Media usage and political trust among young adults in China: The role of media credibility, trust in sources and political membership

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Abstract
On the basis of an online survey conducted among young Chinese adults, this study examines how the association between media usage and political trust can be explained by three factors: the mediating roles of the perceived credibility of traditional and social media; the moderating roles of trust in sources – media and non-media sources alike; and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) membership. Analyses support the idea that (1) the perceived credibility of political information obtained from traditional and social media is a significant mediator, and that (2) traditional media credibility has a stronger effect than social media credibility.

Keywords
CCP membership, media credibility, media usage, political trust, trust in sources, young Chinese adults

In daily life in contemporary society, China’s young generation is exposed not only to traditional media (e.g. television, radio) but also to a variety of homegrown social media outlets (e.g. Sina Weibo, WeChat). Unlike today’s young Chinese, previous generations had no access to alternative media sources, only traditional media, for more than 60 years since the new China was established by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949

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In this single-party state which practises strict censorship, the media have been playing a crucial role in promoting legitimacy for the authoritarian political system (Shen and Guo, 2013; Sun et al., 2001). But the rise of social media has – to a certain degree – enabled younger generations to circumvent the censorship to seek and disseminate information from ‘alternative media’ or even non-media sources (e.g. Luqiu, 2017). At the same time, there are also signs that the CCP has adapted to the new situation to limit the impact of social media (Hassid, 2012; Hyun and Kim, 2015).

By comparison to the Western world, China’s social media users are relatively younger, nearly 76 per cent of them being under the age of 40 (China Internet Network Information Center, 2019). Despite the rapid evolvement of social media in the past decade, young generations growing up with these new media are found to have lower levels of political trust and trust in government agencies (e.g. the police) than other Chinese citizens (Chen and Shi, 2001; Wu and Sun, 2009). Previous studies have provided evidence that citizens’ political trust may link to a different kind of media usage (Chen and Shi, 2001; Wu, 2014), which developed under the strict control and censorship exercised by the Chinese government (Li, 2004; Wu et al., 2011). However, the underlying mechanism that drives such a relationship remains unexplored. It is unclear whether distinct contextual factors in China – such as China’s young generation’s engagement with social media on one hand, and the CCP’s control of media systems on the other hand – influence the media usage–political trust linkage found among China’s young generation.

The current study aims to improve our understanding of the relationship between media usage and political trust by analysing how the former affects the latter and what affects the strength of this relationship. In doing so, this study examines both the mediating and the moderating effects of media usage on political trust. Due to the large variety of potential news sources, it is relatively easy for China’s young generation to access various types of political information through the media. Also, political news from non-mainstream media and non-media sources diffuse more easily through social media than through traditional media such as television or newspapers. Relying on social media usage, individuals may come across unsolicited information (e.g. messages from friends), and this may impact their political preferences. Given this wider picture, we propose the possibility that pathways to political trust differ according to the types and characteristics of media platforms – traditional media versus social media – among young adults in China.

Compared to traditional media coverage, user-created information posted on social media is less likely to be filtered by professional gatekeepers, and it typically lacks traditional indicators of authority, such as author identity or established reputation (Johnson and Kaye, 2015; Metzger, 2007; Sundar, 2008; Westerman et al., 2014). Consequently, the task of determining credibility has shifted from professional gatekeepers to public users (Johnson and Kaye, 2000; Metzger, 2007). Unlike professional gatekeepers, public users often lack the ability to judge online information, while it is also difficult to verify information from non-media sources (Tsfati and Peri, 2006). This makes credibility an important concern in the current media environment (Sundar, 2008; Westerman et al., 2014). For example, as credibility is a central element in building trust, people tend to avoid sources that they do not trust (Johnson and Kaye, 1998). Mistrust in media can
result in non-consumption and non-attention (Kiousis, 2001) and can stimulate the quest for alternative information or for information from non-media sources (Jackob, 2010; Tsfati and Cappella, 2003).

However, little is known about how the impacts of different types of media usage on political trust can be explained by media credibility or by trust in sources in general, be they media or non-media ones. Whether the perceived credibility of the information available on media outlets plays a role in this relationship remains unexplored, as far as China’s young generation is concerned. Thus, our study also examines the underlying mechanism through which traditional and social media usage shapes political trust among China’s young adults. We will start by investigating the mediating role of media credibility in the relationship between media usage and political trust. Second, since mistrust in media may prompt China’s young generation to rely on non-media sources when assessing political information, we explore whether trust in sources (media vs non-media ones) moderates the proposed relationship. Third, given that media institutions, political organizations and political outcomes are closely connected to the hegemony of the CCP, we also examine the moderating role of young adults’ CCP membership in the proposed relationship.

In sum, this study examines how, in the context of China, the relationship between media usage and political trust can be explained through media credibility, trust in sources, and CCP membership. In addition, it also investigates the different roles of traditional and social media within the relationship under study. Drawing on survey data from mainland China, we attempt to answer here two major empirical questions:

1. Focussing on young Chinese adults between the ages of 18 and 40, to what extent can we explain the relationship between media usage and political trust through media credibility, trust in sources, and CCP membership?
2. How do the roles of traditional and social media differ within this relationship?

Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Media usage and political trust

Political trust is traditionally conceptualized as the basic confidence that citizens have in their government (Miller, 1974; Shen and Guo, 2013) or, more broadly, as support for a given political system (Hooghe and Kern, 2015). Shi (2001) argues that political trust is the belief that the political system or some parts of it will produce preferred outcomes even if left untended. In the past decades, political trust in mainland China has been remarkably high and this high level of political trust is an important reason why resilience in the aftermath of policy mistakes and administrative blunders remains high (Li, 2004). The findings of previous communication and political science studies suggest that media play an important role in forming people’s political trust (de Haan and Bardoel, 2011; Warren et al., 2014). Empirical findings are mixed, as the influence of media usage on political trust appears to be positive in some studies but negative in others (Aarts et al., 2012). Yet this impact can differ across media types (Aarts et al., 2012; Moy and Pfau, 2000).
Understanding why certain forms of media usage may have different effects on political trust requires taking more substantive explanatory factors into account. As was signalled earlier, the rise of the internet has often been equated to new communication opportunities that were previously unavailable; traditional forms of media simply did not have them. In particular, social media such as Facebook and Twitter enable Western citizens to formulate their opinions directly by putting them in writing or by expressing them in interaction with others (Hassid, 2012; Sullivan, 2014). In China, by comparison, social media have provided citizens with tools for receiving and distributing a wider range of information than before, including very diverse opinions on political issues (e.g. Hyun and Kim, 2015; Li and Chan, 2017). For example, at the time of the Wenzhou train crash in 2011, there were millions of microblog posts criticizing the government’s poor handling of the disaster and expressing outbursts of anger towards the Ministry of Railways or its representatives – and the extension of criticism to other government institutions and their representatives, as well as the government in general (Bondes and Schucher, 2014). This kind of exposure may generate alienation and dismantle people’s trust in the government because more critical political reports could reduce citizens’ political trust. However, the CCP has tightened its online censorship since President Xi Jinping came to power (Solomon, 2017). In a relatively short time, the CCP has adapted to the new ecology of technologies and started to employ social media to its own advantage (Hassid, 2012; Hyun and Kim, 2015; Sullivan, 2014). Furthermore, information from social media somehow overlaps with information from traditional media sources because online sources normally include digital versions of newspapers and the official accounts of traditional platforms on social media. For example, people can receive daily news by following the official accounts of the Chinese state’s TV broadcaster on Sina Weibo, a micro-blogging site. It is thus plausible to expect that both traditional and social media usage are positively associated with young adults’ political trust in China. Additionally, Chinese mass media are – as part of life of the Communist Party – more politically-oriented than market-oriented due to the highly authoritarian political system (Sun et al., 2001). This may imply that due to the rise of the internet, differences between state-controlled traditional media and more independent social media have increased. Nevertheless, since traditional media in China are considered ‘mouthpieces’ of the Communist Party (Zhang et al., 2014), many people tend to place great trust in state and legal authorities (Li and Sligo, 2012; Wu, 2014). For instance, compared to other media use types, watching television news has consistently the highest correlation with political trust (Shen and Guo, 2013). Given these considerations, we expect that, in China, traditional media usage exerts a stronger influence on political trust than does social media usage. Hence, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1a: Young Chinese adults’ political trust is positively affected by their usage of traditional media.

H1b: Young Chinese adults’ political trust is positively affected by their usage of social media.

H1c: The impact of traditional media usage on young Chinese adults’ political trust is stronger than that of social media usage.
The mediating role of media credibility

While many studies have shown that media usage has a direct influence on political trust (Chen and Shi, 2001; Li, 2004; Wu, 2014), the theoretical explanation for this relationship is not always clear. Mediating variables can shed more light on how the association between media usage and political trust should be interpreted. Whereas some scholars have pointed at the mediating role of nationalism (Hyun and Kim, 2015; Shen and Guo, 2013), we propose to focus on the mediating role of media credibility. In a state-controlled media environment, we expect that the credibility of the messages that have been communicated is crucial for illuminating the underlying mechanism through which media usage shapes political trust.

In brief, credibility can be defined as believability (Fogg and Tseng, 1999), which is generally conceived of as a user-based perception (a judgement made by the users themselves) containing various dimensions: accuracy, fairness, trustworthiness and depth (Fogg and Tseng, 1999; Johnson and Kaye, 2009; Metzger et al., 2010; Westerman et al., 2014). These dimensions represent aspects of the information that are critical to influencing a user’s assessment of its credibility since credibility perceptions result from evaluating multiple dimensions simultaneously (Fogg and Tseng, 1999). This means that a receiver makes judgements on these components in order to arrive at an overall evaluation of credibility. Being endowed with these characteristics, credibility is an important concept in relation to media (Appelman and Sundar, 2016) and helps us understand why some people use certain media and others do not, as well as how people decide what to believe.

