The Dual Impact of Social Media Under Networked Authoritarianism: Social Media Use, Civic Attitudes, and System Support in China

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Although beliefs in the impact of the Internet on democratization did not quickly materialize, recent research on the linkage between social media use and political engagement has reignited optimism about the democratic influence of new media technologies. At the same time, scholars have noted the capability of authoritarian states to exercise effective control of the Internet and manipulate the online public opinion environment. This study argues that social media can promote elements of a civic culture and system support simultaneously where the state practices networked authoritarianism. Analysis of a survey of university students in Guangzhou, China, shows that public affairs communication via social media relates positively and significantly to five elements of a civic culture: political knowledge, social trust, sense of civic duty, internal efficacy, and collective efficacy. Meanwhile, social media–based public affairs communication does not undermine system support; it even has a strong relationship with optimism about the Chinese government.

Keywords: civic culture, system support, social media, networked authoritarianism, China

Since the Internet's popularization, predictions have been made about the capability of digital media to bring about democratic changes. Although scholars have largely abandoned simplistic arguments premised on technological features or the idea of technologies of freedom (Grossman, 1995; Pool, 1983), a new wave of more measured optimism about digital media has arisen with the growth of social media, findings about social media's impact on political engagement (e.g., Boulianne, 2009; Howard & Parks, 2012; Valenzuela, 2013), and the rise of networked social movements (Castells, 2012) in which digital media played a crucial role in mobilization and coordination (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Lee & Chan, 2016; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012).

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Nevertheless, other scholars have long noted that authoritarian governments can control the Internet with multiple techniques, such as content censorship, firewall erection, and legal restrictions of online speech (Hachigian, 2001). Authoritarian governments need to resolve the tension between the urge to embrace new technologies to engage with global capitalism and the desire to maintain power, and their capability in this regard has evolved over time (Hussain & Howard, 2013). MacKinnon (2011) coined the term *networked authoritarianism* to describe how contemporary authoritarian states exercise a nuanced, complex, and proactive form of Internet control. When networked authoritarianism is practiced effectively, social media use may actually generate support for the regime and its preferred ideologies (Hyun, Kim, & Sun, 2014).

This study argues that, with the practice of networked authoritarianism, social media use may indeed have a dual impact on people's political attitudes and beliefs in authoritarian countries (i.e., social media use may promote elements of civic culture and support for the existing system simultaneously). Focusing on young people in a Chinese urban city, this article should contribute to the literature by articulating the reasons why the dual impact of social media exists and empirically examining the dual impact in a single study.

The Concepts of Civic Culture and System Support

In this article, the dual impact of social media refers to the possibility that social media may simultaneously enhance civic culture and support for authoritarian systems. Hence, the concepts of civic culture and system support need to be explicated first.

In their seminal work, Almond and Verba (1963, 1989) conceptualized civic culture as a pluralistic culture emphasizing communication and persuasion, respecting diversity, and yet setting consensus as the ideal. For Almond and Verba, civic culture was historically a condition for the development of British parliamentary democracy. Theoretically, they thus treated civic culture as a cause or precondition for the emergence of stable democracy (Putnam, 1995); that is, democracy could stabilize mainly when individuals have taken up the set of attitudinal and value orientations facilitating the peaceful coliving and regulated competition among people with varying interests and worldviews.

Other theorists contested Almond and Verba's (1963) "cultural perspective" on democratization by arguing that democratic institutions should be seen as the cause rather than the effect of a civic culture. That is, democratic institutions provide the stable social conditions and relatively fair political system that foster a civic culture (Muller & Seligson, 1994). But putting aside the debates on causal order, most researchers would agree that civic culture is a hallmark of a stable democratic system.

Because civic culture involves a range of attitudes, beliefs, and values, it would be helpful to identify its dimensionality. In their original study, Almond and Verba (1963) identified the dimensions of political cognition, citizen obligation, subjective competence, and social relation. Political cognition refers to whether citizens are "aware of and informed about the political system in both its governmental and political aspects" (Almond & Verba, 1963, p. 45). One basic issue in the study of political cognition is how much citizens know about government affairs and the political process.

Besides being informed, citizens are also expected to take part in the making of collective decisions. Civic duty or obligation refers to whether individuals believe that they are responsible for the well-being of their communities and hence would act as a citizen-participant. It reflects people's conception of the role they ought to play in the community.

In addition, whether people would take an active part in civic life can also be affected by whether they feel they can influence political officials and institutions. Subjective competence is the extent to which people see themselves as capable of affecting government decisions. The concept is highly similar to, if not simply the same as, the notion of political efficacy.

Participating in civic and community life entails interactions with others. Hence, yet another factor that could influence people's readiness to engage in civic life is their attitude toward others, especially whether they find their fellow citizens to be trustworthy. Almond and Verba (1963) used Morris Rosenberg's (1956) social trust scale to examine how people see their fellow members of society.

