# Consumptive News Feed Curation on Social Media: A Moderated Mediation Model of News Interest, Affordance Utilization, and Friending

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This study analyzed a survey sample from China and investigated how (1) news interest, (2) affordance utilization, and (3) friending were associated with consumptive news feed curation (CNFC), a practice of selective exposure, as well as the ways in which these associations were mediated and moderated by psychological factors. Findings showed that all 3 factors were positively associated with CNFC. Media locus of control (MLOC), namely, individuals' beliefs in their ability to control their information environment, was found to be a positive mediator. Namely, the three independent variables led to greater MLOC before facilitating CNFC. Need for cognition (NFC) was a moderator. That is, the main associations became weaker among those with higher NFC, suggesting that people with a stronger preference for analytical and logical information processing were less likely to curate for consumptive purposes. Moderating effect of NFC was also found on the indirect effects of news interest and affordance utilization on CNFC.

*Keywords: consumptive news feed curation, news interest, affordance, friending, media locus of control, need for cognition*

As social media grow exponentially, users oftentimes personalize their news feed to create particularistic windows on the world, selectively allocate attention, and manage what to consume (e.g.,

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Hermida, 2020; Merten, 2021). This practice is termed consumptive news feed curation (CNFC). In a nutshell, CNFC speaks to the selection of preferred content from the vast amount of information (Davis, 2017; Lu, 2020).

According to Davis (2017), digital curation "remains undertheorized in its own right" (p. 770). Prior literature has paid much attention to productive curation such as online self-disclosure while consumptive curation has received relatively less attention. For instance, the queries about what psychological, technological, behavioral, and psychological antecedents predict CNFC remain unanswered. Moreover, the limited extant body of literature mainly focuses on the Western context. To bridge these gaps, this study analyzes a survey sample from China and investigates how (1) news interest, (2) affordance utilization, and (3) friending are associated with CNFC, as well as the ways in which these associations are mediated and moderated by psychological factors.

Our selection of these variables is based on the following reasons. First, interests in certain news leads to selective exposure (Merten, 2021; Wonneberger, Schoenbach, & Van Meurs, 2011). Second, using social media affordances is a means to achieve the purpose of selective consumption (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012). Furthermore, friending directly determines the content an individual can be exposed to (Chen & Li, 2017). Additionally, psychological factors, including a belief in their abilities to control the online environment and to process information rationally and statistically can vary the strength of the effects of the abovementioned independent variables (Tsfati & Cappella, 2005).

In terms of the study context, our selection of China was deemed necessary. Prior systematic literature reviews and meta-analyses have highlighted the glaring asymmetry of contextualization in communication technology research, calling for an inclusion of developing countries (e.g., Adjei-Bamfo, Maloreh-Nyamekye, & Ahenkan, 2019; Jennings & Gagliardi, 2013). Our study aptly heeds this call. China has a huge social media market and user base. However, limited studies have hitherto explored digital consumption in China. Although one germinal study had examined CNFC within six Asian societies (i.e., Lee, Chan, Chen, Nielsen, & Fletcher, 2019), it did not include mainland China. Our study is an addition that provides insights into cross-societal nuances.

In doing so, our study not only enriches the digital curation literature but also "enhance[s] the rigor and utility of research" (Salway et al., 2011, p. 1) and explores how concepts and categories are employed in different settings.

## Literature Review

### *Selective Exposure and Consumptive News Feed Curation*

Davis (2017) suggested that CNFC is the manifestation of "the predominance of selective exposure" (p. 774). Selective exposure refers to the phenomenon whereby individuals choose to allocate attention to certain information that is congruent with their opinions and attitudes (Festinger, 1962). To select their exposure to information, individuals aim to reduce cognitive dissonance created by the information at odds with their preexisting beliefs (Sears & Freedman, 1967). Over decades, scholars have examined the selective

exposure hypothesis in various contexts, and revealed multiple driving forces of the phenomenon, including political interest (Johnson, Bichard, & Zhang, 2009), explicit and implicit attitudes (Arendt, Steindl, & Kümpel, 2016), and people's discussion networks (Lyons, 2019).

In terms of the consumptive curation, Hogan and Quan-Haase (2010) argued that it is a trend that underlies "long-term trajectories, persistent social practices, and discernible cultural patterns" of digitally mediated communication (p. 309). Davis (2017) conceptualizes curation as a "discriminate selection of materials for display" (p. 771). Accordingly, CNFC is the behavior of "allocate[ing] attention among information and social networks" (Davis, 2017, p. 776). Hence, CNFC in the social media context pertains more to how social media users sift through their information feeds, identifying and consuming what they find fascinating and enthralling while avoiding those tedious and cliché.

As a manifestation of selective exposure, CNFC could also intensify echo chamber, which is described as a network wherein a group of individuals chooses to connect with those sharing similar ideologies and views while excluding outsiders, such that homophonous ideas are crystalized and intensified (Bruns, 2019). This often goes hand in hand with filter bubbles, a shield that people use to avoid heterogeneous ideas (Bruns, 2019). These factors also drive CNFC (Pedersen & Burnett, 2018).

Unlike in offline socialization, a user of social media may follow a large number of "friends," which inevitably leads to an overabundance of information, weakening of strong ties, and erosion of boundaries (Feng et al., 2015). These may compel the user to proactively curate consumptive feeds and become more selective (Dylko et al., 2017). Relatedly, such curation may also be driven by the pursuit of psychological well-being. When social media users see constant spam commercials, negative news, or people showing off their "happy lives" (Primack et al., 2017), they may perform consumptive curation out of a desire for mental health and tranquility, either by unfollowing/blocking the accounts or by shielding updates toward specific accounts.

In sum, research suggests that CNFC, a practice of selective exposure, entails the following components: The information people identify as their interests or as their favored content (Merten, 2021), the technological functionalities available for users to use, and the accounts people decide to follow or avoid (Davis, 2017; Valenza, 2014). Accordingly, we examined the effects of the following three related factors—news interest, affordance utilization, and friending—on CNFC.

It comes with a caveat that news feeds on social media are not always determined by users' curation. Instead, social media users' trust in the information they are exposed to could also be a factor on which the feeds are contingent. Additionally, the platform algorithms can also hide or highlight certain posts, which significantly impact CNFC among users (Powers, 2017). In China, algorithmic censorship admittedly plays a role in detecting remarks on allegedly sensitive issues, removing posts, and blocking accounts (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2014).

### News Interest

News interest and selective exposure are inextricably linked. Stroud (2008) suggested that selective exposure occurs when "people's beliefs guide their media selections" (p. 345). According to Stroud (2008), these beliefs mainly entail those "related to a person's interests or self-identity" (p. 345). News interest is a psychological preference for following hard news from the media (Wonneberger et al., 2011). Research has also lent credence to the motivational role of news interest in eliciting selective exposure in today's high-choice media environment (Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, & Shehata, 2013; Wonneberger et al., 2011). For instance, Wonneberger and colleagues (2011) suggested that "a pronounced interest in watching a specific newscast" can influence viewing intentions and program choices (p. 329). It warrants mentioning that in today's digital media ecology, news interest may not pertain to hard news only. In fact, opinion pieces and news along a certain partisan line are oftentimes disseminated on social media platforms and intertwined with hard news. Consequently, in the digital media landscape, news interest is expanded to include opinion pieces, and sometimes news interest may even include information that may seem like news but not necessarily be news.

