news reports and unofficial information on political issues (Chan, Wu, Hao, Xi, & Jin, 2012, p. 345).

As an online discursive space, WeChat empowers users in China to express opinions on political events (Chan et al., 2012; “From Weibo,” 2014). Characterized by horizontal communication networks and decentralization, WeChat potentially challenges the domination of information flows of the Chinese government (Zhou, 2010). Nevertheless, WeChat, like other SNS, faces the Internet censorship policies of China. For instance, posts that threaten the power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will be deleted or hidden by human censors who monitor the “Great Firewall” (Deluca, Brunner, & Sun, 2016).

With the above in mind, this study explores the relationship between motives for WeChat use, and implications for online behaviors of citizens living in an authoritarian regime. Drawing on instrumental and psychological perspectives on SNS effects, this study shows certain motives for WeChat use, along with browsing news and information about a particular political issue, are associated with political engagement through WeChat in China. Findings from this study contribute to understandings of the influence of SNS use on democracy development in China, and other similar authoritarian regimes (Chan et al., 2012).

**Literature review**

According to Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), political participation is conceptualized as “both psychological engagement and behavioral involvement of civic and public affairs” which are aimed at “influencing governmental decisions” (as cited in Hsieh & Li, 2014, p. 27). Psychological engagement mainly involves political efficacy, political interest, political cynicism, ideological orientation, political trust, and political intimidation (Dimitrova & Bystrom, 2013; Hsieh & Li, 2014; Mou, Atkin, & Fu, 2011). Behavioral involvement primarily encompasses voting, attempting to persuade others, attending a campaign rally, giving money to a political candidate, signing a petition, and volunteering for a political party (Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-I-Abril, & Rojas, 2009; Hsieh & Li, 2014; Vitak, Zube., Smock, Carr, Ellison, & Lampe, 2011; Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2010). Forms of political participation are “supplemented” by online communication tools like SNS, blogging, and websites (Vitak et al., 2011, p. 108). In this study, political participation is defined as online voluntary activity about a particular political issue which includes—but is not limited to—reading posts, forwarding information, discussing political issues, expressing personal opinion, attending political campaigning activities, subscribing to a political listserv, and sending political messages (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009; Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011; Gil de Zúñiga, 2012; Wallis, 2011; Zhang, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2013).

**SNS support political engagement in China**

The introduction of the Internet to China and market competition among Chinese Internet companies not only engendered “a relatively open and decentralized” media system of China but also led to the emergence of “a new population” named as “Chinese netizens” who acquire information through the Internet (Lei, 2011, p. 291). A majority of Chinese netizens consist of young people who are known as the “post-eighties” and/or
“post-nineties” generations (Wallis, 2011). Chinese netizens tend to be “autonomous from the state in terms of political beliefs,” “critical of the political conditions and the party state,” support “the norms of democracy,” and desire to “engage in politics,” as compared with traditional media users and nonmedia users (Lei, 2011, pp. 309–310).

In China, where joining collective action to directly or indirectly challenge authorities can bring about “political repercussions,” and thus rarely happens, SNS positively contribute to participation in political life in an oppressive environment through “weakening the power of the authoritarian state in monopolizing the production and dissemination of information and meaning” (Lei, 2011, p. 311). As SNS rapidly diffuses across China, Chinese netizens are able to access a wealth of unofficial or alternative information on public issues (Deluca et al., 2016). Such information not only liberates the minds of Chinese netizens but also facilitates public deliberation (Cheng, Liang, & Leung, 2014; Esarey & Qiang, 2011). Furthermore, networked and horizontal communication afforded by SNS enable Chinese netizens to quickly spread a broad spectrum of information on political issues, while bypassing established media systems (Bondes & Schucher, 2014; Zhang & Tomlinson, 2012). For instance, Weibo—a popular microblogging site—allows Chinese netizens to forward and cross-post breaking news regarding “governmental abuses of power, cover-ups, and scandals” (Sullivan, 2013, pp. 1–2). In addition, SNS provide multifarious channels for Chinese netizens to voice their opinions on “political issues and current affairs” while avoiding being harshly repressed by the Chinese government (Chan et al., 2012; Cheng et al., 2014; Esarey & Qiang, 2008; Yang, 2014). For instance, on 23 July 2011, a Chinese high-speed-train crash triggered a large-scale “online mass incident” which was played out on Weibo (Bondes & Schucher, 2014). Thousands of Chinese netizens condemned the ministry of railway of China and discussed a number of contentious issues involving the CCP and Chinese government (e.g., “corruption, lacking of transparency, and polarization in income distribution”) through posting and reposting a large number of messages (Sullivan, 2013, p. 2). Although the Chinese government imposed Internet censorship on SNS, Chinese netizens were able to creatively convey their views on political and social issues through both technological (e.g., virtual private network) and nontechnological methods (e.g., coded language, phonograms, and emoji) and circumvent government restrictions (Deluca et al., 2016; Esarey & Qiang, 2011; Wallis, 2011).