Other scholars have similarly identified civic culture's main dimensions. Inglehart (1988), for instance, defined civic culture as a coherent complex of attitudes and cognitions composed of interpersonal trust, life satisfaction, and support for progressive changes. Putnam (1993) saw civic culture as composed of civic engagement, political equality, "solidarity, trust and tolerance" (p. 88), and social structure of cooperation. Applying the concept in China, Shi (2000) included political knowledge, political interests, efficacy, attitudes toward power and authority, and attitudes toward reform as the core elements of a civic culture.

This study, which is also conducted in China, treats five variables as elements of a civic culture: political knowledge, sense of civic duty, internal efficacy, collective efficacy (i.e., people's perceptions of the capability of citizens as a collective actor to effect social change; see Lee, 2006), and general social trust. These variables correspond to Almond and Verba's (1963) original distinction among political cognition, civic obligation, subjective competence (internal and collective efficacy), and social relations, respectively. Notably, these dimensions do not exhaust the whole landscape of civic culture, but they are the persistent and durable characteristics of a civic culture in previous studies.

Meanwhile, system support refers to the degree to which people exhibit a general preference for the existing configuration of political institutions. In political science, Easton (1975) made the classic distinction between diffuse and specific support. Specific support refers to support for specific policies, incumbent officers or political outcomes. By assuming that members have sufficient political awareness and cognition to make political assessment, specific support is grounded on rational calculus of to what extent perceived outputs from the authority match one's demands.

Diffuse support refers to attachment to political objects for their own sake. It refers to the general evaluation of the political system as a whole, regardless of the immediate outputs or performance, and often arises from socialization and direct experience. Although diffuse support may be developed through the accumulation of people's satisfaction with specific policies over time, once developed, diffuse support is expected to be "not easily dislodged because of current dissatisfaction with what the

government does" (Easton, 1975, p. 445). As diffuse support is more durable and fundamental; it carries higher degrees of theoretical significance when researchers have to assess and explain the stability and legitimacy of a political system (Gibson & Caldeira, 1992; Muller, Jukam, & Seligson, 1982). Therefore, system support is hereby conceptualized as a form of diffuse support and measured by people's generalized attitudes toward central state institutions and government policies. People's attitudes toward specific policy outcomes or specific government leaders are not treated as pertinent to system support.

Diffuse support is typically measured in terms of trust in government and the presence of trust means people believe that "the system can be counted on to provide equitable outcome" (Muller et al., 1982, p. 241). Conceptually, trust in government is an evaluation of "whether political authorities and institutions are performing in accordance with normative expectation held by the public" (Listhaug, Klingemann, & Fuchs, 1995, p. 358). It can encourage acceptance of policy decisions and compliance with laws and regulations (Tyler, 1998). Thus, this study also uses trust in party-state institutions as an indicator of system support.

Evaluation of the political system also extends to the quality of policies (Stokes, 1962). People satisfied with government policies tend to be more supportive of the political system (Mishler & Rose, 2001). In contrast, the failure of policies to meet needs and expectations would result in the erosion of political legitimacy (Easton, 1975). As diffuse support is not attached to specific policy made by authorities, generalized policy evaluation rather than evaluation of specific policies is regarded as an indicator of system support.

Besides policy evaluation and trust, political efficacy has also been used by researchers as a measure of diffuse support (Iyengar, 1980). More precisely, political efficacy is conventionally differentiated into internal (i.e., people's beliefs in their individual capabilities to understand and/or participate in politics) and external efficacy (i.e., people's beliefs about the general responsiveness of governmental institutions to citizen demands; Balch, 1974). Although internal efficacy is treated as an element of civic culture, as noted above, external efficacy is the dimension pertinent to system support.

Finally, people's support for a political system may be reflected in not only how they evaluate the present status of the system but also how they perceive the future. This future orientation may be particularly important for developing countries such as China, where the legitimacy of the government is likely to be dependent on its capability to deliver continual social development and economic growth (Heberer & Schubert, 2008). Hence, we include optimism about the government as a fourth indicator of system support.

Networked Authoritarianism and the Impact of Social Media

Although authoritarian governments have tried to tame the Internet in various ways, networked authoritarianism refers to an approach of Internet control arising in the past decade. It is the result of "when an authoritarian regime embraces and adjusts to the inevitable changes brought by digital communications" (MacKinnon, 2011, p. 33). Networked authoritarianism does not attempt to exercise undifferentiated and complete control of digital media. Countries practicing networked authoritarianism do

allow people to enjoy a greater degree of freedom of communication than before. But such an increased degree of freedom is still circumscribed within a system of information control, censorship, and proactive public opinion manipulation.