The effect of news interest on CNFC has become more likely in the digital age, wherein interactive platforms allow more room for users to make selections (Messing & Westwood, 2014). Indeed, scholars have provided sufficient evidence to buttress the link between news interest and curatorial practices on social media. Wells and Thorson (2017) argued that the choice to follow political or news actors on Facebook "will be driven by personal interest—following the most common logic of personal curation" (p. 37). Lee and associates (2019) demonstrated that people's news interest is positively associated with their frequencies of consumptive curatorial behaviors on social media. Merten's recent research (2021) also indicated that news interest is a significant predictor of news-boosting curations.

These findings are not without explanations. For instance, Gil de Zúñiga and associates (2017) indicated that people with a clear interest in news are typically more reluctant to randomly consume information, compared with those less interested in news, those who care less about the content quality, and those who have interest only in entertainment. In other words, people with stronger interests in news would be more immune to the "news-finds-me" perception or the incidental exposure of news (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017, p. 112). This argument is supported by Merten's (2021) study indicating that a CNFC is premised on "an interest or need for news" (p. 1023). This is because CNFC pertains to the practical presentation of selective exposure in the era of social media while the latter is determined by personal motivations and needs. Based on the reviewed literature, we posit the following hypothesis:

*H1:      News interest is positively associated with CNFC.*

### Affordance Utilization

Affordance refers to the action possibilities available to be taken while using technologies (Gibson, 1979). Accordingly, technological affordance is "the mutuality of actor intentions and technology capabilities that provide the potential for a particular action" (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013, p. 39). Modern

technological platforms provide various functionalities and utilities, which, according to Hermida (2020), are part of the "continually evolving and dynamic infrastructure for public interaction and expression" (p. 476).

Prior research has introduced three dimensions of technological affordances: Acknowledging (e.g., liking), interacting (e.g., commenting), and redistributing (e.g., retweeting; Larsson, 2015). Through frequent liking, commenting, and retweeting, social media users actively engage in discussions and demonstrate social endorsements (Borah & Xiao, 2018). Akin to Western social networking sites, China's Weibo and WeChat also provide similar affordances (Ge, Gretzel, & Clarke, 2013; Su & Xiao, 2021).

Studies have showed that social media affordance utilization is positively associated with selective exposure (e.g., Hermida et al., 2012; Merten, 2021) because the affordances of social media "convey several cues to guide users in making decisions about which news to consume" (Mukerjee & Yang, 2021, p. 222). Hermida and colleagues (2012) argued that technological affordances lead consumers to "both create and receive personalized social news streams" (p. 821). Merten (2021) suggested that the news content an individual user can be exposed to is influenced by "their interactions" with the news content through "sharing or commenting" (p. 1021). It has also been confirmed by Lee and associates (2019) that frequent sharing and commenting on social media lead to more consumptive selections and political engagement.

Some scholars have argued that many social media users share without really reading (e.g., Gabielkov, Ramachandran, Chaintreau, & Legout, 2016); however, whenever affordance cues are available, even if users only read keywords of news headlines, they can still be directed to positive CNFC. The rationale is twofold. First, the psychological prerequisite of CNFC entails the proactive selection of favored content (Pedersen & Burnett, 2018) while the three dimensions of affordances precisely denote social endorsement of the consumed content (Borah & Xiao, 2018). Second, both frequent utilization of affordances and proactive curation of media content pertain to an active interest in, and efficacious self-control of, the flow of news (Davis, 2017; Lee et al., 2019). Hence, the following hypothesis is postulated:

H2:     Affordance utilization is positively associated with CNFC.

### Friending

Additionally, we are also interested in the association between friending and CNFC. Friending on social media is typically operationalized as the frequencies with which users send out and accept friending requests to develop and manage their networks (Chen & Li, 2017). Managing one's own social network through friending was tied to bridging social capitals, improving psychological well-being, facilitating information sharing, and promoting privacy management (e.g., Chen & Li, 2017; Weeks & Holbert, 2013).

As Davis (2017) has put it, "[O]ne means of consumptive curation is through . . . allocating attention among vast networks" (p. 774). Such attention allocation entails whom an individual determines to *friend* or *follow* in the first place, to preemptively curate in their favorable content while filtering out other content (Davis, 2017; Sibona, 2014). Merten (2021) argued that the antecedents of CNFC include three dimensions: incidentiality, sociality, and nonexclusivity. In terms of "sociality," Merten (2021) suggested that social media users can "add or block contacts so that they might be exposed to more or less news in

their feeds" to determine the extent to which they engage with related content (p. 1022). Hence, our next hypothesis is posited:

*H3:      Friending is positively associated with CNFC.*

### *Media Locus of Control as Mediator*

Beyond the main associations, we are also interested in whether people's locus of control (LOC) over their media environment can serve as a mediator. LOC refers to the "mastery of one's environment" (p. 162), and involves people's understanding of their behavior as under their own control (Rubin, 1993). People with higher LOC usually believe their experiences are contingent on their own behaviors rather than luck, fate, or influential others (Koo, 2009). Scholars have introduced the idea of LOC into the context of media use and coined the concept of media locus of control (MLOC; Ku et al., 2019; Maksl, Ashley, & Craft, 2015), which explains "the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as being in control of news" (Ku et al., 2019, p. 33).

In terms of the two researched platforms, Weibo is seen as China's Twitter as it incorporates almost all functionalities of Twitter (Jiang, Wang, Tsou, & Fu, 2015). WeChat, as an alleged super-app that integrates the features of multiple social media platforms, contains public accounts, moments, top stories, blocking of users, liking, and various other functions (Su & Xiao, 2021). These affordances allow users to "exert some degree of control on their feeds" (Chan, Lee, & Chen, 2021, p. 4).

This study includes MLOC as a mediator to examine whether there are indirect mechanisms. Our construction of the mediation model is deemed appropriate. As Chan, Hu, and Mak (2022) indicated, the use of cross-sectional designs for mediation "reflects the reliance on theory and logical reasoning to justify proposed mediation processes and subsequent findings" (p. 3).

The rationale of each path of our mediation model is specified below. First, news interest, affordance utilization, and friending are all contingent on the subjective initiative and the ability to control media platforms. Specifically, news interest is based on the preference for certain content and avoidance of others, and the satisfaction of interest lies in the autonomous control over the media environment, channels, and resources (Strömbäck et al., 2013; Wonneberger et al., 2011). Affordance utilization is driven by social identification and endorsement, which is also a manifestation of media control (Cabiddu, De Carlo, & Piccoli, 2014). Friending involves a subjective decision on whom to follow, which largely affects what appears in one's feed (Sibona, 2014).