Another example of the role of SNS in political engagement is evident in the antigraft campaign initiated by Xi Jinping, President and General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (MacLeod, 2014). The antigraft campaign aims at regaining public trust through prosecuting misbehaving members of CCP who “use public funds for elaborate meals or personal travel, receiving extravagant gifts, and hosting big weddings” (“China brings battle,” 2016). SNS, including WeChat and Weibo, allow Chinese netizens to engage in this activity through posting relevant information such as “exposing official wrongdoings” (Kao, 2013). Hence, in 2012, a Chinese journalist brought down a district official of CCP by using Weibo to post an image of a video showing that the official had sex with a mistress (“Lei Zhengfu,” 2012). Similarly, a safety official in Shaanxi Province was dismissed after images of him wearing luxury watches (e.g., Rolex) were posted on Weibo (Gu, 2012). In addition, WeChat “official accounts” have been set up by some local, provincial governments, as well as China’s Central Government, for users to report corrupt officials (“WeChat, new media,” 2013). These cases indicate that SNS foster political engagement
in China; due in part to instrumental values, such as the high speed of information spread, transparency, and the convenience of use (“WeChat, new media,” 2013; Cheng et al., 2014). Another key factor of political engagement involves motives for SNS use. Since the antigraft campaign is a typical example of political events in China, this study chose it as the context for exploring the role of WeChat in political engagement in China. In the current study, political engagement through WeChat is operationalized as online behaviors incorporating: (1) the reposting of news and information about the antigraft campaign of China, and (2) expressing opinions on political events.

**Effects of motives for SNS use**

Uses and gratifications theory (U&G) proposes that individuals are goal-oriented, and they use media to satisfy their needs (Pornsakulvanich, Haridakis, & Rubin, 2008). These needs generate multiple motives, involving distinct cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Rubin & Rubin, 1992). U&G has been used to explain how and why individuals use a range of media, including cellphones, the Internet, and SNS (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014; Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007; Zhang & Pentina, 2012). Some common motives for media use include: social interaction, entertainment, accessibility, self-expression, information seeking and exchange, surveillance, and professional development (Cheng et al., 2014; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Zhang & Pentina, 2012).

Guided by U&G, one line of research shows that certain motives for media use influence the frequency, amount, and intensity of media use. Leung and Wei (2000) found that instrumentality is a predictor of the level of cellphone use, including the number of calls made and received on a typical day. Wei and Lo (2006) argued that affection, social utility, fashion status, and accessibility are predictors of the frequency of telephone calls to family. Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) noted that convenience motivation predicts the length of overall Internet use. Joinson (2008) mentioned that utilizing Facebook for status updates is associated with frequency of visits to Facebook, while content gratifications is associated with time spent on Facebook. Cheng et al. (2014) suggested that SNS use for accessibility, recognition needs, and entertainment are predictors of the frequency of SNS use.

Cheng et al.’s (2014) study on the relationship between the motives of SNS use and civic engagement among Chinese nationals is “the closest and most relevant” to WeChat; and their study showed that four categories of motivations are associated with civic engagement: technological convenience, information exchange, social interaction, and recreation (Chan et al., 2012, p. 346). Following Cheng et al. (2014), this study proposed six motives for WeChat use, including: information needs, affection needs, fashion/status, accessibility, recognition needs, and entertainment needs. As crucial psychological factors explaining SNS use, the six motives may be associated with WeChat adoption. Thus,

RQ1: How can the motives of WeChat use predict (1) the frequency and (2) the intensity of WeChat use?

As a research paradigm, U&G has been demonstrated to be powerful in accounting for the association between the motives for media use and citizen engagement (e.g., Cheng et al., 2014; Gil de Zúñiga, 2012). Information motives for media use are predictors of political and civic engagement, both online and offline. Straits (1991) claimed that individuals
following political information on newspapers are motivated to “share, exchange, and compare” the information with their families, coworkers, friends (p. 434). Shah et al. (2001) argued that Internet use for information exchange predicts civic engagement among young American adults. Hyun, Kim, and Sun (2014) found that Internet use for seeking information about Sino-Japanese conflicts and social interaction predict anti-Japanese behaviors (e.g., boycotting Japanese products) among Chinese netizens. Chan et al. (2012) argued that Weibo use for information needs is a predictor of online expression about government and political affairs. Gil de Zúñiga (2012) posited that SNS use for news is positively associated with civic engagement. In contrast, some studies have found that media use for entertainment motives have “a negative or muted effect” on political engagement (Gil de Zúñiga, 2012, p. 321). Shah et al. (2001) found that Internet use for chat room participation is negatively associated with civic engagement. Zhang and Chia (2006) found that entertainment program viewing does not have an effect on political engagement. Chan et al. (2012) noted that Weibo use for entertainment needs is not significantly associated with online expression about government and politics. Cheng et al. (2014) noted that SNS use for entertainment does not predict civic engagement in China, both online and offline.