To elaborate, people within many contemporary authoritarian countries, including China, are endowed with the capability to call attention to social problems and injustices through the Internet. In China, the Internet has become the space through which a cacophony of voices is expressed, including social criticisms and grievances (Yang, 2009). Social incidents signifying the severity of inequality and/or the arrogance of power, controversies surrounding city-level policies, and, occasionally, even official corruption cases could arouse fervent online debates (Cai, 2010; Qiang, 2011). Such intensive online expressions of grievances could sometimes force governmental authorities to respond.

Certainly, it does not mean that citizens would be allowed to express their anger on all matters, at all times, and against all targets. The state retains tight control of the online and offline information environment. In China, Deibert, Palfrey, Rohozinski, Zittrain, and Haraszti (2010) categorized the government's tactics into three "generations." The first generation focuses on Internet filtering and Internet-café surveillance. The second generation focuses on the construction of a legal environment legitimizing information control. The latest generation further intrudes into the online environment through more proactive means, such as systematic surveillance and state-sponsored information campaigns. Broadly speaking, the current Chinese government uses all the above tactics together with others, such as cyberattacks, device and network controls, domain-name controls, localized disconnection and restriction, and astroturfing (Bamman, O'Connor, & Smith, 2012). The result is a highly sophisticated form of Internet policing.

One implication of the need to allow a certain degree of citizen expression and embrace of the other utilities of the Internet while maintaining tight political control is that authoritarian states come to implement a kind of "time, place, and manner" management of digital communications. That is, the degree of freedom of expression varies across social groups, time periods, issue topics, online spaces, and whether online expression may be connected to offline mobilization (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). For instance, although foreign social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter are banned, Chinese citizens can quite easily access the banned sites if they have access to virtual private networks linking them to the outside world.[1] People with different levels of technical know-how, economic capital, and international connections enjoy different levels of freedom of communication.

Various scholars have noted that the approach of networked authoritarianism has achieved significant "success" (MacKinnon, 2011; Pearce & Kendzior, 2012). For example, detention of online activists in China has compartmentalized online public opinions and enforced self-censorship among individuals and Internet content providers. In addition, the vented anger does not necessarily bring about sustained social activism. As the criticisms and complaints are restricted to specific topics, they can be

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[1] China has tolerated the proliferation of virtual private networks (VPN) for a long time. However, in January 2015, the Chinese government started to disrupt a number of widely used VPN services. Attacks on VPNs has continued and signifies a most recent turn toward tighter Internet control in China.

safety valves, allowing people's anger to be diffused and diverting attention away from underlying systemic issues. The overall result can be the creation of an image of governmental responsiveness (Sullivan, 2014) and the bolstering of regime legitimacy (He & Warren, 2011).

It follows from the above description that, under networked authoritarianism, public affairs communication via social media can bolster elements of civic culture and system support simultaneously. Here, the term *public affairs communication* refers broadly to communication about issues and policies concerning the interests of the public. It is in contrast with communications about private lives, leisure activities, and/or entertainment. Public affairs communication can involve news acquisition and sharing, writing or reading commentaries on social affairs, discussing with others about politics, and so on. Public and private communications could overlap in reality. For this study, however, the important point is that there is a general distinction between public and private matters, and one's knowledge, internal efficacy, and sense of duty are likely to be enhanced as people communicate about public affairs more frequently. And to the extent that public affairs information on the Internet is largely proregime because of the practice of networked authoritarianism, public affairs communication via social media is likely to relate positively to system support.

Meanwhile, social media can be defined as Web-based services that allow individuals to construct profiles and share connections with others within a bounded system (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). The term "encompasses social network and micro-blogging sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), peer production communities (e.g., Wikipedia), [and] content sharing and discussion forums (e.g., Reddit)" (Ellison & Vitak, 2015, p. 205). Compared to traditional media, social media are characterized by higher levels of interactivity, navigability, and modality (Sundar, Jia, Waddell, & Huang, 2015), the abundance of informational resources, and the affordance for people to network with each other. Public affairs communications via social media are particularly likely to enhance elements of civic culture because people are not only passive receivers of information in social media. Indeed, past studies have shown that public affairs communication via social media can enhance political knowledge and efficacy and spur participation (e.g., Bode, 2016; Boulianne, 2015).

Studies in China have also shown the connections between social media use and civic culture and political participation (e.g., Wei, 2013). But when the government succeeds in controlling the online information environment and proactively shaping the online opinion climate, increased levels of participation do not entail calls for democratization. Empirically, Hyun et al. (2014) have shown that social media use in China was associated with higher levels of nationalism, an ideology favored by the current regime. Hyun and Kim (2015) further showed that using social media to get news is positively associated with online expression, which in turn has both direct and indirect positive influence on system-supporting attitudes.

Hypotheses and Research Question

To recapitulate, this study aims to examine the influence of social media on civic culture and system support under networked authoritarianism. Civic culture is represented by political knowledge, social trust, collective efficacy, internal efficacy, and sense of civic duty. System support is indicated by

external efficacy, generalized policy evaluation, trust in party-state institutions, and optimism about the government. Social media use is believed to relate positively to both elements of civic culture and indicators of system support.