When it comes to the second path, namely the relationship between MLOC and CNFC, scholars suggested that personalization effectiveness was influenced by individuals' LOC, because customization and personalization of online feeds leave users in control of the interaction (Ponsard & McGrenere, 2016).

Additionally, MLOC could also serve as a cognitive heuristic strengthening the main relationships. First, although research has confirmed the links between the three predictors and CNFC, it still is possible that an individual retweeted a post (i.e., affordance utilization) or followed someone (i.e., friending) only

because of emotional burden or social pressure. In this case, MLOC could be a cognitive heuristic that leads to curation as people performing the above behaviors while holding internal beliefs of controlling capabilities usually "function in a more positive, efficacious, and adaptive manner" (Gilmor, 1978, p. 1).

Second, scholars suggested that the use of social media could spur cognition and consciousness such as the sense of mastery and control, which further engenders a self-efficacious feeling (Chen & Chan, 2017); the latter in turn triggers participation (Lee, 2012). Third, in addition to the context of media and communication, scholars also highlighted the mediating role of LOC in contexts such as adaptive behaviors and life satisfaction (Fiori, Brown, Cortina, & Antonucci, 2006; Gilmor, 1978). The integration of the reviewed literature suggests a mediation mechanism. Therefore, we put forth the following hypothesis:

H4:     MLOC would mediate the associations between (a) news interest and CNFC; (b) affordance utilization and CNFC; and (c) friending and CNFC.

### Need for Cognition as Moderator

Need for cognition (NFC) is defined as "a need to structure relevant situations in meaningful, integrated ways" and "to understand and make reasonable the experiential world" (Cohen, Scotland, & Wolfe, 1955, p. 291). Scholars further defined NFC as the "tendency to engage in and enjoy thinking" (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982, p. 116). NFC-oriented people prefer processing information analytically, statistically, and rationally (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982; Xiao, Su, & Lee, 2021).

Decades of studies have lent sufficient evidence to the moderating role of NFC in the context of health crisis, online purchasing, and political knowledge acquisition. Among individuals that consume same news content, the varying levels of NFC could either strengthen or buffer the effects of the content on their responses (Sicilia, Ruiz, & Munuera, 2005; Tsfati & Cappella, 2005). However, limited research on selective exposure has hitherto incorporated NFC as a moderator.

There are two possibilities about NFC's moderating effect. On the one hand, NFC "determines the ability and desire to dispense cognitive efforts" (Sicilia et al., 2005, p. 34), and CNFC precisely requires cognitive efforts because it is a practice requiring not only a crystal-clear idea of *what* to consume but also an understanding of *how* to realize the curation of consumption (Davis, 2017). Therefore, it is possible that CNFC might be more likely among those with higher NFC.

On the other hand, CNFC is essentially a "discriminating way" through which "networked individuals navigate pools of data" (Davis, 2017, p. 774), and it theoretically stems from the selective exposure hypothesis. Therefore, it is also likely that people with higher levels of NFC would instead prefer heterogeneity, and thus would *not* commit to curatorial efforts.

Another factor that adds to our unclarity about NFC's impact is the possibility that many social media users engage in liking, commenting, and sharing without actually reading the post first (e.g., Gabielkov et al., 2016), which is at odds with the prerequisites of NFC. Hence, it is not safe to make a conclusion about whether NFC can weaken or strengthen the proposed associations. Considering these gaps,

we are committed to providing more evidence by incorporating NFC both as an independent variable and as a moderator in this study. The following research questions are asked:

RQ1:    *What is the association between NFC and CNFC?*

RQ2:    *Would NFC moderate the main associations between (a) news interest and CNFC; (b) affordance utilization and CNFC; and (c) friending and CNFC?*

RQ3:    *Would NFC moderate the mediated associations between (a) news interest and CNFC; (b) affordance utilization and CNFC; and (c) friending and CNFC, through MLOC?*

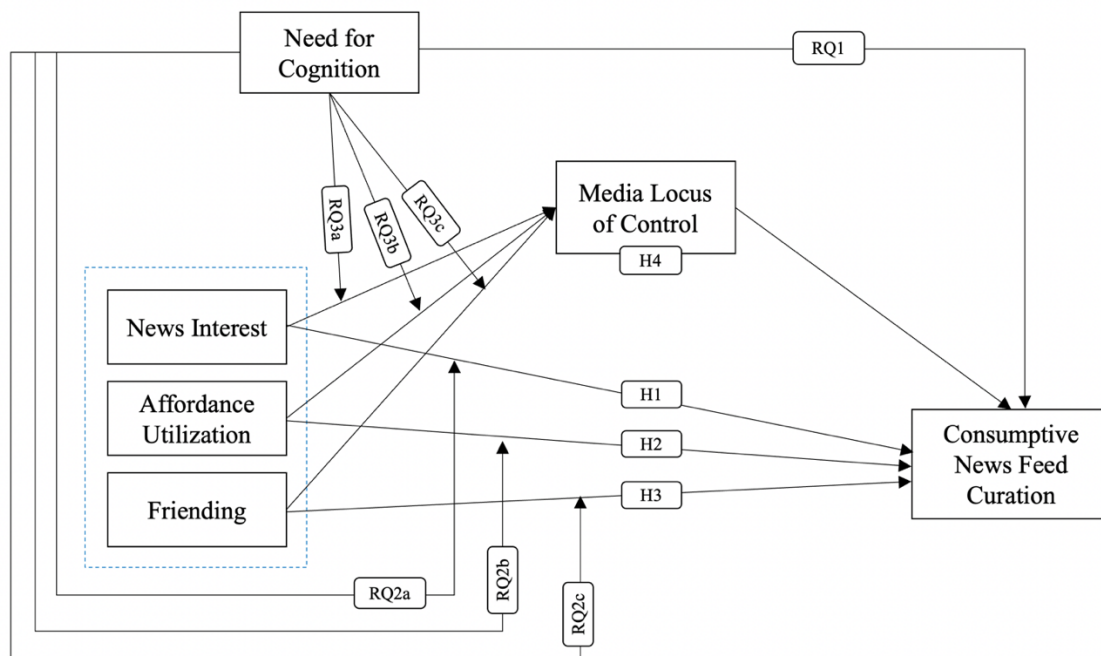Juxtaposing our hypotheses and research questions, we propose the following model (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Proposed moderated mediation model.**

**Methodology**

*Sampling*

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board of a public university in the United States, an online survey was developed via Qualtrics. Data were collected by distributing a Qualtrics questionnaire on the two researched social media platforms. Statistics show that in 2021, Weibo enjoyed 550 million monthly active users, and WeChat had 1.2 billion monthly active users, which accounted for 86% of the

overall Chinese population. Hence, the use of both platforms for sampling arguably guaranteed relatively unbiased data. It merits mentioning that although previous studies argued that the content on Weibo and WeChat was under algorithmic censorship (King et al., 2014), Chinese social media users were largely aware of the existence of censorship and how to circumvent it (e.g., Wang & Shi, 2018). Our sampling procedure is deemed appropriate for the aim of the current research. That being said, such social media regulation can still pose a latent challenge to the sampling validity, and we encourage future researchers to take it into consideration.