Drawing on previous studies about the relationship between political engagement and media use for (1) informational needs and (2) entertainment, hypothesis one is proposed:

H1a: WeChat use for informational needs is positively associated with political engagement.

H1b: WeChat use for entertainment is negatively associated with political engagement.

Furthermore, little research has clearly delineated the relationship between political engagement and SNS use for affection needs, fashion/status, accessibility, and recognition needs. Taken demographics and the frequency of WeChat use into account, leads to the following research question:

RQ2: How can WeChat use for affection needs, fashion/status, accessibility, and recognition needs predict political engagement?

**Instrumental perspectives on the effects of SNS use**

Studies of media effects on political and civic engagement have resulted in a range of findings (Gil de Zúñiga, 2012). Prior to the advent of the Internet, some scholars argued that mass media use reduces political engagement, because of time displacement and mean-world effects (Shah et al., 2001). With the widespread use of the Internet, however, other researchers stressed that Internet use results in a decrease in participation in political and civic issues (e.g., Nie & Erbring, 2000). These arguments mainly focus on the “volume of usage” of a specific medium and fail to consider effects of media formats and contents on political participation (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Xenos & Moy, 2007). More recent studies indicated that online communication tools promote “democratic deliberation” (Zhou, 2010, p. 1005) as well as “social mobilization” (Cheng et al., 2014, p.2) through substantially reducing “costs of information acquisition and communication” (Xenos & Moy, 2007, p. 707). It is widely recognized that SNS enhances political engagement by increasing the “availability of free information” and facilitating time- and distance-defying interaction among users (Zhou, 2010, p. 1005). Furthermore, the
convenience of accessing SNS on mobile devices “may entice a broader set of citizens to engage in politics” (Boulianne, 2009, p. 194). Ultimately, the features of SNS foster a citizenry who become more knowledgeable, concerned, and critical about “public policy issues” and “collective problems” (Zhou, 2010, p. 1005).

The ubiquity of access to SNS positively contributes to political participation by enabling individuals to search for, obtain, and consume diverse information on political issues with little time and money (Boulianne, 2009; Towner, 2013). Before SNS use was integrated into everyday life, Xenos and Moy (2007) argued that seeking and looking for information about political issues online was a way to reduce uncertainty about the political world. Nowadays, SNS function as “outlets” for political information and news (Weeks & Holbert, 2013). For example, individuals can seek, follow, and browse up-to-date news on political campaigns and presidential candidates by refreshing their Twitter and Facebook pages on mobile devices “at any time and place” (Dimitrova, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Nord, 2011, p. 97). In addition, SNS allow individuals to control their political information environment (Weeks & Holbert, 2013). Rather than passively receiving political information and news as determined by mainstream media, SNS users can select relevant information by themselves, or from the recommendations of networks of interest-bound and like-minded others who are connected and coordinated via SNS (Bennett, 2012; Klinger & Svensson, 2014). Most importantly, exposure to a high volume of news reports and information on SNS are associated with political engagement (Xenos & Moy, 2007; Towner, 2013). For instance, access to online political information significantly increases the likelihood of donating money to political campaigns (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). In addition, exposure to political information through Facebook News Feed is a predictor of both general political participation and political activity on Facebook (Vitak et al., 2011). In this sense, we hypothesize that browsing information and news about the antigraft campaign on WeChat predicts political engagement through WeChat, since the medium provides Chinese netizens with sufficient information on political events to let them feel they are able to “make an informed decision,” whether to repost relevant information to Moments, or comment on a specific post concerning a political issue (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003, p. 176).