Following past research on the impact of social media, social media use can be understood as involving multiple dimensions, such as time spent, network size, other online network characteristics, and types of contents being communicated (Tang & Lee, 2013). This study, however, focuses on public affairs communication (PAC) via social media as the main independent variable. This is in line with extant research showing that political use of social media is the most likely to relate to other political attitudes and behavior (e.g., Tang & Lee, 2013). Some of the other dimensions of social media use, such as time spent and network size, will be included as controls to ascertain the specificity of the impact of public affairs communication via social media. The main hypotheses are thus stated as follows:

H1a: *PAC via social media is positively related to political knowledge.*

H1b: *PAC via social media is positively related to social trust.*

H1c: *PAC via social media is positively related to collective efficacy.*

H1d: *PAC via social media is positively related to internal efficacy.*

H1e: *PAC via social media is positively related to sense of civic duty.*

H2a: *PAC via social media is positively related to external efficacy.*

H2b: *PAC via social media is positively related to generalized policy evaluation.*

H2c: *PAC via social media is positively related to trust in party-state institutions.*

H2d: *PAC via social media is positively related to optimism about the government.*

Beyond the main effects hypotheses, this study also explores if the impact of social media on young people in China would vary according to whether they come from urban cities or rural societies. The urban–rural distinction is significant in many respects, as urbanites have generally higher levels of income and education (Sicular, Ximing, Gustafsson, & Shi, 2007). Urban societies have higher levels of technological development (Harwit, 2004) and host more and larger civic associations (Pei, 1998). Therefore, people growing up in an urban setting are likely to be more familiar with using social media to communicate about public affairs and with progressive ideas such as civil society and human rights. However, as urbanites enjoy higher levels of income and other resources, they arguably have vested interests in the existing system (Lu & Chen, 2004). Hence, they might also support the existing regime to larger extents. Given the general significance of the urban–rural divide in China, this study puts forward an exploratory research question:

Q1:   *Does the impact of PAC via social media on civic culture and system support vary across urbanites and rural residents?*

Method and Data

The data analyzed below came from a survey of university students in Guangzhou, China, conducted in November 2014. Ten universities located in a "university town"—an area developed by the city government to host the major universities in the city—were included in the study. Dorm rooms were used as the basis for sampling because almost all students at the universities lived in dormitories. With a target of 900 respondents, different numbers of dorm rooms and target responses were calculated and selected for each of the 10 universities based on the proportion of students at each university relative to the overall total number of students. A total of 225 dorm rooms (because there are four students in each room) were systematically sampled based on gender, location, and target sample size for each university. Research assistants visited the selected dorm rooms. If a dorm room was empty during the visit, the research assistant visited the next dorm room as replacement. In the end, a total of 897 valid responses were obtained. All respondents were assured that their answers are anonymous. Although participation was voluntary, each participant got 5 renminbi upon completing the survey. The assistants reported response rates of higher than 90%.

Public affairs communication via social media constitutes the main independent variable. The questionnaire asked respondents to name up to three of their most frequently used social media sites. Regarding each of the first two sites, the respondents were asked to report, by means of a 4-point scale (1 = *never* to 4 = *frequently*): (1) how frequently they shared information about social affairs via the site, (2) how frequently they shared information about political issues via the site, (3) how frequently their friends connected via the site shared contents about social affairs, and (4) how frequently their friends connected via the site shared contents about political issues. The questions did not presume the respondents to make sharp distinctions between social and political affairs—the items were designed to generate a multiple-items index so that the respondents' level of public affairs communication could be captured more accurately. Information sharing, similarly, is broadly defined and could include forwarding news or other public affairs information to others, reposting messages, or simply sharing one's original contents. Besides, because of space limitations in the questionnaire, we did not break down "public affairs" into a wide range of specific issues. We relied on the respondents sharing a "common sense" of what public affairs refers to. But given the results, we believe that the items captured what they were expected to capture. The answers to the eight items (two sites × four items) were averaged to form the index (α = .83, M = 2.20, SD = 0.61).

Political knowledge was measured by a set of five items asking the respondents to name (1) the current Premier of the People's Republic of China (PRC), (2) the largest "democratic political party" in China[2] in terms of membership, (3) the current Chairman of the National People's Congress (NPC), (4) the frequency of general elections for the NPC, and (5) the number of members of the Politburo Standing Committee of the PRC. Responses were scored as either correct (1) or incorrect (0). An index was created by summing the five items (α = .60, M = 1.57, SD = 1.21).

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[2] China has eight democratic political parties, including China Democratic League and Jiusan Society. These parties are supposed to signify and foster internal democracy within the Communist system. In reality, these parties accept the leadership of and are subservient to the CCP.