Sampling was administered from March 3, 2020, to April 18, 2020. All participants proceeded to the main body of the questionnaire after informed consent. One thousand and eighty-two respondents submitted questionnaires. The researchers used SPSS 22.0 to exclude incomplete samples, yielding 712 valid samples. Among the final samples, 67.8% were reported female ($n$ = 483), and the age ranged between 18 and 65 years ($M$ = 23.26, SD = 5.68). The original questionnaire was in Chinese, and was translated into English by the researchers.

### Measures

*CNFC*

Our measurement of CNFC is adapted from Lee and colleagues' (2019) measurement, namely, the respondents were asked to indicate the frequencies with which they "unfollow/unfriend someone because I don't like what s/he posts," "follow/friend someone because I like what s/he posts," "edit my setting to someone so that I can be directly notified every time s/he has new updates," and "edit my setting to someone so that his/her posts will not appear in my feed although I still follow him/her" (1 = never, 4 = always; $M$ = 1.75, SD = 0.67, $a$ = .77).

*News Interest*

We measured news interest based on the measurement of Lee and colleagues' (2019) study, namely, the respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they are interested in following news on social media (1 = not at all interested, 7 = extremely interested; $M$ = 4.66, SD = 1.71).

*Affordance Utilization*

In alignment with prior research (Larsson, 2015), affordance utilization was assessed by the frequencies with which the respondents "like," "comment," and "retweet" on social media (1 = never, 4 = always; $M$ = 2.04, SD = 0.66, $a$ = .78).

*Friending*

We measured friending using the measurement of Chen and Li (2017), namely, the respondents were asked to indicate the frequencies with which they "send out friending requests to others" and "accept friending requests from others" on social media (1 = never, 4 = always; $M$ = 1.79, SD = 0.71, $R$ = .82).

*MLOC*

As in prior research (Ku et al., 2019; Maksl et al., 2015), respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree with the following statements, "I am in control of the information I get from the news media," "I feel like what happens in my social media feeds is mostly determined by non-accidental happenings," and "if I encountered some information I did not expect to see, I can determine where to obtain the information I wanted" (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree; $M$ = 4.39, SD = 0.73, $a$ = .79).

*NFC*

Consistent with prior literature (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982), respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree with seven statements, including "I would prefer complex to simple problems," "I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking," "Thinking is not my idea of fun," "I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities." Two items were reverse coded (1= strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree; $M$ = 3.54; SD = 0.60, $a$ = .81).

*Exogenous Variables*

In addition to age ($M$ = 23.26, SD = 5.68), gender (female: 67.8%), education (*Median* = 5 [Completed college education], SD = 0.77), and monthly income (*Median* = 1 [<2,000 Chinese Yuan], SD = 1.54), *self-efficacy* and *communicative use of social media* were also controlled to reduce the possibilities both of spurious associations and of respondents not being regular social media users. Self-efficacy was assessed by the extent to which respondents agree that "I think I have a deep understanding of the current global and domestic affairs," "I think I have the ability to engage in national issues," and "I think I have the ability to improve the society" (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree; $M$ = 2.54, SD = 0.84, $a$ = 0.76). As in the study by Chen and Li (2017), communicative use of social media was used to assess the frequencies with which the respondents use social media to keep in touch with "families and friends," "people of similar interests," "people that wouldn't meet otherwise," and "local community" (1 = never, 7 = almost always; $M$ = 4.21, SD = 1.31, $a$ = .81).

### Data Analysis

Hierarchical regression was modeled to address the main associations (H1, H2, H3, and RQ1). Hayes' (2018) PROCESS macro model 4 was conducted to address the mediation mechanism (H4), model 1 was performed to address the moderation (RQ2), and model 7 was run to analyze the moderated mediation (RQ3). As an observed Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) and logistic regression path analysis modeling tool, Hayes' (2018) PROCESS is widely adopted in communication research. It bears mentioning that structural equation modeling (SEM) could be an alternative strategy to provide a cohesive theoretically informed model, too, however, there is lack of consensus on how moderated mediation models can be run by SEM; hence our decision to use PROCESS macro models was more appropriate. Before these analyses, bivariate correlations across all variables were computed and reported in Table 1.

**Table 1. Bivariate Correlation Matrices Across All Variables.**

|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Age | – | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Gender | −.30*** | – | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Education | .42*** | −.35*** | – | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Income | .65*** | −.44*** | .67*** | – | | | | | | | |
| 5. Self-efficacy | .22*** | −.22*** | .41*** | .38*** | – | | | | | | |
| 6. Communicative use of social media | .17*** | −.18*** | .23*** | .29*** | .27*** | – | | | | | |
| 7. News interest | .03 | −.06 | .17*** | .12* | .31*** | .40*** | – | | | | |
| 8. Affordance utilization | .06 | −.04 | .05 | .11** | .28*** | .31*** | .38*** | – | | | |
| 9. Friending | .02 | −.12** | .11** | .18*** | .20*** | .27*** | .22*** | .48*** | – | | |
| 10. MLOC | .07 | .01 | .17*** | .05 | .38*** | .09* | .20*** | .17*** | .10* | – | |
| 11. NFC | .11** | −.16*** | .32*** | .24*** | .38*** | .13*** | .23*** | .17*** | .14*** | .41*** | – |
| 12. CNFC | −.08* | .15** | −.09* | −.11** | .10* | .04 | .25*** | .31*** | .18*** | .26*** | −.12** |

*Note.* *p* < .05, **p* < .01, ***p* < .001.

## Results

H1 proposed a positive association between news interest and CNFC. As shown in Table 2, a positive association was found (*b* = .06, *p* < .001), supporting H1. H2 postulated a positive association between affordance utilization and CNFC. According to the results, a positive association was observed (*b* = .23, *p* < .001), lending support to H2. H3 posited a positive association between friending and CNFC. The results again demonstrated a positive relationship between both factors (*b* = .07, *p* < .05), rendering support to H3.