In China, the media carry more positive than negative content relating to politics and public affairs (Xiao, 2013), which diminishes the impact of negative stories in everyday life (Shen and Guo, 2013). The existing literature suggests that political trust depends mainly on the distribution of positive and negative information related to the system (Li and Chan, 2017). The less information on grievances and discontent citizens receive from the media, the less they will distrust their government. However, when the credibility of media is low in individuals’ perception, the positive information they receive on the Chinese government may not be considered accurate, fair or believable, but then the impacts of media usage on political trust might be trivial or negligible, or they may disappear altogether. In other words, only if the political information that comes from traditional and social media is perceived as credible are young adults likely to adopt positive political opinions related to the government, which in turn affects their political trust. It should be noted that some people may still use media with non-credible information because of habitual consumption or a lack of alternatives, or because they just enjoy listening to diverse viewpoints (Tsfati and Cappella, 2005). Particularly in the Chinese context where the supply of media sources is curtailed by the government, individuals may routinely use media without fully trusting them. This may imply that – compared to Western contexts – media usage and media credibility are less strongly correlated. We view the relationship between media usage, media credibility and political trust as a mediating relationship rather than a moderating relationship, since the latter would imply that we expect only effects for certain groups (‘specification’), while we believe credibility can offer a theoretical understanding for all individuals.
‘interpretation’). Consequently, we argue that traditional and social media usage is related to political trust indirectly through the construct of perceived media credibility. We expect that media usage is positively associated with political trust, and this positive relationship can be explained by the credibility that people attribute to the information they find in the media of their choice.

Further, the existing literature suggests that the perceived credibility of traditional media and that of social media may have different kinds of influence (Kiousis, 2001; Zhang et al., 2014). Whereas traditional media are associated with editorial control and fact-checking, social media offer more bottom-up expressions that could be viewed as ‘disinterested’ or ‘alternative’ (e.g. Metzger et al., 2010; Tsfati and Peri, 2006). Empirical comparisons between traditional media and new media (e.g. the internet, social media) produce inconsistent outcomes (Banning and Sweetser, 2007; Johnson and Kaye, 1998; Kiousis, 2001; Zhang et al., 2014). Also, some researchers argue that the credibility of traditional media and of their online versions is rated similarly (Antunovic et al., 2018). Particularly in a complicated media environment, the information from social media sometimes overlaps with the information from traditional media. In China, a survey in 10 major cities revealed that traditional media (television and newspapers) are still considered by residents to be the most credible (Zhang et al., 2014). In view of this result, we would expect the credibility of social media to be lower in individuals’ perception than that of traditional media, particularly when it comes to political information.

So, as in H1c, we expect the effect of the perceived credibility of social media to be weaker than that of traditional media within the relationship under study. In line with this expectation, we formulate the following set of hypotheses:

H2a: Young Chinese adults’ perceptions about the credibility of the political information they get from traditional media mediate the impact of traditional media usage on political trust.

H2b: Young Chinese adults’ perceptions about the credibility of the political information they get from social media mediate the impact of social media usage on political trust.

H2c: The mediating role of young Chinese adults’ perceptions about the credibility of traditional media is stronger than the role of their perceptions about the credibility of social media.

The moderating role of trust in sources: Media and non-media sources

In contrast to the large body of work on media credibility, research on trust in media is more limited (Jackob, 2010; Kohring and Matthes, 2007). The concepts of credibility and trust differ from each other (Fogg and Tseng, 1999). Trust conveys a sense of dependence and reliance (Hosmer, 1995). Whereas media credibility is about the concrete information that people gather from the media and about distinctions between media types and outlets in terms of people’s willingness to accept a given message, trust in media concerns media as an institution and is normally pitted against trust in alternative sources of information (Jackob, 2010; Johnson and Kaye, 2009; Kiousis, 2001). It is assumed
that when users consider the information in a medium to be credible, this credibility might result in trust in the medium (Jackob, 2010; Kohring and Matthes, 2007). However, high levels of credibility accorded to a particular medium do not amount to trust in the media as a whole. Trust plays a key role in media–recipient relationships and it affects whether people turn to ‘alternative media’ or even non-media sources (Jackob, 2010; Kohring and Matthes, 2007; Tsfati and Cappella, 2003). In a country where both traditional and social media are political and are tightly related to the authorities, it is important to examine the differences between credibility of information (the mediator role) and trust in media institutions (the moderator role).

Whereas some people show high levels of trust in the media, others are media sceptics – in other words, they have a subjective feeling of alienation from the media or mistrust them, particularly mainstream media (Carr et al., 2014; Tsfati and Peri, 2006). Compared to people who trust the media, users who trust alternative sources are expected to have less mainstream and more non-mainstream information in their media diets (Jackob, 2010; Tsfati and Cappella, 2003). However, if we want to examine the relationship between media usage and political trust in China, relying on a dichotomy between mainstream and alternative media is not enough. This study considers trust in two types of sources of information: mass media sources and non-media sources. The latter consist of alternative sources from outside the editorial production process of the media system (e.g. opinions from experts and scientists, telephone hotlines, official authorities) (Jackob, 2010).

