Cross-Media Usage Repertoires and Their Political Impacts: The Case of China

QIONG GONG
MARC VERBOORD
SUSANNE JANSSEN
Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

This study takes a repertoire-oriented approach to examining how social and traditional media usage affect political engagement in China. Building on previous studies and giving them a new direction, we examine how various social media platforms and traditional media outlets are combined in cross-media repertoires of young Chinese adults. We do this with the help of survey data collected in mainland China. Using the Step-3 approach of latent class analysis, we then consider how these repertoires can be explained by various individual and contextual factors and what impact the repertoires themselves have on various forms of political involvement. The study identifies 6 distinctive media repertoires: digitally focused, communication oriented, minimal users, moderate omnivores, voracious omnivores, and print interested. Repertoires are mainly correlated with age, education, and perceived media credibility. In China, young adults with the most omnivorous and print-oriented media repertoires display the highest levels of political trust, political interest, and online political engagement. The study also discusses the implications of these results.

Keywords: media repertoire, political trust, political interest, online political engagement, social media, traditional media, China

The rise of the Internet and social media has spurred research into their "democratic potential": the question of whether new media are able to increase political participation among citizens. More concretely, new media are hypothesized to give new impetus to political engagement by creating a platform for the common people, by intensifying social interaction, and by offering devices that appeal to youths (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Skoric & Poor, 2013; Vissers & Stolle, 2014). There are indications showing that the use of social media is a positive and significant predictor of an individual's political participatory behaviors, both online and off-line (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012), but overall the effect seems to be modest (see Boulianne, 2015; Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2016). The promise of social change attached to social media acquired a new dimension during the Arab Spring, where social media were played

Qiong Gong: gong@eshcc.eur.nl
Marc Verboord: verboord@eshcc.eur.nl
Susanne Janssen: s.janssen@eshcc.eur.nl
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up as crucial resources for collective action in societies where traditional media are controlled by the state or subject to censorship (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011). The current research focuses on China. Research on the relationship between media usage and political participation that addresses non-Western countries and other political regimes is still relatively scarce (Boulianne, 2015; Skoric, 2011; Skoric, Zhu, & Pang, 2016). Furthermore, students of political outcomes in Western countries have turned their attention to the impacts of media or news "repertoires" (e.g., Strömbäck, Falasca, & Kruikemeier, 2018), but this approach is still absent in works on China. We will argue here that the strong diversification of social media platforms in China during the past decade makes it imperative to move beyond analyzing social media as a single category of media usage.

The present study has the following research questions:

RQ1:   Which current media repertoires can be identified among young Chinese adults?

RQ2:   How can adherence of young Chinese adults to these repertoires be predicted by their social backgrounds?

RQ3:   How do these repertoires relate to the political involvement of young Chinese adults?

As a research context, China is a country with a state-controlled media system in which a highly diversified ecology of social media platforms has emerged during the past decades (Gleiss, 2015; Li, 2019). We focus specifically on young adults because their media preferences are generally considered to be very different from those of older generations, as they grew up with Internet-based media (e.g., Edgerly, 2017; Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014). We are working with a concept of "young adults" broadly defined as individuals between 18 and 40 years of age.

This study extends previous research on media repertoires and their impacts in three ways. First, we pay more attention to the specific social media platforms and their functionalities in the Chinese media context than did previous studies. We look closely at eight widely used platforms and try to analyze how they are combined with more traditional media in the media repertoires of young adults. Second, we examine three different aspects of political involvement—political trust, online political engagement, and political interest—to get a better sense of how, in a diverse yet restrictive media context, media repertoires relate to this kind of involvement. Finally, using data from an original online survey in China, we use the relatively advanced technique of latent class analysis (LCA) to find repertoires inductively, and the analysis of distal outcomes (i.e., dependent variables) to relate repertoires to political variables (see Strömbäck et al., 2018; Vermunt, 2010).

Social Media Usage and Political Involvement

The rise of the Internet has often been equated with the opening of new communication opportunities, which were unavailable in the world of traditional forms of media, and which changed citizens' political involvement. In particular, the fast diffusion of social media has prompted many studies into the possible effects of social media usage on citizen or civic engagement (Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang,

2016; Skoric, Zhu, & Pang, 2016), political participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012), and political trust (e.g., Ceron, 2015). These studies share the premise that for societies to function well, it is important that citizens express their political viewpoints, engage in political and social activities (e.g., participate in meetings where societal issues are discussed), and have a certain amount of trust that their political system functions adequately. Norris (2000, 2011) argues that civic engagement, political interest, and trust in government form a "virtuous circle" in which the separate elements reinforce one another. Nevertheless, there are also substantial differences between these concepts.