*Table 2. Hierarchical Regression on CNFC.*

|  | CNFC | MLOC |
|---|---|---|
| *Step 1* | *B* | *B* |
| Age | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| Gender | 0.19** | 0.04 |
| Education | −0.08 | 0.14** |
| Income | −0.04 | −0.02 |
| Self-efficacy | 0.15*** | 0.35*** |
| Communicative use | 0.03 | 0.02 |
| Model $R^2$ | 0.06*** | 0.40*** |
| *F* for $R^2$ | 8.00*** | 20.62*** |
| *Step 2* |  |  |
| Age | 0.01 | 0.01 |
| Gender | 0.18** | 0.04 |
| Education | −0.08 † | 0.15** |
| Income | −0.05 | −0.02 |
| Self-efficacy | 0.05* | 0.33*** |
| Communicative use | −0.04* | −0.01 |
| News interest | 0.06*** | 0.03 |
| Affordances utilization | 0.23*** | 0.03 |
| Friending | 0.07* | 0.05 |
| NFC | −1.07** | 0.36*** |
| Δ$R^2$ | 0.17*** | 0.02** |
| Model $R^2$ | 0.18*** | 0.17** |
| *F* for $R^2$ | 26.87*** | 3.88** |

† $p < .06$ (marginal significance), *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

H4a through H4c posited that MLOC would mediate the associations between the three independent variables and CNFC. As can be seen in Table 3, individuals who reported higher news interest were more likely to have greater MLOC, which in turn facilitated stronger CNFC (indirect effect = 0.0078, Boot*SE* = 0.0034, 95% CI = [0.0019, 0.0153]). Similarly, individuals who reported higher levels of affordance utilization were more likely to have greater MLOC, which in turn was positively tied with CNFC (indirect effect = 0.0160, Boot*SE* = 0.0081, 95% CI = [0.0025, 0.0340]). Likewise, people who reported higher friending were more likely to have greater MLOC, which was in turn positively associated with CNFC (indirect effect = 0.0156, Boot*SE* = 0.0079, 95% CI = [0.0021, 0.0330]). Hence, H4a through 4c were all supported.

*Table 3. Direct and Indirect Effects of the Three Independent Variables on CNFC.*

| Direct and Indirect Paths | B |
|---|---|
| IV1 | |
| News interest → MLOC | 0.05** |
| News interest → CNFC | 0.09*** |
| News interest → MLOC → CNFC | 0.01*** |
| IV2 | |
| Affordance utilization → MLOC | 0.10* |
| Affordance utilization → CNFC | 3.23*** |
| Affordance utilization → MLOC → CNFC | 0.02*** |
| IV3 | |
| Friending → MLOC | 0.10* |
| Friending → CNFC | 0.26*** |
| Friending → MLOC → CNFC | 0.02*** |

*Note.* IV: independent variable. Standardized path coefficients were reported. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

RQ1 asked about the direct association between NFC and CNFC. Regression analysis (see Table 2) indicated a significant negative association between NFC and CNFC ($b = -1.07$, $p < .01$).

RQ2a through RQ2c probed the moderating role of NFC on the three direct associations. For RQ2a, which inquired about the NFC's moderating effect on the association between news interest and CNFC, our results of the PROCESS macro model 1 first showed a significant two-way interaction between news interest and NFC on CNFC ($b = -.16$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [$-0.1983$, $-0.1240$]). That is, among those with higher NFC, the positive association between news interest and CNFC was significant and weaker than those with average and lower NFC (see Figure 2). Furthermore, for RQ2b, there is also a significant interaction between affordance utilization and NFC on CNFC ($b = -.31$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [$-0.4123$, $-0.2082$]). Specifically, among those with higher NFC, the positive association between affordance utilization and CNFC was significant and weaker than those of average and low NFC (see Figure 3). Lastly, RQ2c, a significant moderation effect was also found between friending and NFC on CNFC ($b$ $-.30$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [$-0.4121$, $-0.1914$]). Namely, among those with higher NFC, the positive association between friending and CNFC was significant and weaker (see Figure 4).
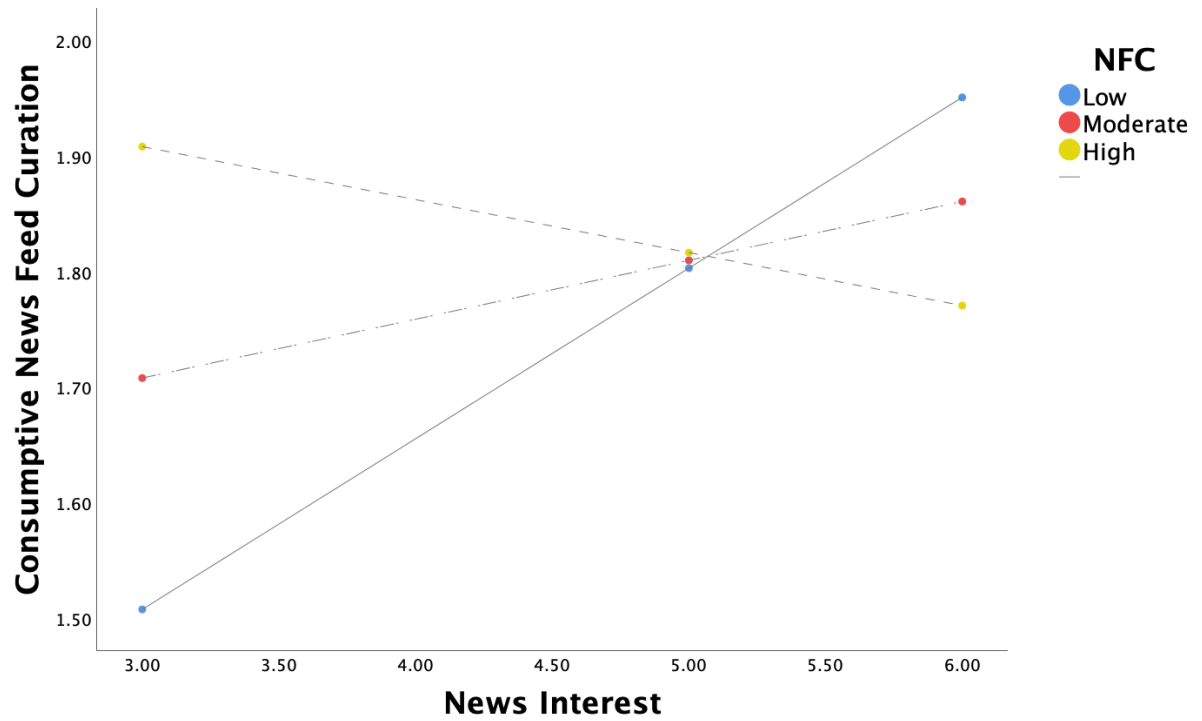
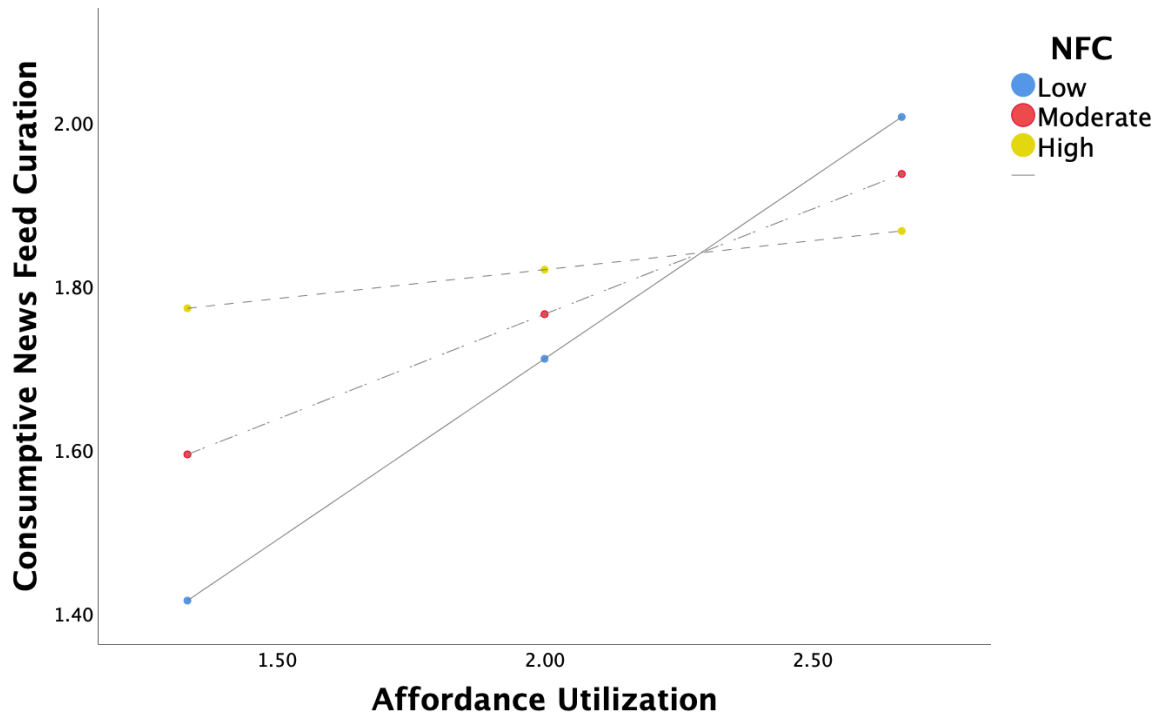*Figure 2. Interaction between news interest and NFC on CNFC.*