When young adults have strong trust in media sources, a strong correlation is expected between traditional media usage and political trust. As trust is closely related to dependability and reliance (Fogg and Tseng, 1999), individuals who trust media sources are likely to consume more media, expect the media to protect users’ rights and interests, tolerate challenging opinions, and have confidence in media institutions. Wu (2014) demonstrates that trust in media correlates positively with trust in Chinese legal authorities. According to this argument, young Chinese adults who trust media rather than non-media sources tend to turn to media consumption more easily, traditional media in particular. Trust in media sources may therefore serve as a moderator, strengthening the relationship between traditional media usage and political trust. In contrast, trust in non-media sources would indicate a comparatively low degree of confidence in the media system and in the legitimacy of the ruling party, and would ultimately link to a low level of political trust. People who place their trust mainly in non-media sources are expected to avoid or ignore what they hear in the media, particularly in traditional media. Consequently, if people tend to trust non-media sources rather than media sources, the effect of media usage on political trust will be weak, but more so for traditional media than for social media, since the latter have a weaker association with the system. Thus, the insights gained from the previous discussion of the literature and the above arguments lead to the following set of hypotheses:

**H3a:** The effect of traditional media usage on political trust is stronger for young Chinese adults who trust media sources than for young Chinese adults who trust non-media sources.
H3b: The effect of social media usage on political trust is weaker for young Chinese adults who trust media sources than for young Chinese adults who trust non-media sources.

H3c: The moderating role of trust in sources is stronger for traditional media usage than for social media usage.

The moderating role of CCP membership

Besides explanations with regard to media usage, political trust is also likely related to whether someone is a member of the CCP. Undoubtedly CCP members are strongly associated with political institutions and the sphere of legitimacy. First, political parties are essential linkage mechanisms between citizens and their political system (Hooghe and Kern, 2015). Affiliation with the CCP was found to be linked to CCP-initiated political activities (Zhang and Lin, 2014). For instance, CCP members are more likely to vote than non-party members (Kennedy et al., 2018). Second, CCP members tend to be more nationalistic than non-CCP members (Sinkkonen, 2013; Tang and Darr, 2012). Previous research has revealed that, in China, nationalism promotes legitimacy for the government and for the authoritarian political system (Hyun and Kim, 2015; Sinkkonen, 2013). However, nationalism has many origins (e.g. cultural sense of belonging) and might not always lead to political trust. However, Shen and Guo (2013) argue that the rise of nationalist sentiment has been positively related to political trust in the context of China. Also, nationalism seems to be closely tied to media consumption, particularly consumption of the state-run traditional media (e.g. television) (Shen and Guo, 2013), as the CCP manipulates this political attitude and successfully directs it towards the maintenance of regime stability and legitimacy (Hyun and Kim, 2015; Shen and Guo, 2013; Zhao, 2005). As official mouthpieces of the regime (Zhang et al., 2014), the media carry people’s national and political ties (Shen and Guo, 2013). News usage of both traditional and social media were found to indirectly foster or encourage system-supportive attitudes (Hyun and Kim, 2015), and TV news watching was positively correlated with political trust (Shen and Guo, 2013). As a major group of internet users in China, young adults, particularly college students, are positively linked to political communication online (Hyun and Kim, 2015). Meanwhile, the CCP increasingly recruits its elite members or future leaders from the ranks of young people, especially the highly educated (Zhou, 2018). It is important, then, to examine the role of CCP membership in media usage and in young adults’ perceptions of the ruling authorities.

One expects CCP members and non-members to differ in their attitudes towards the party and the government. As mouthpieces of the party, the media may have a greater impact on political trust for CCP members than for non-members. The idea here is that CCP members are more politically active than non-CCP members when they engage with what they have read, heard or viewed in the media by way of political information. As a result, they may have more trust in the party and the government, which leads to higher levels of political trust. For this reason, we explore how CCP affiliation may affect the relationship between media usage and political trust as a moderator. Our conjecture is that party membership will strengthen the impact of media usage (particularly
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traditional media usage) on political trust. Building upon prior studies, we formulate the following set of hypotheses:

H4a: The effect of traditional media usage on political trust is stronger for young Chinese adults who are CCP members than for young Chinese adults who are not.

H4b: The effect of social media usage on political trust is stronger for young Chinese adults who are CCP members than for young Chinese adults who are not.

H4c: The moderating role of being a CCP member is stronger for traditional media usage than for social media usage.

Taken together, the literature has provided evidence of the existence of relationships between political trust, different types of media usage (related to traditional and social media), media credibility (more precisely, the perceived credibility of political information gathered from traditional and social media), trust in sources (media and non-media sources alike) and CCP membership. The current study brings these proposed pathways together into a comprehensive model (Figure 1).