Social trust was measured by respondents' agreement, registered by a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree,* with two statements: (1) in China, most people are trustworthy, and (2) in China, the majority of people are willing to help others most of the time ($r = .59$, $M = 2.71$, $SD = 0.61$).

Internal efficacy was constructed by two 4-point scaled statements (1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*) similar to Niemi, Craig, and Mattei's (1991) measurement: (1) I have enough knowledge to participate in political and public affairs, and (2) I am better informed about politics and government than other people ($r = .58$, $M = 2.21$, $SD = 0.59$).

Collective efficacy was, following Lee (2006), the average of respondents' agreement with two 4-point scaled statements (1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*): (1) collective actions of citizens have huge influence on public affairs, and (2) the collective actions of citizens can improve society ($r = .42$, $M = 2.79$, $SD = 0.56$).

Sense of civic duty was measured as the average of respondents' agreement, expressed by the same 4-point scale, with (1) it is important to participate in activities that could improve my community, and (2) citizens have a duty to pay attention to and engage in public affairs ($r = .45$, $M = 3.07$, $SD = 0.51$).

Generalized policy evaluation was the average of the respondents' agreement, expressed with the same 4-point scale, with (1) the majority of government policies are serving the interests of society, and (2) the government is performing well under current circumstances ($r = .56$, $M = 2.77$, $SD = 0.58$).

External efficacy was the average of the respondents' agreement, expressed with the same 4-point scale, with (1) public officials don't care much about what people like me think, and (2) people like me don't have any say about what the government does. The items were reverse-coded so that higher scores represent higher levels of external efficacy ($r = .48$, $M = 2.31$, $SD = 0.65$).

Trust in party-state institutions was the average of the respondents' trust, measured by a 4-point scale (1 = *totally distrust* to 4 = *totally trust*), in (1) the central government, (2) the Chinese Communist Party, and (3) the NPC ($\alpha = .86$, $M = 3.05$, $SD = .63$).

Optimism about the government was measured by an item embedded in a set of items asking the respondents whether, overall, they felt optimistic, angry, anxious, and fearful about the government. The answers were registered with a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*. The single item on feeling optimistic is used to represent optimism about the government ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 0.74$).

Demographics and control variables include gender, age, self-estimated family socioeconomic status, Communist Party membership, and a dichotomous variable representing whether the respondent came from an urban city or rural areas (for tackling Q1). News media exposure (average of how frequently the respondents received news from five media sources), time spent on social media (total time

spent per day using the two most frequently used social media sites), and social media network size (the sum of network size on the two most frequently used social media sites) are controlled, because traditional media consumption and sheer time spent on social media may also enhance the chances of encountering public affairs information, while having more social connections online may also mean a wider range of sources of viewpoints and discussion partners. But these are only control variables used to ascertain if the main independent variable—public affairs communication via social media—indeed has unique relationships with the dependent variables. Details of operationalization are omitted due to space concern.

Analysis and Findings

Before tackling the hypotheses, Table 1 shows the correlations among the two sets of dependent variables. The findings suggest that the elements of civic culture and the indicators of system support are generally positively correlated. The exceptions are political knowledge and internal efficacy. Political knowledge exhibits no relationship with the indicators of system support, while internal efficacy negatively correlates to external efficacy.

These findings are not difficult to understand. Given an existing political system, a sense of civic duty would essentially mean duties as defined by the existing system, while both social trust and trust in the party-state institutions are likely to draw upon the same generalized propensity to trust other entities. A sense that oneself is capable of understanding politics, however, is likely to relate to critical and independent thinking, and hence may introduce critical views toward the existing system.

In any case, given the presence of some correlations among the two sets of dependent variables, in the following analysis, system support variables would be controlled when examining the relationship between social media use and elements of civic culture, and vice versa. This would provide a more robust examination of whether public affairs communication via social media relates to the two sets of dependent variables.

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the main hypotheses. Table 2 summarizes the findings regarding civic culture. The demographics and controls have only sporadic relationships with the dependent variables. Males have more political knowledge than do females, and urbanites exhibit higher levels of collective efficacy. Older students and male students are more confident about their capability to participate in public affairs. News exposure relates positively and significantly only to sense of civic duty and internal efficacy.