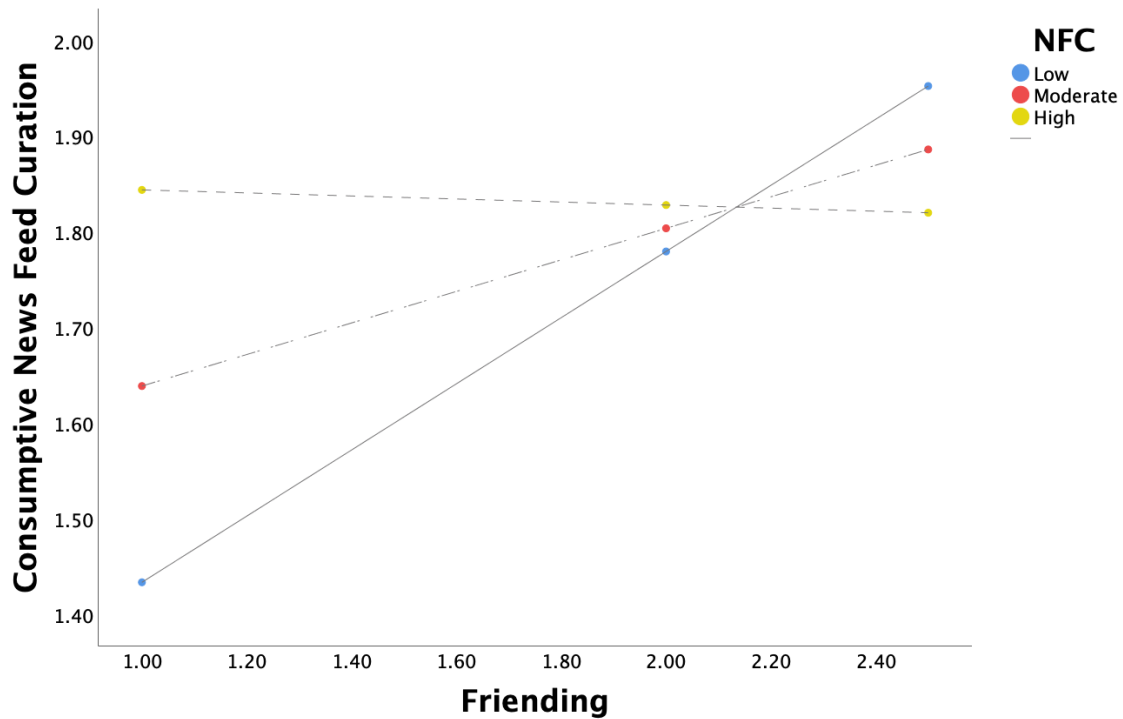*Figure 3. Interaction between affordance utilization and NFC on CNFC.*

***Figure 4. Interaction between friending and NFC on CNFC.***

RQ3a asked whether NFC would moderate the mediated association between news interest and CNFC through MLOC. Given that NFC was a continuous variable, PROCESS macro produced three values based on the mean of this moderator and ±1 SD from the mean. The moderated mediation analysis (model 7) exhibited that the mediated association between news interest and CNFC through MLOC was significantly moderated by NFC (moderated mediation index = −0.0188, *SE* = 0.0058, 95% CI = [−0.0317, −0.0087]), but this only held when NFC was lower or higher than the average by 1 SD (see Table 4). That is, for people with higher NFC, the positive association between news interest and MLOC was significant and weaker than that of individuals with lower NFC (see Figure 5), which was subsequently tied to heightened CNFC.

***Table 4. The Moderated Mediation Effect of News Interest on CNFC.***

|  | MLOC | | | | CNFC | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Predictor | *B* | *SE* | LLCI | ULCI | *B* | *SE* | LLCI | ULCI |
| News interest | 0.42*** | 0.07 | 0.2807 | 0.5584 | 0.09*** | 0.02 | 0.0560 | 0.1148 |
| NFC | 0.86*** | 0.10 | 0.6692 | 1.0550 | | | | |
| News interest × NFC | −0.16*** | 0.02 | −0.1562 | −0.0754 | | | | |
| MLOC | | | | | 0.16*** | 0.04 | 0.0929 | 0.2312 |
| *R*² | 0.28*** | | | | 0.16*** | | | |

Conditional indirect effects of news interest on CNFC at value of NFC

|  | *B* | Boot*SE* | Boot LLCI | Boot ULCI |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| −1 SD | 0.0155 | 0.0053 | 0.0065 | 0.0274 |
| *Mean* | 0.0004 | 0.0024 | −0.0043 | 0.0053 |
| +1 SD | −0.0108 | 0.0042 | −0.0202 | −0.0038 |