As mentioned previously, the affordances of SNS enable new forms of political participation (Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014). Combining audiovisual components with high interactivity, mobility, and speed, SNS allow laypeople as “nodes” to be actively involved in producing, filtering, editing, and forwarding information on political issues (Klinger & Svensson, 2014; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003; Weeks & Holbert, 2013). In regards to the production of information, SNS offer users numerous opportunities to “speak out” while reducing the restriction of expression about political issues imposed by central gatekeepers (Choi, 2014; Lei, 2011). Specifically, SNS empower laypeople, particularly underrepresented populations—whose opinions are often ignored or silenced—as well as individuals for whom offline participation (e.g., voting, joining an association) is out of reach, to participate in “immediate, more horizontal, highly personalized communication” about political issues (Klinger & Svensson, 2014, p. 7). For instance, the large-scale “online mass incident” of the Chinese high-speed-train crash indicates that Weibo provided a freer platform for many ordinary citizens to engage in expressions of “emotion” and “interest demands” on social and political issues (Bondes & Schucher, 2014, p. 60). The microblogging site Weibo enabled users to synchronically discuss the issue on select webpages, or
with hashtags (e.g., #Chinesebullettraincrash) set up by the staff of the website (Dimitrova et al., 2011). Moreover, specific attributes of Weibo such as @ sign and hyperlinks allowed like-minded users to connect and have conversations about the issue with each other (Choi, 2014; Dimitrova et al., 2011).

SNS promote political engagement by allowing users to spread information on political issues (e.g., Sweetser & Larisicy, 2008). Network analyses of tweets about the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions suggested that bloggers and activists are “key information routers” who played important roles in “amplifying and spreading timely information” about political incidents from across the world (Lotan et al., 2011, p. 1375). As both intermediaries and catalysts, SNS users can circulate news reports and information on a particular political event to members of their online personal networks through the “forward,” “retweet,” or “share” function (Klinger & Svensson, 2014). Due to the effect of “network-enhanced word of mouth,” SNS users deliver the information like a “chain letter” (Klinger & Svensson, 2014, p. 8). In particular, they can post links to news on their personal homepages so that individuals who view their profile are able to see the news (Weeks & Holbert, 2013). Furthermore, SNS users can forward news through group chat or group sites; thus each member of the group can access it (Weeks & Holbert, 2013). For example, Facebook users could spread texts, videos, and photos about the 2014 “Umbrella Revolution” of Hong Kong through Facebook Groups; therefore each group member could receive and consume relevant information (Hilgers, 2015). Furthermore, Facebook users can disseminate the same information to a designated member of their social networks by sending private messages, such as sharing links to the information, copying text, or forwarding pictures.

Based on extant research about the effects of media exposure on political engagement through SNS, this study explores the association between browsing news and information on the antigraft campaign and political engagement through WeChat. Given the relationship between the consumption of news and information on political issues and political engagement, hypothesis two is proposed:

H2: Using WeChat to browse news and information about China’s antigraft campaign is positively associated with political engagement.

Cheng et al. (2014) mentioned that the frequency of SNS use is positively associated with online participatory behaviors such as “information seeking and reposting news reports. In a similar vein, the frequency of WeChat use may have a positive association with political engagement through WeChat. Thus, hypothesis three:

H3: WeChat use frequency is positively associated with political engagement.

In addition to main effects, browsing news and information on political events should enhance the relationship between the frequency of WeChat use and political engagement through WeChat. It is expected that the frequency of WeChat use is a predictor of political engagement through WeChat: the more frequently individuals use WeChat, the more likely they engage in China’s antigraft campaign. However, the relationship should be even stronger for individuals who use WeChat to browse news and information, given that browsing is expected to be positively associated with political engagement. Thus, hypothesis four:
H4: There is a significant interaction effect between browsing news and information about the antigraft campaign and the frequency of WeChat use on political engagement through WeChat.

Data and methods

Participants

Participants completed an online survey, written in Chinese, from October 26, 2014 through November 12, 2014, and hosted on www.qualtrics.com. Participants were recruited from multiple colleges across China through convenience sampling methods. In total, 307 participants completed the survey. A consent letter was drafted to ensure that participants were WeChat users, and undergraduate students at least 18 years of age. Of the sample, 209 were female (68.1%), 92 were male (30.0%). The mean age was 19.99 (SD = 1.55, ranging from 18 to 26); 118 were first year students (38.4%), 78 were second (25.4%), 33 were third (10.7%), and 75 were fourth (24.4%).

Procedure

Both established and new scales informed by previous studies were employed as measurements of this study. Reliability of the scales, referring to their internal consistency, were reported. Given that this is an exploratory study with a relatively small sample size, scales with a reported Cronbach’s alpha of between .65 and .70, are acceptable (Rossi, 2009).

Motives of WeChat use

Six motives of WeChat use were measured on 7-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) with 21 items. The scales were adapted from 5-point Likert scales, which were used to investigate gratification-sought among Chinese nationals using SNS (Cheng et al., 2014).