Table 1. Correlations Among the Dependent Variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Political knowledge	---							
Social trust	.06	---						
Collective efficacy	.10**	.21***	---					
Internal efficacy	.11**	.17***	.14***	---				
Civic duty	.12***	.18***	.26***	.10**	---			
External efficacy	.01	.10**	.06	-.07*	.03	---		
Generalized policy evaluation	.02	.36***	.24***	.05	.17***	.16***	---	
Trust in party-state institutions	.04	.14***	.11**	-.04	.16***	.09**	.45***	---
Optimism about the gov't	.04	.25***	.11**	.01	.18***	.14***	.51***	.38***

Note. Entries are Pearson correlation coefficients. *N*s range from 781 to 877.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Consistent with the extant literature on social media's impact on political attitudes and behavior, sheer time spent using social media does not significantly relate to any of the dependent variables. Meanwhile, social media network size relates significantly to political knowledge and internal efficacy. The fact that all other variables have only inconsistent and sporadic relationships with the dependent variables makes the finding regarding public affairs communication via social media particularly impressive. Public affairs communication via social media significantly relates to all five dependent variables. Consistent with *H1a* to *H1e*, respondents who engage in public affairs communication more frequently via social media exhibit higher levels of political knowledge and social trust, see citizens' collective actions as more efficacious, and have a stronger sense of internal efficacy and civic duty.

Table 3 summarizes the results of the same regression model used to predict the indicators of system support. Similar to Table 2, the control variables only have sporadic relationships with the dependent variables. Younger respondents exhibit higher levels of external efficacy. Moreover, younger respondents, respondents from families with higher socioeconomic status, and respondents from rural backgrounds have more trust in the party-state institutions. Understandably, Communist Party members tend to show a higher level of trust in these institutions, but they are not more optimistic about the government or have higher levels of external efficacy. In contrast, news exposure is quite consistently related to stronger system support: frequent new consumers have higher levels of trust in party-state institutions, are more optimistic about the government, and have more positive evaluations of government policies in general.

Table 2. Predicting Elements of Civic Culture.

	Political knowledge	Social trust	Collective efficacy	Internal efficacy	Civic duty
Demographics					
Gender	.08*	-.06	.02	.12***	-.02
Age	.07	.03	.09*	.11**	.05
Family SES	-.06	-.04	.03	.06	-.06
Party membership	.05	.01	-.05	.01	.05
Urbanite	.04	.02	.10**	-.00	.03
News exposure	.06	-.04	.03	.11**	.07*
System support					
External efficacy	.01	.04	.03	-.06	.00
Generalized policy evaluation	-.03	.31***	.23***	.07	.07
Trust in party-state institutions	.06	-.01	.03	-.05	.10*
Optimism about the government	.01	.08*	-.04	-.06	.08*
Social media variables					
SNS time	.04	.05	.00	-.02	.01
SNS network size	.12**	-.01	-.00	.09*	.02
SNS PA communication	.08*	.07*	.09**	.23***	.08*
Adjusted R^2	.039***	.132***	.073***	.123***	.055***

Note. Entries are standardized regression coefficients. Missing values are replaced by means. N = 897.
p < .0. **p* < .01. ***p* < .001.

Time spent using social media only relates negatively to external efficacy, and social media network size does not relate to the dependent variables at all. Public affairs communication via social media also does not relate significantly to all the dependent variables. But it has a strongly positive relationship with optimism about the government. *H2d* is supported. However, it also has a weak but significant negative relationship with trust in party-state institutions. When subjected to a MANOVA analysis, public affairs communication via social media does have a significant influence on the four dependent variables considered together (λ = 0.95, F = 8.24, p < .001). But the regression analysis shows that the relationship between public affairs communication via social media and system support is more complicated than the hypotheses predict.

Comparing Tables 2 and 3, the findings suggest that public affairs communication via social media has more consistent relationships with elements of civic culture than with system support. However, this study does not aim at arguing that social media's impact on civic culture and system support are equally strong. The question is whether social media can promote elements of civic culture and system support simultaneously. The findings show that civic culture and system support at least do not contradict each other, and social media use indeed has a highly significant positive impact on one indicator of system support.

Table 3. Predicting System Support.

	External efficacy	Generalized policy evaluation	Trust in party-state institutions	Optimism about the gov't
Demographics				
Gender	-.03	.04	.06	.01
Age	-.08*	-.06	-.12***	-.04
Family SES	.06	.03	.11**	.07*
Party membership	.03	.06	.07*	.03
Urbanite	.01	-.05	-.14***	-.05
News exposure	-.01	.07*	.13***	.07*
Civic culture variables				
Political knowledge	.01	-.03	.03	-.00
Social trust	.10**	.32***	.13***	.22***
Collective efficacy	.05	.17***	.07*	.02
Internal efficacy	-.09*	-.06	-.08*	-.10**
Civic duty	.01	.06	.12**	.11**
Social media variables				
SNS time	-.07*	-.01	-.05	-.03
SNS network size	.03	.00	.02	.00
SNS PA communication	.03	.04	-.09*	.15***
Adjusted R^2	.023**	.160***	.090***	.100***

Note. Entries are standardized regression coefficients. Missing values are replaced by means. N = 897. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

We can then turn to tackle *Q1*, which asks whether the impact of social media varies between respondents with rural and urban background. The question was first tackled through the addition of an interaction term between the dichotomous "urbanite" variable and public affairs communication via social media into the regression model. The top row in Table 4 shows the coefficients of the interaction term. Two coefficients—for political knowledge and sense of civic duty—are statistically significant. Because public affairs communication via social media is positively related to political knowledge and sense of civic duty, the negative interaction term means that the positive relationship is weaker among the urbanites.