Most studies of social media effects have focused on forms of "participation" or "engagement" (often operationalized through certain activities) because social media are agency enhancing: They have enabled citizens to voice their political views directly, either by publicizing them in written form or via interactions with others (Boulianne, 2015; Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2016). Empirical studies have provided evidence that social media usage is indeed generally associated with other forms of civic and political engagement (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014; Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2016; Xenos et al., 2014). Political interest is less often studied as an outcome variable; this is because in Western countries, this characteristic is considered to be rather conditional on taking action, and therefore is modeled as a control variable (Vissers & Stolle, 2014). But a study carried out in Sweden found similar positive effects of social media usage on both political interest and (off-line) political participation (Holt, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Ljungberg, 2013).

Political trust concerns the way citizens view the operative political institutions, such as government and parliament, and its presence indicates that such institutions are doing their jobs in an honest, responsive, and accountable manner (Ceron, 2015). Higher levels of news media use are generally positively associated with political trust (Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, & Shehata, 2016), but social media use has been found to have a negative impact (Ceron, 2015).

In Western countries, many of these aspects of political involvement are connected to the functioning of democracy (Norris, 2000). Obviously, such aspects have no equivalent in nondemocratic countries such as China. Nevertheless, in the Chinese context, various studies show similar social media effects: usage of Sina Weibo was associated with increasing willingness to participate politically (Chan, Wu, Hao, Xi, & Jin, 2012), online forum usage was positively associated with online political discussion among Chinese college students (Mou, Atkin, Fu, Lin, & Lau, 2013), and usage of social networking sites for information exchange was positively related to certain forms of political participation that were not organized by party officials (Zhang & Lin, 2014). At the same time, studies also highlight the complexities of the political situation: expressing political opinions online is strongly related to nationalistic attitudes, which are influenced by party propaganda: swaying domestic and international opinion in favor of Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) policies (Anne-Marie & Wang, 2009; Hyun & Kim, 2015). Political trust, or system support, are mainly enhanced by using traditional media such as newspapers and television, but the effects of using Internet or social media are mixed. Whereas Shen and Guo (2013) find negative effects of Internet usage, Hyun and Kim (2015) state that "public use of the Internet for political expression contributes to sustaining the existing Chinese system rather than undermining it." (p. 775). More recently, Chen and Sun (2019) reported that individuals who are influenced by social media such as WeChat and Sina Weibo tend to have lower trust in government.

Media Repertoires and Their Impacts

Most of the work carried out so far on the relationship between social media usage and the various manifestations of political involvement collapsed social media into one indicator or focused on one specific social media platform (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Sina Weibo). Increasingly, however, scholars are taking into account the expanding range of the media types and outlets that have emerged in the digital age, and shifted their attention to the ways in which individual media users mix and match various forms of usage (Taneja, Webster, Malthouse, & Ksiazek, 2012; Webster, 2014). This focus on "media repertoires" captures the ritualistic or habitual ways in which individuals combine various sorts of media use into a single bundle of practices (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006; van Rees & van Eijck, 2003; Yuan, 2011). Note that there is no consensus as to which media type (print vs. audiovisual, off-line vs. online, elite newspapers vs. popular newspapers, etc.) or outlet (TV channels, newspaper titles, social media platforms, etc.) should be incorporated. As a result, operational definitions of media repertoires can be quite varied. Recent studies of news repertoires testify to that. Bos, Kruikemeier, and Vreese (2016), with relatively few online items, find "minimalists," "public news consumers," "popular news consumers," and "omnivores" for the Netherlands. Edgerly, Vraga, Bode, Thorson, and Thorson (2018), distinguishing also by device, find "news avoiders," "curated news only," "traditional news only," and "news omnivores." And Strömbäck et al. (2018), analyzing mainly online and off-line versions of traditional media, find "minimalists," "public news consumers," "local news consumers," "social media news consumers," and "popular online news consumers."