Informational needs were measured by asking participants to indicate their level of agreement with the following statements: “to broaden knowledge base,” “to understand events happening,” “to find out what is going on in society,” “to refine my thinking.” Cronbach’s alpha was .88 (M = 4.96, SD = 1.28).

Affection needs were measured by asking participants to indicate their levels of agreement with four statements: “to let others know I care for them,” “to get the feeling that people care about me,” “to share common topics with friends,” “to share position, opinion, and personal values.” Cronbach’s alpha was .89 (M = 4.77, SD = 1.16).

Fashion/status needs were measured by asking participants to indicate their agreement with three statements: “to look cool,” “to look stylish” and “to look fashionable.” Cronbach’s alpha was .87 (M = 2.44, SD = 0.93).

Recognition needs were measured by asking participants to indicate their agreement with three statements: “to establish personal identity,” “to gain respect and support,” “to enhance sense of belonging by creating or joining group.” Cronbach’s alpha was .84 (M = 3.63, SD = 1.28)
Accessibility was measured by asking participants to indicate their agreement with four statements: “to respond to friends’ messages,” “to add new friends anytime and anywhere,” “to respond to strangers’ requests,” “to be available to friends anytime and anywhere.” Cronbach’s alpha was .65 ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.98$).

Entertainment needs were measured by asking participants to indicate their agreement with three statements: “to kill time,” “to escape from study or work pressure,” “to have fun.” Cronbach’s alpha was .67 ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.10$).

The items used in the online survey were first written in English and then translated to Chinese. To ensure that the Chinese translation of the survey in English was reliable, the researcher conducted translation verification by inviting one assistant professor and one instructor who are Chinese nationals proficient in English to check the survey in Chinese against the one in English (Zavala-Rojas, 2014).

**WeChat use**

WeChat use was measured in two dimensions: (a) WeChat use intensity (b) the frequency of WeChat use. SNS use intensity influences online expression about government and political affairs (Chan et al., 2012). Likewise, WeChat use intensity may influence political engagement through WeChat. In this study, a Weibo Use Intensity Scale was adapted to measure WeChat use intensity (Chan et al., 2012). Specifically, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statements ($1 = $ strongly disagree, $7 = $ strongly agree), including “WeChat is part of my everyday activity,” “I am proud to tell people I am on WeChat,” “WeChat has become part of my daily routine,” “I feel out of touch when I haven’t logged onto my WeChat for a while,” “I feel I am part of the WeChat community,” “I would be sorry if WeChat shut down” (Chan et al., 2012). Cronbach’s alpha was .91 ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.41$). As to the frequency of WeChat use, participants were asked to indicate their frequency of browsing posts ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.87$), posting messages ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 0.98$), reposting messages ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 0.89$), and clicking “Like” ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.86$) on 5-point Likert scales ($1 = $ Never, $5 = $ Always). Cronbach’s alpha was .81 ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.72$).

**Browsing news and information through WeChat**

Participants were asked to respond according to a 5-point Likert scale ($1 = $ Never, $5 = $ Always): “How often do you browse news and information about the anti-graft campaign through WeChat?” ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.90$).

**Political engagement**

Political engagement through WeChat was measured by an additive index of two behavioral items: (a) sharing news reports and information about the antgraft campaign, (b) expressing opinions towards the antigraft campaign (interitem correlation = .61, $p < .001$). Responses were recorded on 5-point Likert scales ($1 = $ Never, $5 = $ Always).

**Demographics**

Gender and age are factors influencing political participation (Gil de Zúñiga, 2012). Scales developed by Gil de Zúñiga were adapted to measure the two constructs. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate their gender ($1 = $ Male, $0 = $ Female) on a nominal scale.
Age was measured by asking participants “What is your age on your last birthday?” and to type their age in a text box (p. 324).

**Results**

*Predicting WeChat use*

Two hierarchical regression analyses, in which demographic variables were entered first, followed by the motives of WeChat use, were conducted to explore the association between the gratifications-sought and WeChat use (Table 1).

In regards to RQ1, results revealed that the second block consisting of the motives for WeChat use powerfully predicted the frequency of WeChat use and WeChat use intensity. In particular, entertainment was a significant predictor of both the frequency of WeChat use ($\beta = .14, p < .05$) and WeChat use intensity ($\beta = .30, p < .001$). Recognition needs strongly predicted the frequency of WeChat use ($\beta = .33, p < .001$) and WeChat use intensity ($\beta = .26, p < .001$). In addition, accessibility ($\beta = .19, p < .01$) was a predictor of WeChat use intensity.