To further illustrate the findings, the regression analyses in Tables 2 and 3, after removing the urbanite variable, were reconducted among respondents from urban and rural background separately. The bottom rows of Table 4 show the coefficients of public affairs communication via social media in the split-sample analysis. Most importantly, social media communication has a statistically significant coefficient in seven of the nine columns for respondents of rural background. In other words, the pattern of findings shown in Tables 2 and 3 remain applicable for respondents from rural backgrounds. In contrast, among respondents of urban backgrounds, public affairs communication via social media significantly predicts only internal efficacy and optimism about the government. Taken together, the results in Table 4 strongly suggests that the impact of social media use on elements of civic culture is stronger and more consistent among respondents from rural areas, while the impact of social media on system support is mixed for both groups of respondents.

Table 4. Impact of Social Media Among Respondents With Urban Versus Rural Background.

	Knowledge	Social trust	Collective efficacy	Internal efficacy	Civic duty	External efficacy	Gen. policy evaluation	Trust in party-state	Optimism about gov't.
				Dependent Variable					
Urban X SNS PAC	-.08*	-.04	.00	.04	-.07*	-.02	.01	.04	.00
Effect of SNS PAC									
Urbanites	.02	.03	.06	.25***	.02	.02	.06	-.06	.17***
Rural residents	.15**	.10*	.14**	.20***	.15**	.05	.00	-.12*	.13*

Note. Entries in the first row are standardized regression coefficients for the interaction term when added into the regression model presented in Tables 2 and 3. Entries in the two bottom roles are standardized regression coefficients for the SNS public affair communication variable in the two subsamples when split-sample analysis was conducted. *N*s = 897, 465, and 418 for the whole sample, the urbanite subsample, and the rural residents subsample, respectively.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Conclusion

This study examines the dual political impact of social media use in China. The premise is that authoritarian countries cannot totally abandon new media technologies if they have to engage with the global community and achieve economic and social development, but they would also use the Internet to bolster regime legitimacy and maintain social stability, instead of embracing a democratic ideal and pushing forward political reform. Under the approach of networked authoritarianism (MacKinnon, 2011), the key to maintaining legitimacy and stability is not total suppression of speech and criticisms online; rather, by allowing limited degrees of freedom of communication to specific groups of people and on specific issues, social grievances are more likely to be diffused and dispersed.

Against this background, this study shows that, among university students in Guangzhou, China, public affairs communication via social media does relate to elements of civic culture consistently and a higher level of optimism toward the government, though not on all indicators of system support. The empirical findings can be considered as both replicating and extending the results in the extant literature. Past research has already shown that social media use is related to civic engagement in China (Wei, 2013), whereas other studies have demonstrated the relationship between social media use and nationalism and support for the current political economic system (Hyun & Kim, 2015; Hyun et al., 2014). This study shows that social media's impact on civic culture goes beyond the notion of participation—it has positive relationships with political knowledge, social trust, internal efficacy, collective efficacy, and sense of civic duty.

This study is also, to the authors' knowledge, the first about China that examines the impact of social media on elements of civic culture and support for the existing system simultaneously. Although the findings regarding system support are not as clear-cut as those in some previous studies, the overall pattern of findings suggests the compatibility between civic culture and system support in the Chinese context. Although there is no consistent positive linkage between public affairs communication via social media and system support, social media communication at least does not undermine the current political system by generating more critical attitudes, as in the case of more liberal societies, such as Hong Kong (e.g., Lee, So, & Leung, 2015). This study thus strengthens the evidentiary basis for the discussion of the effectiveness and implications of networked authoritarianism.

The positive impact of social media use on the elements of civic culture shows that, even with only restricted degrees of freedom to communicate on specific matters, such online political communication and civic engagement can still foster people's sense of efficacy and civic duty. Through talking to others about social issues, university students can acquire a sense that they are responsible for the well-being of their communities and that they are capable, when networked with others, to effect changes. At the same time, through discussing with numerous others, young people could also notice other people's concerns about the society and thus come to the conclusion that their fellow citizens are not all selfish and manipulative people waiting to take advantage of others. To the extent that civic culture is both an empirical as well as a normative concept (i.e., seen as normatively desirable), the growth of elements of civic culture can be seen as a desirable development in China.

Nevertheless, the findings also remind us about the problem of jumping to conclusions and talking about the democratizing potential of social media just because social media use is related to civic engagement. It is not to deny that digital media may facilitate social mobilization for the purposes of political change. But there is nothing inevitable in the relationships among social media, civic culture, and democratization. Theoretically, even if we agree with Almond and Verba's (1963, 1989) original argument that civic culture is a precondition for a stable democracy, a precondition is not necessarily a sufficient condition or an effective cause that would lead to the outcome.