The research method

Data collection

The data collection process consisted of two phases. First, on 21 May 2016, a pilot survey was conducted with 120 selected respondents familiar with the Chinese media
system. The questionnaire was translated from English to Mandarin Chinese by using a standard ‘forward-backward’ translation procedure. The survey applied snowball sampling. Accordingly, the questionnaire was adjusted on the basis of the respondents’ feedback. Next, the revised questionnaire was distributed by the research agency, wjx.cn, whose database covers all Chinese provinces. Given our focus on young adults, only panel members within the age range of 18–40 years were approached. Participants received compensation from the survey company. In total, 1033 valid responses (age: $M=29.7$, SD = 5.02) were collected in July 2016. This sample concerned respondents who completed the entire survey, with the final response rate of 12.9 per cent. While this response rate is relatively low, it is similar to that of previous web survey-based studies carried out in China (Shih and Fan, 2008; Yamamoto et al., 2015). In the final sample there were slightly more female (51.5%) than male respondents (48.5%). The sample contained a relatively large share of highly educated participants (50.1% college graduates). Up until December 2017, people with high school or vocational school degrees and with junior college or higher education constituted 25.4 per cent and 20.4 per cent, respectively, of Chinese internet users (China Internet Network Information Center, 2019). Parents’ educational level averaged 3.18 (SD = 1.154) on a 6-point scale, which corresponds to the high school level. In line with this over-representation of higher-educated people, most participants lived in cities (97.8%). Additionally, the over-representation of higher education was tied in with a disproportionately high representation of CCP membership (Hyun and Kim, 2015; Hyun et al., 2014). Around 33 per cent of the respondents were CCP members, which was well above the national figure – 6 per cent (Hyun and Kim, 2015; Kennedy et al., 2018). However, Skoric et al. (2016) note that higher-educated and metropolitan populations tend to be over-represented in Chinese survey samples.

Measures

**Political trust.** The question about political trust was formulated thus: ‘How much do you trust the government in general?’ The response categories ran from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). This operationalization followed other studies (e.g. Shen and Guo, 2013), noting that political trust can be a one-dimensional attitude, as citizens do not distinguish between different dimensions of trust in government (e.g. trust related to political leaders and to different governmental institutions) (Hooghe, 2011). In this study, political trust refers to citizens’ trust in Chinese political institutions in general.

**Media usage.** Guided by previous studies (Jung et al., 2011), traditional media usage was measured by an averaged index of four items: television (both TV set and online), newspaper (only in print), magazine (only in print), and radio (both on radio set and online). Respondents were asked to indicate how often they used each medium, and they answered using a Likert-type 5-point scale where 0 was ‘never’ and 5 was ‘almost daily’. Similarly, social media usage was measured by asking participants to indicate on a 5-point scale how often they used a selection of eight Chinese social media platforms: Sina Weibo, WeChat, Qzone, Zhihu.com, Baidu Tieba, Tianya Club, Douban.com and Guokr.com.
**Media credibility.** Guided by previous measurements, five dimensions of media credibility were combined to form a single scale measure (Appelman and Sundar, 2016; Johnson and Kaye, 1998, 2009). Participants were asked to rate the degree of believability, accuracy, fairness, depth and trustworthiness of political information found in traditional and social media on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Scores for the five measures of credibility were combined into indexes for the credibility of political information found in traditional media and in social media.

**Trust in sources.** Following past studies (Carter and Greenberg, 1965; Jackob, 2010), trust in sources was derived from the questionnaire and indicated whether the respondent trusted media sources or non-media sources. Respondents who indicated that they tend to trust media sources (i.e. either mainstream or non-mainstream media) are coded as 0, and otherwise as 1.

**CCP membership.** The membership was a binary variable (1 indicates non-CCP member and 0 indicates CCP member) and was measured by asking (in the form of a true/false question) whether the respondent was a CCP member.

**Control variables.** Early work on media credibility suggests that audience-based variables affect media credibility. Also, the mixed findings concerning the credibility of traditional media and its online counterparts call for investigating predictors of credibility. It is clear that social background characteristics affect individuals’ judgements of media credibility (Golan, 2010; Yamamoto et al., 2016). Thus our regression models include control variables such as age, gender, education, parents’ educational level, place of residence, political interest and interpersonal trust (e.g. Kim, 2012; Tsfati and Ariely, 2014).

**Analysis**
In order to investigate the mediating roles of the perceived credibility of traditional media and social media as well as the moderating roles of trust in sources and CCP membership for the relationship between media usage and political trust, we employed ordinary least squares (OLS) regression (see Models 1–7). For all the regression analyses, the five demographic variables, political interest, and interpersonal trust were controlled. The analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 25 and Stata 15.

**Results**

**Descriptive results**
Table 1 shows the correlations among the main variables. The results indicate that strong links exist between traditional and social media usage, the perceived credibility of political information on social and traditional media, and political trust. Cronbach’s alphas range from 0.78 to 0.95, suggesting a high internal consistency.
Hypothesis testing

Table 2 presents the results of applying regression analysis to test whether perceived media credibility mediates the hypothesized relationship. In the first stage of the regression (Models 1–3), the direct paths between media usage and political trust (H1a and H1b) were tested, as well as media credibility and political trust. In Model 1, we entered control variables and media usage in order to test whether they predict political trust. The

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and inter-variable correlations (N=979).

| Variables                  | M    | SD   | Cronbach's alpha |
|----------------------------|------|------|------------------|
| 1. Traditional media usage | 3.16 | 0.78 | 0.78             |
| 2. Social media usage      | 3.07 | 0.70 | 0.81             |
| 3. Credibility, traditional media | 5.38 | 1.14 | 0.95             |
| 4. Credibility, social media | 5.20 | 1.11 | 0.94             |
| 5. Political trust         | 4.80 | 1.51 | –                |

Entries are Pearson correlation coefficients.
* \( p < 0.05 \); ** \( p < 0.01 \); *** \( p < 0.001 \).