*Predicting political engagement*

Three hierarchical regression analyses, in which demographic variables were entered first, followed by the frequency of WeChat use second, the motives for WeChat use third, browsing news and information about the antigraft campaign through WeChat fourth, the interaction between the frequency of WeChat use and browsing news and information through WeChat last, were conducted to investigate H1a, H1b, H2, H3, and H4.

Results showed that WeChat use for entertainment significantly predicted reposting news reports and information about the antigraft campaign ($\beta = -.17, p < .01$). Informational needs were significant predictors of: (1) reposting news reports and information

| Table 1. Hierarchical regression analyses of WeChat use. |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Variables | WeChat use intensity | Frequency of WeChat use |
|-----------|----------------------|-------------------------|
|           | $R$                  | $B$                     | $r$        | $\beta$     |
| **Step 1:** |                     |                          |            |              |
| Age       | .16**                | .15**                   | .05        | .05         |
| Gender    | .01                  | .01                     | .01        | <.01        |
| $\Delta R^2$ | .03*               |                          | <.01       |             |
| **Step 2:** |                     |                          |            |              |
| Entertainment | .48***              | .30***                  | .33***     | .14*        |
| Accessibility | .46***              | .19**                   | .34***     | .06         |
| Affection  | .39***               | -.04                    | .34***     | -.01        |
| Fashion/Status | .36***              | .03                     | .31***     | <.01        |
| Recognition Needs | .47***              | .26***                  | .47***     | .33***      |
| Informational Needs | .27***             | -.01                    | .33***     | .09         |
| $\Delta R^2$ | .34***              |                          | .25***     |              |
| $R^2$     | .37                  |                          | .25        |              |
| Total adjusted $R^2$ | .35                |                          | .23        |              |

Note: Figures are Pearson’s $r$ and standardized beta-coefficient. Beta weights are from final regression equation with all blocks of variables in the model. Variables coded, or recoded, as follows: gender (1 = male, 0 = female); $N = 307$.

***$p < .001$.

**$p < .01$.

* $p < .05$. 

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about the antigraft campaign (β = .18, p < .01), (2) expressing opinions towards the antigraft campaign (β = .16, p < .05), and (3) the composite level of political engagement in the antigraft campaign (β = .19, p < .01). Thus, H1a was fully supported, and H1b was partially supported.

Browsing news and information about the antigraft campaign through WeChat is the most important block in all the hierarchical regression analyses. Specifically, in the model that predicted the composite level of political engagement, browsing news and information explained 14% of variance. In the model that predicted reposting news reports and information, browsing news and information explained 15% of variance. In the model that predicted expressing opinions, browsing news and information explained 8% of variance. Moreover, browsing news and information about the antigraft campaign through WeChat significantly predicted: (1) the composite level of political engagement (β = .38, p < .001), (2) reposting news reports and information (β = .39, p < .001), and (3) expressing opinions (β = .28, p < .001). The results supported H2.

The frequency of WeChat use significantly predicted the composite level of political engagement (β = .21, p < .001) and its two components: reposting news reports and information (β = .21, p < .001), and expressing opinions (β = .17, p < .01). Thus, H3 was supported.

### Table 2. Hierarchical regression analyses for political engagement through WeChat.

| Variables          | Political engagement (composite) | Repost news reports and information | Express opinions |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------|
|                    | r      | β     | r      | β     | r      | β     |
| Step 1:            |        |       |        |       |        |       |
| Age                | −.12*  | −.09  | −.18** | −.14**| −.04  | −.01  |
| Gender             | .05    | .04   | .04    | .03   | .05    | .04   |
| ΔR²                | .02    | .03** | <.01   |       |        |       |
| ΔR²                | .08*** | .06***| .07*** |       |        |       |
| Step 2:            |        |       |        |       |        |       |
| WeChat Use Frequency | .27*** | .21***| .23*** | .21***| .26*** | .17***|
| ΔR²                | .08*** | .06***| .07*** |       |        |       |
| Step 3:            |        |       |        |       |        |       |
| Entertainment      | .08    | −.11  | −.01   | −.17**| .15**  | −.03  |
| Accessibility      | .13*   | .03   | .06    | <.01  | .17**  | .05   |
| Affection          | .17**  | .11   | .10*   | .10   | .21*** | .09   |
| Fashion/Status     | 16**   | .07   | .09    | .05   | .19**  | .07   |
| Recognition Needs  | .07    | −.23**| <.01   | −.24**| .12*   | −.17* |
| Informational Needs| .28*** | .19** | .24*** | .18** | .26*** | .16*  |
| ΔR²                | .09*** | .09***| .06**  |       |        |       |
| ΔR²                | .14*** | .15***| .08*** |       |        |       |
| Step 4:            |        |       |        |       |        |       |
| Browsing news and information through WeChat | .50*** | .38***| .50*** | .39***| .38*** | .28***|
| ΔR²                | .14*** | .15***| .08*** |       |        |       |
| Step 5:            |        |       |        |       |        |       |
| WeChat use frequency × Browsing news and information through WeChat | .18** | .17** | .16** | .16** | .16** | .14*  |
| ΔR²                | .03**  | .02** | .02**  | .02** | .02**  | .02*  |
| R²                 | .35    | .35   | .23    |       |        |       |
| Total adjusted R²  | .32    | .33   | .20    |       |        |       |