Explanatory models of media repertoires have emphasized both socioeconomic characteristics—such as gender, age, and educational level (Strömbäck et al., 2018; van Rees & van Eijck, 2003)—and more structural factors—such as access to media, program schedules, and audience availability (Webster, 2014; Yuan, 2011). More and more, these elements have been integrated into one model of "media duality" (Webster, 2014), in which both individual and structural or contextual factors are shown to affect media choices and to shape media as well as news repertoires (Edgerly et al., 2018; S. Kim, 2014; Taneja et al., 2012; Yuan & Ksiazek, 2011).

Three important limitations stand out in this literature. First, specific social media platforms are not often distinguished in repertoires. Boczkowski, Matassi, and Mitchelstein (2018) disclose the distinct meanings attributed to social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, but do not show how platforms are combined in actual repertoires. Second, as far as we know, inventories of media repertoires of both traditional and social media in the Chinese context have not yet been conducted. Third, despite the growing attention on how audiences perceive the credibility of different media types (Appelman & Sundar, 2016), this has not often been linked to media repertoires.

As argued previously, we do not want to stop at mapping and explaining media repertoires among young Chinese adults; we also intend to investigate how these repertoires are related to political involvement. We found two previous studies examining this type of impact of repertoires. One study suggests that social media news consumers are more likely to participate in online politics than in other news repertoires (Strömbäck et al., 2018). The other study found that, among U.S. teenagers, news

omnivores display higher levels of online political participation than those who receive only curated news (Edgerly et al., 2018). What impacts media repertoires have in the Chinese context has yet to be seen.

The Research Method

The Data

The data collection process consisted of two phases. First, on May 21, 2016, a pilot survey was conducted with 120 selected respondents familiar with the Chinese media system. The survey applied snowball sampling. Accordingly, the questionnaire was adjusted on the basis of these respondents' feedback. The final survey contained 39 questions (131 subitems) about media usage and trust in media. Note that the survey had three focus areas: arts and culture, health and fitness, and politics. In this article, we employ the data on politics. 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. The final data were collected in July 2016. Although 1,850 agreed to participate, 280 did not provide answers on our dependent variables, and 537 spent little time on the survey (less than 10 minutes, implying more than four questions per minute) in combination with suspicious answering patterns (wrong answers to trap questions inserted by survey company, or exactly the same answers for dozens of items in a row). In line with the recommendations of the survey company, these respondents were removed from the final sample (N = 1,033; response rate of 12.9%). Though this response rate is relatively low, it is similar to that of previous Web survey-based studies carried out in China (Shih & Fan, 2008; Yamamoto, Kushin, & Dalisay, 2015). In the final sample, there were slightly more female (51.5%) than male respondents (48.5%). The mean age is 29.7 years (SD = 5.02 years). 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, respectively, 25.4% and 20.4% of Chinese Internet users (China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC], 2019). In line with this overrepresentation of higher educated people, most participants lived in cities (97.8%). Additionally, the overrepresentation of higher education was tied in with a disproportionately high representation of CCP membership (Hyun & Kim, 2015; Hyun, Kim, & Sun, 2014). Around 33% of the respondents were CCP members, which was well ahead of the national figure of 6% (Hyun & Kim, 2015; Kennedy, Nagao, & Liu, 2018). However, Skoric, Zhu, and Pang (2016) note that higher educated and metropolitan populations tend to be overrepresented in Chinese survey samples.

Measures

Media Usage

Guided by previous studies (Jung, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2011), traditional media usage was measured by 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 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *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.[1]

Political Trust

The question about political trust was formulated thus: "How much do you trust the government?" Response categories ran from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). This operationalization followed other studies (e.g., Hooghe, 2011; Shen & Guo, 2013).

Online Political Engagement

Measurement for online political engagement was inspired by various previous studies (Skoric, 2011; Yamamoto et al., 2015). Respondents were asked how often they engage in five different types of political activities on social media: "reading news related to politics or public affairs"; "reading blogs or microblogging comments related to politics or public affairs"; "sharing with others on topics of politics or public affairs"; "posting comments in online discussion groups related to politics or public affairs"; and "following social media accounts of the government and of public administration institutions" (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very frequently*). These items form a reliable scale (*M* = 3.43, *SD* = .80. α = .86).

Political Interest

Guided by previous studies (Holt et al., 2013; D. Kim, 2012), the political interest item included six questions (e.g., "How frequently do you follow what is going on in politics and public affairs?" and "How interested would you say you are in politics?"). Answers to these questions were then ranged on a political interest scale (*M* = 3.96, *SD* = .66, α = .87) that ran from 1 (*not interested at all*) to 5 (*very interested*).