Table 2. OLS regression models predicting political trust (Models 1–3) and media credibility (Models 4–5).

| Political trust          | Credibility, traditional media | Credibility, social media |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Model 1                  | Model 2                        | Model 3                  | Model 4                  | Model 5                  |
| Gender (1 = female, 2 = male) | -0.06*                          | -0.07**                  | -0.07**                  | 0.02                     | 0.02                     |
| Age                      | -0.07*                          | -0.03                    | -0.06*                   | -0.03                    | -0.01                    |
| Education                | 0.01                           | 0.05*                    | 0.03                     | -0.04                    | -0.07*                   |
| Parents’ educational level | 0.03                           | 0.06*                    | 0.02                     | 0.01                     | 0.02                     |
| Size residence           | -0.01                          | -0.02                    | -0.01                    | -0.02                    | 0.001                    |
| Political interest       | 0.17***                        | 0.07*                    | 0.03                     | 0.31***                  | 0.24***                  |
| Interpersonal trust      | 0.20***                        | 0.14***                  | 0.11***                  | 0.16***                  | 0.20***                  |
| Media usage              |                                |                          |                          |                          |                          |
| Traditional media usage  | 0.29***                        | –                        | 0.19***                  | 0.20***                  | 0.18***                  |
| Social media usage       | 0.10**                         | –                        | 0.06*                    | 0.05                     | 0.10**                   |
| Media credibility (Mediators) |                                |                          |                          |                          |                          |
| Credibility, traditional media | –                              | 0.38***              | 0.35***                  |                          |                          |
| Credibility, social media | –                              | 0.20***              | 0.16***                  |                          |                          |
| Adjusted \( R^2 \)       | 29.50%                         | 42.10%                   | 45.10%                   | 26.60%                   | 25.60%                   |
| \( F \)-value            | 46.32***                       | 80.04***                 | 73.69***                 | 40.36***                 | 38.28***                 |

Values reflect standardized coefficients.
Significance levels: * \( p < 0.05 \); ** \( p < 0.01 \); *** \( p < 0.001 \).
regression in Model 2 ascertained whether media credibility predicts political trust. Controlling for all previous factors, we then tested the full model for predicting political trust in Model 3. The results show that traditional media usage has a strong significant effect in the hypothesized direction (Model 1: $\beta=0.29$, $t=8.10$, $p<0.001$; Model 3: $\beta=0.19$, $t=5.89$, $p<0.001$). Social media usage is also positively associated with political trust (Model 1: $\beta=0.10$, $t=2.76$, $p<0.01$; Model 3: $\beta=0.06$, $t=2.04$, $p<0.05$). Thus, H1a and H1b are supported. Also, both the perceived credibility of traditional media (Model 2: $\beta=0.38$, $t=10.68$, $p<0.001$; Model 3: $\beta=0.35$, $t=10.13$, $p<0.001$) and the perceived credibility of social media (Model 2: $\beta=0.20$, $t=5.58$, $p<0.001$; Model 3: $\beta=0.16$, $t=4.64$, $p<0.001$) are positively related to political trust.

In the second step (Models 4–5), we tested whether media usage predicts young adults’ perceptions about the credibility of the political information they get from traditional and social media. The regression in Model 4 indicates that the usage of traditional media is a strong predictor: it positively predicts perceived credibility of traditional media ($\beta=0.20$, $t=5.54$, $p<0.001$). We also observe that social media usage has a positive impact on the perceived credibility of social media in Model 5 ($\beta=0.10$, $t=2.84$, $p<0.01$).

We tested H2a and H2b, taking them together and hypothesizing a mediating role for media credibility (namely, the credibility of both traditional and social media) in the relationships between media usage (traditional vs social media) and political trust. Comparing Models 3, 4 and 5, the findings suggest that the significant relationship of traditional media usage and political trust is weakened when taking traditional media credibility into account (Model 4: $\beta=0.20$, $t=5.54$, $p<0.001$ vs Model 3: $\beta=0.19$, $t=5.89$, $p<0.001$). Similarly, the relationship of social media usage and political trust is also weakened via social media credibility (Model 5: $\beta=0.10$, $t=2.84$, $p<0.01$ vs Model 3: $\beta=0.06$, $t=2.04$, $p<0.05$). Thus, partial mediation effects are found in the relationship between media usage (and this covers both traditional and social media) and political trust. Therefore, H2a and H2b are supported.