Note: Figures are Pearson’s r and standardized beta-coefficient. Beta weights are from final regression equation with all blocks of variables in the model. Variables coded, or recoded, as follows: gender (1 = male, 0 = female); N = 307.

***p < .001.
**p < .01.
*p < .05.
As to RQ2, Table 2 showed that recognition needs significantly predicted the composite level of political engagement ($\beta = -0.23$, $p < 0.01$), reposting news reports and information ($\beta = -0.24$, $p < 0.01$), and expressing opinions ($\beta = -0.17$, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, RQ2 was well established.

To examine the moderating effect of browsing news and information about the anti-graft campaign on political engagement through WeChat, one interaction term was created and entered as the last block of variables in each of the models (the interaction was centered to reduce multicollinearity). The combination of predictors significantly predicted the composite level of political engagement through WeChat ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$), reposting news reports and information ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$), and expressing opinions ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.05$). H4 proposed that browsing news and information strengthens the effect of the frequency of WeChat use on political engagement through WeChat, the results indicated that H4 was supported.

**Discussion**

Contextualized in the case of China, the present study explored how the motives for WeChat use, the frequency of WeChat use, and browsing news and information about the anti-graft campaign, were associated with political engagement through WeChat. In addition, it examined the associations between the motives for WeChat use, and (1) WeChat use intensity and (2) the frequency of WeChat use. This study shed new light on U&G theory and provided empirical evidence of political engagement through SNS in China.

First, the study contributed to our understanding of the usage patterns of WeChat. Entertainment and recognition needs were central motives driving Chinese young adults to intensely and frequently use WeChat. Recognition needs stimulated young adults to seek social support, obtain respect, and strengthen sense of belonging by posting personal information (e.g., thoughts, feelings, experiences) onto Moments, sending private messages to other WeChat users, and creating or joining WeChat groups. Entertainment needs motivated participants to pass the time and relax by watching videos (e.g., short videos created by WeChat users), browsing news, playing games, and reading jokes. The results were also supported by a statistical report on the Internet development of China, which showed that the “Top 10” Internet activities in China involved listening to or downloading music, instant messaging, and playing games (China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC], 2010). Wallis (2011) noted that “Chinese cyberspace is mainly perceived as a place for socializing and entertainment” by Internet users (p. 412). One of the reasons might be that the Chinese government has identified negative consequences of SNS use (e.g., collective action) and reduced them through “harsh regulations” and “comprehensive control” (Lei, 2011; Wu, 2014). For instance, the Chinese government and the Internet companies within China directed online behaviors towards entertainment and social interaction (Yang, 2012). The study also revealed that accessibility was positively associated with WeChat use intensity. Results showed that the convenience of accessing WeChat through smartphones, tablet computers, laptops, desktops, and connecting with other users by text or voice messages, video or audio calls, contributed to the high intensity of WeChat use.
Second, in addition to illustrating the relationship between gratification factors and WeChat use, this study extended the U&G approach by examining how these factors were associated with political engagement through WeChat. It was found that Chinese youth who used WeChat for entertainment were less likely to repost news reports and information through WeChat. Results resonated with previous research, which indicated that the use of media (e.g., SNS, Internet, and mass media) for entertainment purposes, has a negative association with political and civic engagement in multiple contexts (e.g., Shah et al., 2001). Gil de Zúñiga (2012) explained that SNS use for entertainment distracts users and reduces their participation in political events. Thus, it is sensible that the use of WeChat for having fun, such as watching videos and playing games, resulted in decreases in forwarding news reports and information about the antigraft campaign through WeChat, since WeChat users might be distracted by entertainment activities and pay less attention to the content of news items about the antigraft campaign.

As mentioned above, media use for informational needs had a positive association with political engagement (e.g., Zhang & Chia, 2006). The current study also found that WeChat use for informational needs was not only positively related with the composite level of political engagement, but also contributed to increases in both reposting news reports and information and expressing opinions on the antigraft campaign. Results were indirectly corroborated by a finding that Weibo users with high information motives are more likely to express their opinions about government and politics through Weibo—as compared with those who are motivated to follow soft news and gossip—since the former tend to understand more about political events and current affairs (Chan et al., 2012).