*Note.* Bootstrap samples = 5,000.
*B* = unstandardized effect size. LLCI = lower level of the 95% CI. ULCI = upper level of the 95% CI.
Products are mean centred.
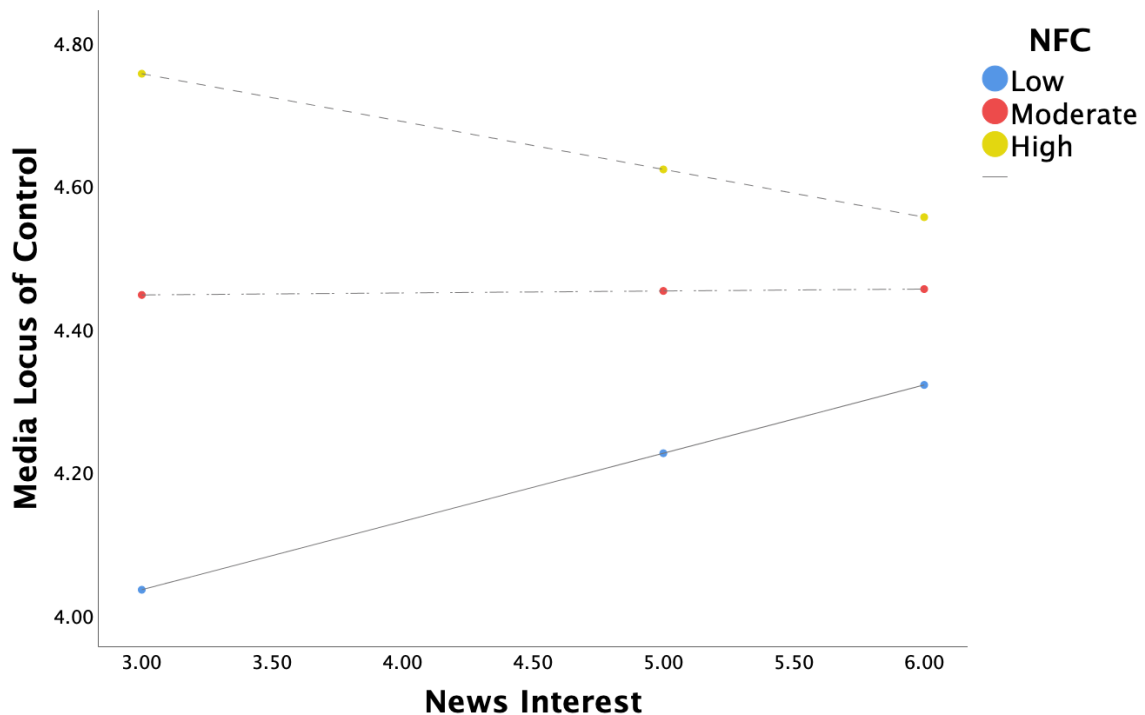*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.



***Figure 5. Interaction between news interest and NFC on MLOC.***

RQ3b inquired whether NFC would moderate the mediated association between affordance utilization and CNFC through MLOC. The same analysis was conducted, and the results of model 7 revealed that the mediated association between affordance utilization and CNFC through MLOC was moderated by NFC (moderated mediation index = −0.0339, $SE$ = 0.0142, 95% CI = [−0.0649, −0.0096]), but this only held when NFC was lower than the average by 1 SD (see Table 5). That is, for people with lower NFC, the indirect effect was significant and stronger (see Figure 6).

*Table 5. The Moderated Mediation Effect of Affordance Utilization on CNFC.*

| Predictor | MLOC | | | | CNFC | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | $B$ | $SE$ | LLCI | ULCI | $B$ | $SE$ | LLCI | ULCI |
| Affordance utilization | 0.81*** | 0.20 | 0.4179 | 1.2098 | 0.32*** | 0.04 | 0.2498 | 0.3956 |
| NFC | 0.79*** | 0.12 | 0.5526 | 1.0179 | | | | |
| Affordance utilization × NFC | −0.22*** | 0.06 | −0.3325 | −0.1057 | | | | |
| MLOC | | | | | 0.15*** | 0.03 | 0.0875 | 0.2218 |
| $R^2$ | 0.26*** | | | | 0.20*** | | | |

Conditional indirect effects of affordance utilization on CNFC at value of NFC

| | $B$ | Boot$SE$ | Boot LLCI | Boot ULCI |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| −1 SD | 0.0310 | 0.0132 | 0.0085 | 0.0598 |
| *Mean* | 0.0039 | 0.0069 | −0.0093 | 0.0183 |
| +1 SD | −0.0165 | 0.0110 | −0.0400 | −0.0002 |

*Note.* Bootstrap samples = 5,000.
$B$ = unstandardized effect size. LLCI = lower level of the 95% CI. ULCI = upper level of the 95% CI. Products are mean centred.
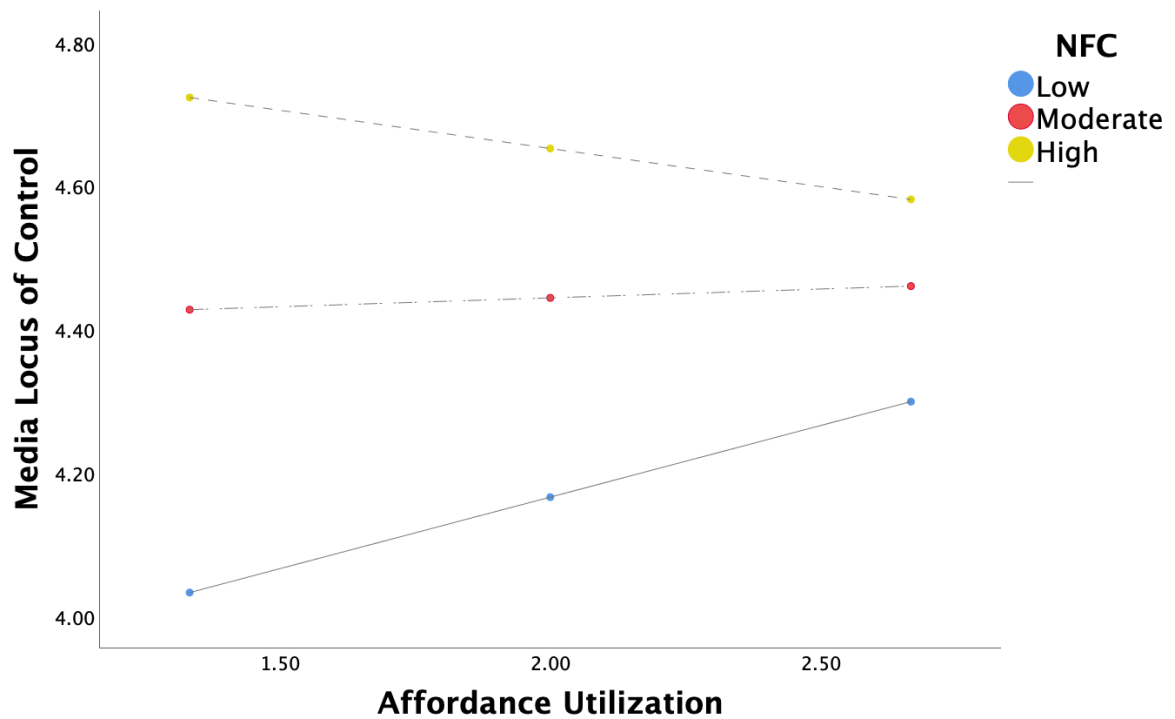*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

**Figure 6. Interaction between affordance utilization and NFC on MLOC.**

RQ3c asked about the moderating effect of NFC on the mediated association between friending and CNFC through MLOC. According to the results, NFC was not a significant moderator for the proposed relationship.

