

The Spatial Relationship between Social Media, Digital Connectedness, and Social Isolation in China: Revisting Cyber-Optimism

Jason Gainous*

Andrew W. MacDonald†

3/8/23

Early research and popular discourse on the promise of the internet was optimistic. Many believed it would promote social interconnectedness and, ultimately, be a positive force in people's lives. Since these early predictions, research has become much less positive, usually pointing to the negative aspects of social media. Here we argue that the digital environment can actually create a space that deters feelings of social isolationism especially for those living outside cities in restrictive information environments where citizens are often disconnected from the outside world. Using data from a nationwide survey of Chinese citizens we conducted in 2015, we find that the more citizens digitally connect with others, the more likely they are to move relationships from online to offline, and the more they use social media the less personally isolated they feel. Further, those living in urban environments tend to feel more isolated, and this spatial factor seems to moderate the aforementioned relationships. All three of those observed relationships are stronger for those in less urban environments.

Data

The data from this study are original. We designed a survey instrument to measure a range of concepts including social isolationism and various dimensions of social media and digital information consumption. We employed Qualtrics to collect the data. They randomly selected 2292 respondents from their existing panel¹ from November 25 to December 2, 2015. We originally wrote the question in English and translated them into Chinese.

*University of Louisville, jason.gainous@louisville.edu

†Duke Kunshan University, andrew.macdonald@dukekunshan.edu.cn

¹Qualtrics recruits a large pool of respondents for various survey projects through online advertising. Recruits who update their profiles at least once every 6 months are randomly invited to participate. These recruits are awarded online points that can be exchanged for cash or various other country-specific gifts. The number

The data collection had two phases. For the first phase, Qualtrics collected and submitted to us a trial run of 286 cases. We were able to check the data for reliability and adjust the instrument before proceeding with the second phase, the final data collection. We only made three adjustments, all of which turned out to be important and central to our analysis. For the trial run, we only asked respondents about pro-government Internet posters and did not ask them about potential net-spy or hostile posters. We amended this oversight and it became central to the analysis that follows. In addition, much of our theory focuses on the impact of Chinese Internet users circumventing government filters on the Internet. We initially had a question about whether citizens had jumped the wall to read sensitive political information (see Appendix A – Q25), but decided to add whether they had done so for entertainment purposes as well (Q26 - to watch foreign movies, television shows, etc.). Finally, we also included an attention filter question as part of a battery of institutional trust questions where respondents were simply told to select the “None at all” response (Q13H). If they did not select this response, we could assume they were not paying attention to the questions, and the survey ended for these respondents and the data were not collected for them. In the end, the full sample included a total of 2292 respondents. This sample size provides for a roughly ± 2 margin of error.

While our sample was randomly selected, the sampling frame was based only on Internet users that Qualtrics can access. Qualtrics recruits their frame subjects through online advertising on websites such as local portals, search engines, social networking services, and/or online shopping services. We do not contend that our sample is representative of the Chinese population, as the method of obtaining respondents obviously greatly limits those citizens with little or no access to the Internet. That said, we are comfortable that our sample is generally representative of Chinese Internet users. Given that our research focus centers on Internet effects, it makes sense to have a large sample of Internet users. A sampling frame including the entire Chinese population did not make sense for this research. Half of the population do not regularly access the Internet according to World Bank and China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) data as of late 2015 when we conducted our survey. Using a sample of the entire population could potentially limit the degrees of freedom in our models and the marginals of nuanced measures of digital media use would likely become too small to have any value. Thus, the large sample of Internet users adds to our confidence in the inferences throughout the book.

of points is based on the length of the survey, and since our survey had over fifty questions, respondents received a relatively high number of points.