Interestingly, recognition needs was another predictor of political engagement through WeChat, implying that WeChat use for social affiliation reduced the chances of reposting news reports and information and expressing opinions on the antigraft campaign. In other words, political engagement through SNS might be perceived as a risk to the maintenance as well as the development of interpersonal relationship by Chinese youth. A survey on Chinese netizens revealed that discussing politics through SNS may negatively influence interpersonal relationships (e.g., causing controversy) and eventually lead to disintegration of social groups constructed via SNS (Sylar, 2016). The fear of being rejected by others may be another factor inhibiting Chinese from expressing opinions through WeChat, especially controversial ones (Leary, 2010). Therefore, it is not surprising to find that participants who used WeChat for affiliating with others (e.g., establishing personal identity, gaining social support) rarely shared news reports and information on the antigraft campaign and expressed viewpoints toward the issue through WeChat.

Third, the frequency of WeChat use significantly predicted political engagement through WeChat. From the instrumental perspective on media effects, the low cost and the convenience of logging onto WeChat through mobile and fixed digital devices brought about many “opportunities and incentives” for participants to engage in politics, such as forwarding news reports and information on the antigraft campaign by clicking the “Share” button on WeChat (Bimber, 2001; Chan et al., 2012). Also, Shen, Wang, Guo, and Guo (2009) found that Internet use is associated with posting personal opinions online. Hence, it is plausible that the use of WeChat at high frequencies can increase the engagement in the antigraft campaign.
Fourth, results indicated that browsing news and information about the antigraft campaign is an indispensable factor in evaluating political engagement through WeChat. Consuming news reports and information on political issues provided by SNS was found to be positively associated with online political engagement, since it led to an increase in political knowledge and awareness of social and public concerns (Cheng et al., 2014; Towner, 2013). As individuals became knowledgeable about a political issue by scanning relevant news reports and information on SNS, they were able to decide what to do to engage in the issue (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). Likewise, the more Chinese youth browsed news and information about the antigraft campaign, the more likely they engaged in the issue by reposting relevant content to WeChat groups, such as posting their feelings about particular corrupt officials on Moments.

Last, the significant interaction effect between the frequency of WeChat use and browsing news reports and information about antigraft campaign through WeChat on political engagement reflected the effect of the digital divide on engagement in political and civic issues, as discussed by other scholars, namely those in the West (Norris, 2001). SNS, as Internet-based applications, aggravate the “democratic divide” between individuals who attend to, and those who disregard information on issues of public concerns in China, just as happens in democratic regimes (Norris, 2001, p. 348). In this study, participants who regularly perused news and information about the antigraft campaign through WeChat, were more likely to engage in expressing their views on certain incidents, and spreading pertinent information through WeChat, than those who attend less to the content of WeChat messages (Chan et al., 2012).

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Several limitations and suggestions for future research must be addressed. First, this study used a cross-sectional sample which cannot explain causal relationships between the predictors and criterion variables. Although the study presented an argument based on previous research that WeChat use influences political engagement, it is unknown if the relationship can work the other way (Chan et al., 2012). Thus, longitudinal studies are needed to find out the direction of the relationship. Second, the current sample is skewed towards younger female, and more educated participants, since (1) Chinese nationals who are between 18 and 36 are heavy users of WeChat, and (2) a majority of the participants were from the college of liberal arts and sciences, one that is dominated by females (Shin, Postiglione, & Huang, 2015). In addition, all participants were college students. Thus, findings cannot be generalized to “other demographics of China” (Chan et al., p. 349; “WeChat’s Impact,” 2015). Future studies should include behaviors of individuals across generations, because political engagement is related to every citizen (Cheng et al., 2014). Third, as one of the key criterion variables, political engagement through WeChat was measured with two items. However, prior research showed that there are other indicators of political engagement through SNS, such as joining SNS-based social groups and following a political candidate or group (Vitak et al., 2011). Using multiple items to measure criterion variables can improve the reliability and validity of results (Chan et al., 2012). Fourth, even if this study successfully applied a scale measuring young Chinese nationals’ gratifications for SNS use and a Weibo Intensity Scale to measure WeChat use, new measurements exclusively focusing on WeChat use might be
more valid to understand user behaviors. Last, this study did not differentiate mobile users who access WeChat through mobile devices from nonmobile users who access WeChat through fixed devices (e.g., desktop) and compare differences in WeChat use between the two groups of individuals (Cheng et al., 2014).

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