What this study has not yet achieved is a more integrative theorization of the relationship between system support and elements of civic culture. The analysis demonstrates the generally positive relationships between the two sets of factors, as well as the relationship between social media use and each set of factors. But future studies may attempt to theorize whether and how social media may shape not only civic culture and system support separately but also how the two relate to each other.

Another possible way to move forward is to fall back on Easton's (1975) classic distinction between specific and diffuse support. With this distinction, one might argue that the approach of networked authoritarianism could allow the undermining of specific support but not the undermining of diffuse support. That is, netizens can question the legitimacy and appropriateness of specific policies and governmental actions, but not the system itself. Future research may further examine the possibility that public affairs communication via social media may at times relate to more negative evaluations of specific policies or even specific government officials who had engaged in questionable conduct, and yet at the same time relate to more positive evaluations of the existing system.

Although conventional news media is not the focus of this article, it is worth highlighting the point that news exposure seems to have less consistent relationship with civic culture and yet more consistent relationship with system support in the analysis. These findings are understandable, as the mainstream media in China are under heavy and direct state control. When compared with social media, mainstream news media do not provide the possibilities of interactions, discussions, and networking. Hence, its influence on civic culture is likely to be weaker. However, more direct state control also means that mainstream media contents are likely to be even more one-sidedly progovernment, thus resulting in more consistent relationship with system support.

Looking at the findings in another way, one might note that neither social media nor mainstream media have a very strong impact on the dependent variables. But this is not surprising. The attitudes and values constituting civic culture and system support are basic orientations that people acquire through long-term cultivation and socialization. For this study, the important point is that media communications can have independent impact on such factors.

It should be noted that this study focuses on university students in Guangzhou, the center of the Guangdong Province bordering Hong Kong and where a few of the most daring media outlets in China are located. In other words, the study focuses on a group of young, educated citizens located in a place supposed to be relatively receptive to liberal progressive ideas from the West. On the one hand, the focus on this specific group of young people is a limitation of this study. Future research should examine the

generalizability of the findings to the broader population. But on the other hand, the fact that the current pattern of findings is applicable to this group of citizens is highly significant. It is suggestive of the effectiveness of networked authoritarianism in that the relationship between social media use and optimism about the government exists even among people supposedly having the highest "critical potential" due to education, digital skills, and exposure to the outside world.

Another finding of the study is that the impact of public affairs communication via social media on elements of civic culture is somewhat stronger among students from rural societies. As noted, rural residents have generally smaller amounts of social resources and weaker information access. This is because students from rural societies have to come to urban cities to study. They may not be familiar with the city's original mass media environment, and they are unlikely to have strong and dense preexisting interpersonal networks in urban cities. It means that, when compared to each other, students of urban background are more likely to receive information from and thus be subjected to the influence of a wider range of media outlets and interpersonal sources. What these students derive from social media would constitute a relatively smaller proportion of the total information they receive from all sources. In other words, they are possibly less dependent on social media. In contrast, social media may constitute a particularly important information source and platform for interpersonal relationship building for students of rural backgrounds. This could explain the relatively stronger impact of social media communication among students from rural societies.

The above explanation is ad hoc, and the distinction between rural and urban societies in China may be shrinking. Hence, it is the task of future research to track if the rural–urban distinction would remain empirically meaningful in the long run. But generally speaking, the findings regarding differential impact of social media suggests that future studies should pay attention to how different social groups may react differently to public affairs communication via social media.

Finally, two other limitations of the study need to be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional survey does not allow the specification of causal direction. The analysis posited public affairs communication via social media as the cause, but reverse causality cannot be ruled out. Nevertheless, even without the specification of causal direction, the findings of the systematic relationships among social media use, civic culture, and system support remain theoretically and socially significant because they illustrate how public affairs communication via social media is embedded in or tied to specific clusters of political attitudes and beliefs in contemporary China.

Second, the generalizability of the study's findings over time also needs to be ascertained through continual research. This is important for both theoretical and empirical reasons. Theoretically, the copresence of elements of civic culture and system support are unlikely to be totally without tensions and contradictions. Whether the tensions can be contained in the long run and under what conditions the tensions may generate problems for the practice of networked authoritarianism are questions requiring continual attention. Empirically, as digital media continue to evolve, the approaches to Internet control by China and other authoritarian countries may also evolve. There is no guarantee that networked authoritarianism is the "final" approach that authoritarian systems adopt to meet the challenges of digitization.

Despite the limitations and uncertainties, this study shows why networked authoritarianism can be effective. It urges us to adopt a more measured and contextualized evaluation of the potential of digital and social media to bring about social and political changes.

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