

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

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Early research and popular discourse on the promise of the internet's impact on social isolation was optimistic. Since these early predictions, research has become less positive, usually pointing to the negative role of social media. However, little is known about this relationship in highly controlled, autocratic social media environments. Using data from a nationwide survey of Chinese citizens, we do find that the more citizens digitally connect with others, the less personally isolated they feel. Conversely, though, the more likely people are to move relationships from online to offline, and the more they use social media, the more personally isolated they feel. We also find that this relationship interacts with urbanicity - being in rural areas tends to amplify the effect. Overall, our findings suggest that institutional context may not play an important role in the social media - social isolation relationship.

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