While the weakening of media usage effects suggests that – following the elaboration paradigm – media credibility offers an interpretation of media usage, alternative readings cannot be completely dismissed. For example, we observe that the strong correlation between media credibility and political trust remains mostly intact after inclusion of media usage. It is possible that media credibility should be interpreted as determinant of media usage. Also, given the strong positive correlations between the relevant variables (see Table 1), the cross-sectional nature of the data, and the censorship of media in China, it cannot be ruled out that media credibility is to some degree influenced by political trust.

Turning to the moderating effects of trust in sources (H3a and H3b) and CCP membership (H4a and H4b) within the relationship under study, again, OLS regression equations were applied to predict political trust (see Table 3). Before all variables were entered in the equation in Model 8, we controlled for trust in media (Model 7) and party membership (Model 6), respectively. The OLS models show that trust in sources moderates the association between traditional media usage and political trust (Model 7: $\beta=-0.38$, $t=-3.28$, $p<0.01$; Model 8: $\beta=-0.39$, $t=-3.36$, $p<0.01$), but does not moderate the relationship between social media usage and political trust. Thus, H3a and H3c
are supported, H3b is rejected. Concerning the moderating role of CCP membership, variations in political membership do not appear to moderate the proposed relationship. Therefore H4a, H4b and H4c are not supported.

To test H1c and H2c, we compared the regression coefficients of traditional media usage with those of social media usage, and tested whether the difference of the coefficients is significantly different from zero. The dependent and independent variables are standardized to conduct the analysis. Through a regression analysis, the results show that the difference of coefficients is significantly different from zero (t-value = −2.64, p < 0.01). The results suggest that social media usage has a weaker influence on political trust than traditional media usage, which further implies that H1c is supported. In a similar way, we tested H2c. The results show that the difference of the coefficient is significantly different from zero (t-value = −2.45, p < 0.01). This suggests that H2c is supported. Taken together, all the path coefficients are shown in Figure 2.

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**Table 3. OLS regression models predicting the moderation effects.**

| Political trust | Model 6 | Model 7 | Model 8 |
|-----------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Model 6 | Model 7 | Model 8 |
| Gender (1 = female, 2 = male) | −0.07** | −0.07** | −0.08** |
| Age | −0.059* | −0.06* | −0.06* |
| Education | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.01 |
| Parents’ educational level | 0.02 | 0.005 | −0.003 |
| Size of residence | −0.001 | −0.002 | −0.001 |
| Political interest | 0.03 | 0.04 | 0.04 |
| Interpersonal trust | 0.12*** | 0.11*** | 0.12*** |
| Media usage | | | |
| Traditional media usage | 0.18* | 0.25*** | 0.23** |
| Social media usage | −0.03 | 0.02 | −0.07 |
| Media credibility (mediators) | | | |
| Credibility, traditional media | 0.35*** | 0.33*** | 0.33*** |
| Credibility, social media | 0.16*** | 0.16*** | 0.15*** |
| Moderators | | | |
| Trust in sources (0 = media sources, 1 = non-media sources) | − | 0.14 | 0.16 |
| Traditional media usage × trust in sources | − | −0.38** | −0.39** |
| Social media usage × trust in sources | − | 0.14 | 0.13 |
| Communist Party membership (0 = yes, 1 = no) | −0.09 | − | −0.09 |
| Traditional media usage × party membership | 0.02 | − | 0.03 |
| Social media usage × party membership | 0.16 | − | 0.15 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 45.10% | 46.60% | 46.70% |
| $F$-value | 58.31*** | 61.67*** | 51.26*** |

Values reflect standardized coefficients.
Significance levels: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.
Conclusions and discussion

This study focused on unfolding the mechanism of how media usage affects political trust among young Chinese adults. The mediating role of media credibility and the moderating roles of trust in sources and CCP membership were examined. First, the findings confirm that both traditional and social media usage are positively associated with political trust (supporting H1a and H1b). Along with this, the impact of traditional media is found to be stronger than that of social media. This finding confirms that consumption of different media types does have a distinct influence on young adults’ political trust (Aarts et al., 2012; Moy and Pfau, 2000). This finding in the Chinese context is consistent with Lee’s (2010) finding for the United States. But obviously, in the context of China, this outcome needs to take into account the fact that the media have played and still play a key role in the CCP’s construction of its authority and legitimacy (Hyun and Kim, 2015). In this digital age, the impact of social media might have been limited in a restrictive political setting like China (Hassid, 2012; Hyun and Kim, 2015; Sullivan, 2014).

Second, the mediating effect of media credibility is confirmed: some of the impact of media usage on political trust is achieved via the perceived credibility of the political information delivered by these media. Importantly, perceived media credibility explains only a part of the relationship – there still are significantly large and direct effects of media usage on political trust in China. This also implies that alternative explanations need to be considered. For example, previous studies emphasize the mediating roles of citizens’ nationalism in the relationship between different types of media news usage and political trust in China (Hyun and Kim, 2015; Shen and Guo, 2013). Both social media news and traditional news consumption increase system support via nationalism (Hyun and Kim, 2015).
Next, we found that trust in media or non-media sources moderates the relationship between traditional media usage and political trust, but does not moderate the relationship between social media usage and political trust. This seems related to the nature of these media: whereas traditional media represent the official voice of the government, social media often contain more user-generated content and offer a diversity of views on current policies and social issues (Shen and Guo, 2013). For instance, it is common for young people to express their opinions on sensitive political issues by using satire (e.g. ironic metaphors, emojis, images and songs) to avoid censorship on Chinese social media (e.g. Luqiu, 2017). When young Chinese adults put their trust in non-media sources, this could mean that they regard various social media platforms as important sources of information.