Credibility of Political Information Gathered From the Media

Guided by previous measurements, five dimensions of media credibility were combined to form a single scale measure (Appelman & Sundar, 2016; Johnson & 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* to 7 = *very much*). The scores were combined into two credibility indexes, one for political information obtained from traditional media (*M* = 5.38, *SD* = 1.14, α = .95) and the other for political information obtained from social media (*M* = 5.01, *SD* = 1.12, α = .94).

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[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), whereas others were selected because they are representative in specific domains (e.g., Douban.com in arts and culture, Guokr.com in science). Also, our 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 (2017).

Interpersonal Trust

This study also examines individuals' interpersonal trust, owing to its close relationship with political trust (see Mishler & Rose, 2001). Interpersonal trust was measured via answers to three questions; these answers were then averaged on a 7-point scale, so as to build a composite index ($M =$ 5.3, $SD = .99$, $\alpha = .64$).

Demographics

Age is measured from the year of birth, which ranges from 1976 to 1998. Gender is coded so that female = 1. Participants' educational level was measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*less than primary school*) to 5 (*beyond master's degree*). Apart from these demographic factors, we controlled for CCP membership because this factor can affect how individuals use media (Hyun & Kim, 2015). CCP membership is a dummy variable.

Contextual Factors: Size, Place of Residence, and Internet Penetration Rate

We used respondents' IP addresses to find their location. The place of residence would fall into one out of six possible categories, according to population size. These categories were village/town (2.23%), small city (below half a million; 8.33%), medium city (half a million to 1 million; 13.65%), big city (1 to 5 million; 14.42%), capital city (5 million to 10 million; 28.27%), and super big city (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen; 33.11%). The Internet penetration rate is measured by region, on the basis of the national report (CNNIC, 2019).

Analytical Strategy

To estimate the media repertoires of young Chinese, we apply LCA using the Latent GOLD software (Vermunt & Magidson, 2016). This technique enables us to find discrete groups, or classes, on the basis of respondents' response patterns, as well as distribute individual respondents into these groups on the basis of conditional probabilities. In the first step, we employed the cluster option in Latent GOLD, with the media usage questions as indicators of class membership. The model was estimated using 200 random sets of starting values, and a minimum of 30 iterations per set. For answering RQ2 and RQ3, we rely on two relatively recently developed functionalities within LCA: Step-3 models with covariates and Step-3 models with distal outcomes (Vermunt & Magidson, 2016). The first functionality enables researchers to examine which covariates best predict membership of classes. In line with recommendations from the literature, we apply ML (i.e., maximum likelihood) bias correction (Vermunt, 2010). The second functionality models memberships of classes as independent variables, which can predict selected distal outcomes or dependent variables (here, political outcomes) while controlling for other variables. Compared with saving classes and applying multinomial regression models or analyses of variance (ANOVAs), these Step-3 models avoid the problem that parameter estimates of this last step are underestimated (Vermunt & Magidson, 2016). Here, we apply the Bolck-Croon-Hagenaars (BCH) approach (Bakk & Vermunt, 2016).

The Results

Descriptive Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of media usage variables. Among 12 types of media platforms, the frequency of WeChat usage is the highest and Guokr.com scores the lowest. The respondents are less likely to use traditional media such as radio, magazines, and newspapers. Four of the social media platforms—WeChat, Qzone, Sina Weibo, and Baidu Tieba—are used significantly more than traditional media—except for television, which scores highest among traditional media outlets. Zhihu.com, Tianya Club, Douban.com, and Guokr.com score slightly lower than print media and radio usage. Clearly social media such as WeChat, Qzone, Sina Weibo, and Baidu Tieba play a significant role in the daily life of the young adults in our sample.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Media Usage.

	M	SD
Total traditional media usage [1]		
Television[1]	3.79	0.924
Radio[1]	2.9	1.042
Magazine[1]	2.93	0.971
Newspaper[1]	2.93	1.046
Total social media usage[2]		
WeChat[2]	4.68	0.603
Qzone[2]	3.69	1.100
Sina Weibo[2]	3.47	1.151
Baidu Tieba[2]	3.07	1.107
Zhihu.com[2]	2.52	1.251
Tianya Club[2]	2.52	1.142
Douban.com[2]	2.43	1.099
Guokr.com[2]	1.98	0.983

Note. [1]*N* = 1,033; [2]*n* = 1,030.