## Discussion

Analyzing a survey sample in China, this study built a moderated mediation model and examined the conditional indirect effects of news interest, affordance utilization, and friending on CNFC, with MLOC as mediator and NFC as moderator. Several findings warrant in-depth discussions.

First, the finding that news interest has a positive effect on CNFC is consistent with Stroud's (2008) argument that "beliefs related to a person's interests or self-identity are more likely to influence exposure decisions" (p. 345). Namely, personally related or interested topics can drive selective exposure. Additionally, this finding also echoes the conclusion that social media users' curatorial practices are premised on "the presence of content that is worth curating" (Lee et al., 2019, p. 12). In general, our finding echoes prior literature about the role of news interest as a "motivational determinant" (Wonneberger et al., 2011, p. 325) of news consumption and participation.

Moreover, our finding about the positive effect of affordance utilization is also consistent with the argument of "curation as participation" (Lee et al., 2019, p. 12). Interactive platforms have constructed high-choice environments wherein users can make relatively free information choices (Strömbäck et al., 2013). Social media algorithms can detect users' interests and orientations through their habitual participation, to recommend more homogeneous content to cater to their needs (Auxier & Vitak, 2019). In both ways, the utilization of affordances could result in curation. Likewise, friending was also positively tied to CNFC. As Davis (2017) has put it, the information glut leaves users to "decide what kinds of content, and from whom, they wish to highlight, ignore, engage, or remove" (p. 773). Deciding whom to follow/friend is a discriminating, though convenient, way in which individuals navigate information on social media.

Beyond the direct effects, our findings also showed that MLOC can function as a mediator. First, the three independent variables were all premised on the belief that the study respondents themselves are in control over their environment, aligned with the conceptualization of LOC (i.e., mastery of one's environment; Rubin, 1993). Through these practices, the extent to which individuals believe that they are, and ought to be, in control over their environment has increased. These observed indirect effects, albeit small, indicated that a small group of users' CNFC behaviors may be indirectly impacted by news interest, affordance utilization, and friending via MLOC. Examining indirect relationships with MLOC and other potential mediators such as as attitude reinforcement (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012) and self-efficacy (Chen, Bai, & Wang, 2019) may further delineate a more granular picture of CNFC in the social media context. Moreover, given that we surveyed the Chinese sample, these findings also imply that although the cultural traditions and media systems are different, the influences of interests, affordance utilization, network management, and LOC over media on consumptive behaviors are similar across China and other contexts.

By systematically examining mediation research design in the past two decades, Chan and associates (2022) showed the inadequacy of acknowledging alternative mediators in previous studies. It warrants noting that in the current study, although MLOC did significantly mediate the main association, it accounted for a relatively small portion of the variance in the present indirect mechanism. Hence, we believe that other potential mediators such as attitude reinforcement (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012) and self-efficacy (Chen et al., 2019) should be examined.

Finally, and more interestingly, we not only found that NFC itself is negatively associated with CNFC but also observed that the associations across both news interest and affordance utilization and CNFC became weaker among those with higher NFC. This implied that people with a stronger preference for processing information logically and statistically are less likely to curate their social media feeds for consumptive purposes. Rather, they might prefer exposing themselves to different viewpoints and information to develop a heterogeneous network. Indeed, as Davis (2017) argued, through CNFC, social media users usually decide to consume what they find "funny," "interesting," and "engaging" while avoiding what they find "offensive," "boring," and "cliché" (p. 775). This would undoubtedly lead to exposure to like-minded information, which consequently intensifies the echo chamber effect (Dylko et al., 2017; Valenza, 2014). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that people with higher NFC do not curate much but, instead, have a higher tolerance for heterogeneity.

Considering the uniqueness of the Chinese context, the observed role of NFC in decreasing CNFC makes even more sense. Specifically, information and agendas from authorities might be intertwined with user-generated content, which in turn makes critical analysis more necessary. And this critical psychological mechanism will make individual users more likely to expose themselves to diverse, heterogeneous, and miscellaneous information, without turning to much curatorial efforts. Future studies could benefit from examining the role of NFC in other contexts to validate our conclusion.

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

This study comes with a few caveats. First, it should be noted that our selection of variables was not based on an existing theoretical framework because of the state of undertheorization of the concept (Davis, 2017). Future scholars are encouraged to extend this vein of research. Second, the operationalization of CNFC we adopted from Lee and colleagues' (2019) work only assesses friending and editing behaviors. Future studies could benefit from measuring more types of behaviors to improve its construct validity. Relatedly, news interest was measured by a single-item (i.e., the only question asking the extent to which the respondents are interested in following news on social media), which should also be improved. Moreover, algorithmic censorship on social media might be a latent factor affecting the results. Future scholars should consider controlling for people's awareness of censorship or making cross-societal comparisons. Furthermore, the definition and participants' understanding of "news" might also be an issue. In today's social media platforms, hard news, mis- and disinformation, commercials framed as news, and propaganda are hard to distinguish. Future scholars should examine their nuances. Last but not least, digital curation has two dimensions, namely consumptive and productive curations (Davis, 2017). The productive dimension, including proactive influence on news feeds that appear on "homepages" and selective self-disclosure, merits further exploration (Ponsard & McGrenere, 2016).

### *Implications*

Despite these limitations, our study has several normative implications. Theoretically, our study is of evidential value as it enriches the literature in digital curation and improves the theory building of selective exposure. Specifically, our findings not only buttress the argument that "selective exposure occurs when people's beliefs guide their media selections" (Stroud, 2008, p. 345) but also show that using engagement-related and network-management-related affordances can also drive such curatorial practice. Therefore, both preexisting beliefs and technologically empowered behaviors are important driving factors of selective exposure.

Moreover, our findings also demonstrate that these effects were attenuated through a preference for statistical and rational information processing, suggesting that selective exposure is indeed based on heuristic cues rather than a critical information processing approach. This finding points to a possible solution to constrain selective exposure, namely, enhancing people's NFC. This can be achieved by increasing recognition and training of media literacy among different age groups and initiating relevant media campaigns (Oh & Kang, 2021; Wang, Pascarella, Nelson Laird, & Ribera, 2015).

Contextually, our use of the Chinese sample also benefits the communication technology research that has long been geographically asymmetrical. In practical terms, first, we encourage social media users to (1) read more diverse news and (2) facilitate their discussion network heterogeneity. These are considered more important in the context of China, wherein censorship is strictly implemented. In addition, we recommend media educators to incorporate NFC training such as in-class workshops in the extant curricular (Xiao et al., 2021).

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