Remarkably, no support was found for the moderating effect of CCP membership within the relationship between any type of media usage and political trust. H4a, H4b and H4c could therefore not be confirmed. It should be noted that political interest also failed to reach a level significant enough to predict political trust when controlling for media usage and credibility. One possible explanation is that many young adults are eager to join the CCP mainly in order to improve their employment chances and enjoy tangible material benefits (Kennedy et al., 2018). Indeed, CCP members are often found to have more opportunities for obtaining high-paying and prestigious jobs and for enjoying higher standards of living (Dickson and Rublee, 2000) than the rest of the population. To many young adults in China, party affiliation may not mean that they feel close to the political party or support state authority. This might explain why the moderation role of young adults’ political membership is not observed in this study.

In addition, a comparison between the effect of traditional and that of social media within the relationship under study indicated that young adults rated the credibility of political information provided by traditional media higher than the credibility of political information received via social media, despite the fact that they spent more time online (including on social media) than with traditional media. Thus, we found no evidence that social media have the advantage of perceived credibility in a media system where traditional media are state-controlled. In the literature, competing claims have been put forward regarding the comparison between the credibility of traditional media and that of social media (Kiousis, 2001; Zhang et al., 2014). While some researchers argue that traditional media were judged to be more credible than online media, others maintain opposite views or reach opposite results. The finding of this study supports the first type of conclusion, proposed in Kiousis (2001) and Zhang et al.’s (2014) previous studies. More importantly, political trust had a stronger association with traditional media usage than with social media usage (supporting H1c). Also, traditional media credibility presented a stronger mediating effect than did social media credibility (supporting H2c). But when young adults showed trust in non-media sources rather than in media sources, only the impact of traditional media usage on political trust was weakened (supporting H3c). Hence this article argues for the view that the roles of state-controlled traditional media and social media, which have more free-flowing information, differ within the relationship of media usage and political trust in China.

Some limitations of this study should be mentioned. First, our analysis is limited by the sample, which contains a relatively large share of highly educated Chinese youths.
living in cities: this implies that the results presented here apply mainly to a specific group of young adults. Still, within this group, there is considerable variety in media usage and trust levels. Second, given the cross-sectional nature of the data, we cannot rule out the possibility of a reverse causality. In other words, the causal order of media usage and political trust cannot be definitely established, and alternative interpretations of the regression results may apply. For example, one may argue that media credibility is to some degree influenced by political trust. We admit the reverse causality issue as one limitation of this study. Despite this, it is worth mentioning that as media are controlled by the state or subject to censorship in China, it is rather challenging to disentangle political trust and media credibility. Third, the measurement of trust in media and non-media sources, as well as the use of different media options, could have been more detailed. Related to that, our measurement of political trust relied on a single item: trust in the government. However, as we argued before, political trust has been considered a one-dimensional attitude (Grimmelikhuijsen and Knies, 2017; Hooghe, 2011). Also, some scholars have pointed out disadvantages of multi-item measures (Hooghe and Zmerli, 2011). Finally, as we mentioned, the CCP has started to employ social media to its own advantage. The specific implications of that need more research, in all likelihood with different methodologies. Despite these restrictions, we think that this study offers solid empirical evidence that media credibility (i.e. the perceived credibility of traditional and social media) plays an important role in the relationship between the use of traditional and social media and political trust in a less democratic society. The current study also suggests that the strength of the relationship between traditional media usage and political trust can be modified by trust in sources. Moreover, this research expands our understanding of how different types of media (namely traditional vs social) influence individuals’ political trust.

Our findings suggest a few avenues of future research. First, other explanations for the relationship between media usage and political trust could be examined, such as the precise role of education in how trust and credibility are shaped, but this would also require better access to poorly educated young Chinese. Moreover, the relationship between media credibility and political trust could also be further investigated. Second, future studies might compare the effects of some specific social media platforms on political issues. For instance, Chen and Sun (2019) report that individuals who are influenced by social media such as WeChat and Sina Weibo tend to have lower trust in government. Finally, further studies should consider distinguishing between online editions of traditional media and internet-based media, as the information offered by these two different types of media often overlaps, although making such distinctions is a challenge in the increasingly larger and more complex media ecology.

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Note

1. We do not claim that the social media platforms selected here are the most popular or the most representative ones. Some are among the most widely used platforms (Weibo, WeChat), while others were selected because they are representative in specific domains, for example, Douban.com in arts and culture, or Guokr.com in science. Also, my selection pays heed to what the cited academic literature signals as being popular among young Chinese, as well as to information concerning the various research reports by the CNNIC.

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