Media Repertoires

To answer our first research question, we used the cluster option in Latent GOLD for estimating and comparing various models. Table 2 presents the summary of the model classifications. There is no common agreement on what are the best criteria for deciding on the optimal number of classes, but most scholars use the information criteria of the BIC (Bayesian information criterion) and AIC (Akaike information criterion) in combination with finding parsimonious and interpretable solutions (Collins & Lanza, 2010; Porcu & Giambona, 2017). Smaller values of BIC and AIC represent more optimal balance of model fit and parsimony. Inspection of our criteria showed that seven and eight clusters yielded the most optimal models. However, the seven- and eight-cluster models are less parsimonious and more difficult to interpret. We therefore selected the model that contains six classes. Moreover, entropy, which indicates whether clusters are clearly separated, has a value of 0.968, exceeding the required value of 0.90.

Table 2. Summary of Test Results for the Estimated Latent Class Models.

	LL	BIC(LL)	AIC(LL)	Npar	Entropy
1 cluster	−17,784.2339	35,734.9632	35616.4677	24	1.000
2 cluster	−15,131.9356	30,603.7996	30361.8713	49	0.9912
3 cluster	−13,659.4883	27,832.3378	27466.9766	74	0.9628
4 cluster	−12,350.0123	25,386.8186	24,898.0245	99	0.9698
5 cluster	−11,702.8463	24,265.9196	23,653.6927	124	0.9625
6 cluster	−10,983.8042	23,001.2682	22,265.6084	149	0.9682
7 cluster	−10,675.0201	22,557.1329	21,698.0402	174	0.9688
8 cluster	−9,909.9762	21,200.4778	20,217.9523	199	0.9877

Note: LL=log-likelihood; BIC(LL)=Bayesian information criterion (of LL); AIC=Akaike information criterion; Npar=number of parameters.

Table 3 presents the means of the items that indicate the differences in response patterns that distinguish the clusters (profile output). On the basis of these coefficients, we can find meaningful labels for the clusters. The first cluster, which represents about 22% of the research sample, is labeled voracious omnivores. Individuals in this cluster are likely to use every media platform on a weekly or daily basis. The second largest cluster (20%) consists of the moderate omnivores. Young adults in this group are very likely to use almost all the media platforms included in this study, but, with the exception of television, Sina Weibo, WeChat, and Baidu Tieba, they use these media only a couple times per month. Cluster 3 is slightly smaller (18%) and combines a moderate use of traditional media with a preference for communication- and sharing-oriented social media platforms (Sina Weibo, WeChat, Qzone). We thus label this cluster communication oriented.

The fourth cluster consists of the digitally focused, who comprise 16% of the research sample. This group is least likely to use traditional media, but does use quite a lot of social media platforms (although not as much as the voracious omnivores). The fifth cluster represents about 15% of the respondents, whom we label minimal users. Individuals in this group use few different media, but spend most of their time on only two popular social media platforms—WeChat and Qzone—and television. The last and smallest cluster (9%) is also quite omnivorous, but less so than Cluster 1, and compared with Cluster 2 they are more interested in traditional media. Individuals in this cluster present a very high probability of using newspapers and magazines (and actually, they also rank quite high when it comes to listening to the radio). Therefore, we label them print interested. In sum, while Chinese cross-media repertoires show clear similarities to repertoires found elsewhere (e.g., minimal users, omnivores), the emphasis on social media platforms also brings more specific types to light (e.g., communication oriented).

Table 3. Cross-Media Repertoires Among Young Chinese Adults.

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Cluster 5	Cluster 6
	Voracious omnivores	Moderate omnivores	Communication oriented	Digitally focused	Minimal users	Print interested
Cluster size	21.7%	19.9%	18.6%	16.0%	14.8%	9.0%
Indicators						
Television	4.04 (.061)	3.89 (.062)	3.68 (.076)	3.44 (.064)	3.53 (.080)	4.30 (.054)
Newspapers	3.24 (.078)	2.94 (.075)	2.65 (.070)	2.46 (.054)	2.36 (.063)	4.55 (.076)
Magazines	3.27 (.072)	2.90 (.065)	2.58 (.057)	2.61 (.055)	2.26 (.056)	4.55 (.076)
Radio	3.20 (.076)	2.88 (.070)	2.71 (.076)	2.54 (.060)	2.34 (.073)	4.11 (.096)
Sina Weibo	4.05 (.053)	3.55 (.067)	3.34 (.086)	3.18 (.077)	2.45 (.108)	4.39 (.065)
WeChat	5.00 (.001)	5.00 (.001)	5.00 (.001)	3.79 (.048)	4.61 (.051)	4.25 (.092)
Qzone	4.06 (.072)	3.76 (.075)	3.52 (.087)	3.36 (.077)	3.28 (.095)	4.31 (.074)
Zhihu	3.33 (.065)	2.58 (.074)	1.98 (.076)	2.35 (.074)	1.00 (.003)	4.30 (.088)
Baidu Tieba	3.62 (.060)	3.10 (.063)	2.87 (.073)	3.04 (.068)	1.87 (.083)	4.13 (.103)
Tianya Club	3.36 (.062)	2.54 (.057)	2.27 (.071)	2.38 (.067)	1.00 (.003)	3.69 (.121)
Douban.com	3.50 (.054)	2.53 (.054)	2.05 (.064)	2.34 (.069)	1.00 (.003)	2.96 (.129)
Guokr.com	3.23 (.045)	2.00 (.002)	1.00 (.002)	1.93 (.071)	1.00 (.003)	2.61 (.104)

Note. Results profile output: mean scores. Means are on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very frequently*); between brackets standard errors. $n = 1,030$, because three respondents did not answer media usage questions.

What Predicts Cross-Media Repertoires?

Table 4 presents the outcomes of the Step-3 approach with covariates. More particularly, we report the parameters which can be interpreted as regression coefficients, but note that we used effect coding for the cluster variables. Effect coding implies that the coefficient can be interpreted as the difference between the mean of the coded group and the unweighted grand mean (rather than that every coefficient represents the difference between that specific category and one chosen reference category, as with dummy coding). Inspection of the Wald values shows that classes differ significantly in terms of the predictive value of age, gender, education, the size of the current place of residence, interpersonal trust, and the perceived credibility of political information received from both social and traditional media. Communist Party membership is not significant.

Table 4. User Characteristics of Cluster Members of Cross-Media Repertoires.

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Cluster 5	Cluster 6	
	Voracious omnivores	Moderate omnivores	Communication oriented	Digitally focused	Minimal users	Print interested	Wald
Cluster size	21.7%	19.9%	18.6%	16.0%	14.8%	9.0%	
Covariates							
Age	−.014 (.015)	.020 (.014)	.016 (.014)	−.076 (.016)	.016 (.017)	.038 (.028)	26.3***
Female	.385 (.144)	−.092 (.140)	.420 (.145)	−.179 (.159)	.006 (.164)	−.542 (.267)	17.7**
Educational level	.145 (.104)	−.161 (.100)	.025 (.108)	−.282 (.119)	−.798 (.116)	1.070 (.296)	57.6***
Membership CCP	.406 (.149)	−.044 (.153)	−.158 (.154)	.039 (.181)	−.248 (.196)	.005 (.258)	9.3
Place of residence size	.208 (.058)	−.061 (.050)	−.122 (.054)	.068 (.054)	−.160 (.057)	.203 (.094)	25.1***
Interpersonal trust	.119 (.076)	.101 (.086)	.082 (.083)	−.266 (.077)	−.117 (.082)	.081 (.147)	17.2**
Credibility political info social media	.217 (.098)	−.009 (.088)	−.021 (.092)	−.269 (.083)	−.163 (.097)	.245 (.165)	17.2**
Credibility pol info traditional media	−.087 (.099)	−.218 (.089)	−.207 (.096)	−.303 (.082)	−.234 (.096)	1.049 (.212)	27.7***
Intercept	−1.585 (.698)	1.253 (.683)	.844 (.677)	7.030 (.679)	4.615 (.746)	−12.157 (1.693)	135.6***

Note. Parameters in effect coding; between brackets standard errors. The models are estimated using the Step-3 procedure in Latent GOLD with co-variates (proportional classification; ML bias correction). n = 1,030. Covariates are treated as numeric variables, except for gender and member CP (nominal). $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

How do the clusters differ in background characteristics? Of all clusters, the voracious omnivores and the print interested have the highest educational level, come more often from bigger cities, have relatively high levels of interpersonal trust, and consider political information on social media relatively credible. Whereas the print interested also find traditional media credible, the voracious omnivores, however, do not show a significant outcome for this variable. Also, the gender composition of the groups differs: print-interested individuals are much more likely to be male than female. The digitally focused and the minimal users also share a number of characteristics. These clusters have a relatively low education, display low levels of interpersonal trust, and a low ranking of the credibility of political information contained in the media (particularly traditional). What distinguishes them most is that the digitally focused are younger, while the minimal users have slightly lower educational levels. The other two clusters—the moderate omnivores and the communication-oriented—take in-between positions on most variables. For example, their educational levels are lower than that of Clusters 1 and 6, but higher than Clusters 4 and 5. Their interpersonal trust is similar to that of Clusters 1 and 6, but many of them do not perceive the political information on (particularly) traditional media as credible. The main difference between the moderate omnivores and the communication oriented is that members of the latter class are more likely to be female.

In sum, more highly educated and relatively older individuals tend to be (voracious) omnivorous and more interested in traditional media. These repertoires are aligned with perceptions of higher credibility of mediatized political information and with greater interpersonal trust. Still, among the younger respondents we also find broadly oriented media users—moderate omnivores—who perhaps will increase their levels of media consumption in the future.

Political Implications of Cross-Media Repertoires

Our final research question addresses the issue of whether media repertoires are associated with forms of political involvement such as political trust, political interest, and online political engagement. Table 5 presents the outcomes from three Step-3 analyses with distal outcomes. The coefficients can be interpreted as regression coefficients, but note that, again, we used effect coding for the cluster variables. The Wald statistics for cluster variables implies that the clusters differ significantly for all three political outcomes; that is, at least one class is different from the mean of the other classes. Thus, controlled for the confounding variables reported in the table, clusters appear to be associated with different levels of political trust, online political engagement, and political interest. In other words, regardless of how credible someone finds, for example, the information acquired from social media or traditional media, individual orientation toward politics still appears to be related to their media repertoire.

Table 5. Distal Outcomes for Three Aspects of Political Involvement.

	Political trust (continuous)		Online political engagement (continuous)		Political interest (continuous)	
	Coefficient (*SE*)	Wald	Coefficient (*SE*)	Wald	Coefficient (*SE*)	Wald
Clusters						
Voracious omnivores	−.003 (.070)	135.9***	.255 (.039)	181.2***	.157 (.033)	43.8***
Moderate omnivores	−.214 (.079)		.039 (.040)		.019 (.036)	
Communication oriented	−.191 (.082)		−.117 (.046)		−.020 (.041)	
Digitally focused	−.198 (.083)		−.223 (.044)		−.136 (.043)	
Minimal users	−.473 (.097)		−.480 (.054)		−.182 (.049)	
Print interested	1.079 (.093)		.526 (.050)		.161 (.035)	
Individual factors						
Age	−.007 (.008)	0.8	.011 (.004)	7.2**	.009 (.003)	6.7**
Female	.115 (.037)	9.8**	−.084 (.020)	18.5***	−.064 (.018)	13.5***
Educational level	.009 (.049)	0.3	.136 (.027)	25.4***	.097 (.024)	16.7***
Membership CCP	.070 (.038)	2.2	.041 (.022)	3.6	−.012 (.019)	0.4
Place of residence size	.015 (.030)	0.2	.015 (.015)	1.0	−.012 (.014)	0.8
Interpersonal trust	.226 (.046)	24.1***	.075 (.024)	9.5**	.091 (.023)	16.1***
Credibility of political information from social media	.245 (.054)	20.8***	.141 (.028)	25.8***	.055 (.027)	4.1*
Credibility of political information from traditional media	.438 (.054)	64.9***	.053 (.029)	3.5	.137 (.028)	24.3***
Intercept	.165 (.353)	0.2	.593 (.181)	10.7**	1.255 (.168)	55.939* **
Variances DV	1.124 (.069)	321.9***	.366 (.019)	391.3***	.303 (.021)	211.9***
N	1,030		1,030		1,030	
Log-likelihood (LL)	−3383.03		−2755.09		−2657.82	
BIC (LL)	6,870.13		5,614.24		5,419.70	
Pseudo R^2	16.5%		23.2%		17.4%	

Note. Results of Step-3 analysis with distal outcomes, applying BCH adjustment. Independent variables are treated as numeric, except for the following: female; membership (nominal); education; place of residence (ordinal). The parameters are effect coding. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$. Pseudo R^2 is based on error type minus log-likelihood, which is comparable to McFadden R^2.

The most extreme outcomes are found for political trust. Print-interested individuals have the highest levels of political trust, voracious omnivores have average levels, whereas minimal users display the lowest level of trust. In addition to these effects, there are still positive effects of both the perceived credibility of political information and interpersonal trust. Women are more likely to show political trust than are men, but other demographics are evenly distributed across trust levels.

For online political engagement, we find similar patterns for the cluster variables, but here the moderate omnivores have slightly higher levels of engagement than do the communication oriented and the digitally focused. We find different patterns for the individual factors. How credible the various individuals find the political information in traditional media does not matter, whereas a negative effect might have been expected. Males and the higher educated are more likely to get involved in online participation in political matters.

By comparison, political interest has the weakest connection to cross-media repertoires. Voracious omnivores and print interested are most likely to show political interest, but the differences with the other four clusters are smaller than on the dimensions of trust and online engagement. Minimal users continue to be the least politically oriented, but inspection of the paired comparisons (not reported) shows that the difference with Cluster 4 is actually not significant. Political interest is associated with both the perceived credibility of political information found on social media sites (barely significant) and in traditional media (very significant). Higher levels of education, being male, and higher levels of interpersonal trust are associated with higher political interest.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study attempts to advance our understanding of how, in the repressive media ecology of China, traditional and social media get combined by young adults into distinct cross-media repertoires, and how these repertoires relate to youngsters' political orientations. We find six different repertoires, which run progressively from quite limited (minimal users) to repertoires with a specific media orientation (digitally focused users, communication-oriented users), then to relatively diverse repertoires (moderate omnivores), and finally to repertoires that mix many traditional media types and social media platforms (voracious omnivores, print-interested users). In general, the younger and poorly educated respondents tended to be less inclined to include traditional media in their repertoire. Yet they also showed lower levels of interpersonal trust and did not find political information in the media very credible. This raises at least two questions. Using traditional media (television, newspapers, magazines, radio) is associated with age and education. Should we interpret these findings as a life-course effect, or does it indicate cohort differences? In other words, what will happen when the current teenagers and twentysomethings grow up and finish their education? Second, why do we find so few differences between the perceived credibility of the political information available in social media and in traditional media respectively? That voracious omnivores and the print interested also perceive as credible the information they get from social media can be explained by their omnivorous orientation (they use all kinds of media); but repertoires that focus on social media also judge traditional and social media to be alike in point of credibility (so the digitally focused and the communication oriented). This suggests (1) that, in the Chinese media environment, young adults see little difference between the quality of media types, and

(2) that the way in which they judge this quality has more to do social background with than with how they experience media usage. But this needs further investigation.

We also examined how cross-media repertoires relate to political involvement. Although we studied three quite distinct types of involvement, the findings show clear similarities. The print-interested show the greatest political trust, the highest online political engagement, and the most political interest, followed by the voracious omnivores. Then come the moderate omnivores, at some distance, which implies that more omnivorous media repertoires are positively related to all types of political involvement, whereas heavier reliance on social media platforms has negative associations. That preference for print is most strongly linked with political trust suggests that print media are most strongly associated with the Chinese government.

Some limitations of this study should be mentioned. As in other studies of media usage and political participation in China (e.g., Shen & Guo, 2013; Zhang & Lin, 2014), we cannot make strong causal claims for our effects, because we rely on cross-sectional data. This implies that political involvement can also drive media usage. What is more, our sample is not representative of all Chinese young adults; it contains a large proportion of urban youths with a higher education. Future research could examine the motivations of young adults in using specific media platforms, as well as the degree of political content they come across (Choi, 2016). In the Chinese context, the role of censorship and the influence of the CCP on how young adults use (social) media remain two important elements to address (Hyun & Kim, 2015).

Overall, there is evidence that in China, too, more diverse media repertoires go hand in hand with stronger forms of political engagement (see Edgerly et al., 2018). Although social media platforms are an essential part of such a diversified repertoire, traditional media remain important: Repertoires that contain traditional media show higher political engagement. A disadvantage of the media repertoire approach is that outcomes very much hinge on the items used. Because our measurement of traditional media is, for example, less extensive than that of Strömbäck et al. (2018), we find different types of repertoires. Yet the increasing importance of social media platforms and their multiplicity make it pertinent to incorporate these platforms into future repertoire research (Boczkowski et al., 2018). The findings of the present research evince the relevance of making more fine-grained distinctions between varieties of social media usage.

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