

## **Who Says Matters: The Impact of Inclination-Oriented Media Consumption on Political Trust in China**

Jing Yang

### **Abstract:**

Existing research has examined the impact of media consumption on political trust from the perspective of technical formats such as traditional versus social media, but the role of media stance and inclination has been relatively underexplored. In authoritarian settings like China, the media ecology is shaped by the absence of party competition and classical ideological divides, thus the frameworks of partisan media and ideology-aligned media in democratic countries are less applicable. Therefore, this study conceptualizes inclination-oriented media in authoritarian countries, and categorize media into state-run, private, and international outlets based on their ownership and levels of state control. The central question this study aims to address is how consumption of state, private, and international media impacts trust in central government in China. Using regression models on Social Survey on Chinese Netizens (2014-2021), findings show that state media consumption has consistently positive effect and international media consumption has consistently negative effect, while private media consumption's impact changes from negative to significantly positive on trust in central government. This study also utilizes Monte Carlo Simulations to do a robustness check by testing whether the observed negative relationship between international media consumption and trust in central government holds up when accounting for potential systematic measurement error in media use reporting. The simulations results reveal that though the magnitude of the relationship fluctuates, the direction of negative association is consistent,

strengthening confidence in the study's main findings. This study extends the focus from “what” format matters to “who” delivering “what” content matters, differentiating the impact of propaganda producers on political trust under strict censorship. In addition, the simulation technique helps the estimate model to more closely reflect the actual relationships between media consumption and political trust.

**Keywords:** media consumption, political trust, media inclination, China, Monte Carlo simulations

## Introduction

While previous studies mainly focus on the impact of technical formats of media such as traditional versus social media on political trust, the role of media stance or inclination is comparatively underexplored.. In democratic contexts, research has examined the influence of ideologically aligned media (e.g., conservative versus liberal), partisan media (e.g., left-wing versus right-wing, democratic versus republican), and biased media. However, in authoritarian settings where party competition does not exist like China, the frameworks of these categorizations are less applicable due to different political systems and media ecology, specifically due to a lack of party competition and classical ideology alignment in media. Therefore, suggesting another typology to depict the media with varying inclinations is important to study how these media attributes impact political attitudes and behavior. Currently, the typology of media based on the stance or inclination, and the effect of each type on political trust remain underexplored. Some limited studies on the relationships between media with inclinations and political trust oversimplified the media categorization, only classifying them into a dichotomy of state media and non-state media which lacks a more nuanced diving. In addition, many of them merely use short-term data, lacking a dynamic analysis on how media consumption drives political trust over time.

Building upon these theoretical gaps, this study seeks to address a central question: how does consumption of state, private, and international media impact trust in central government in China? Focusing on authoritarian regimes, this study conceptualizes the media with different stance orientation as inclination-oriented media, and categorize media into state-run, private, and international outlets based on their ownership and levels of state control. Building on this,

this study aims to examine how consumption of these media sources dynamically influences political trust in China, using logistic regression models on Chinese national surveys to estimate the relationships.

Moving beyond traditional focus on what technical formats of media matters, this research shifts attention to “who” delivering “what” matters, emphasizing the important role of information producer and content in political trust. In addition, different from the frameworks and concepts of media bias in democratic countries, this study proposes a typology more applicable to authoritarian countries, especially those without party competition. This study aims to contribute to theories in the dynamic relationships between media and public opinion in non-democratic contexts.

### **Literature Review**

The relationship between media consumption and political trust has attracted extensive scholarly attention, particularly in contexts where state control and censorship shape the flow of information. While much research has been conducted on the effects of media use on political trust in democratic societies, relatively fewer studies address this issue in authoritarian regimes such as China, where the media environment is characterized by a unique absence of party competition and classical ideological divides. The following review synthesizes existing literature to build a conceptual foundation for analyzing inclination-oriented media—distinguished by their differing levels of state influence and control—and their impact on political trust in China’s central government.

## **Media Consumption**

Scholarly work on media effects has traditionally emphasized two dimensions: the technical format of media (e.g., traditional vs. digital or social media) and the ideological orientation of media outlets (e.g., conservative vs. liberal, partisan alignments) (Prior, 2007; Strömbäck & Esser, 2015). In democratic contexts, ideological biases and partisan affiliations provide meaningful cues for media consumers, influencing how audiences interpret political information (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Levendusky, 2013). This line of research highlights that ideologically or partisan-aligned media consumption can reinforce or polarize political trust depending on whether audiences encounter supportive or challenging narratives (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013).

However, these frameworks do not readily transfer to an authoritarian setting like China, where media content is governed by a single-party state and partisan competition is effectively absent (Stockmann, 2013). Chinese media are often categorized in a simplistic binary: state media versus non-state media. Yet, this dichotomy can obscure significant differences among media outlets operating with various levels of state affiliation and control. State-run media are directly controlled by government and party organs, private or market-oriented media operate with commercial pressures yet remain under strict censorship, and international media attempt to provide alternative narratives despite restrictions (Luqiu, 2020). Against this backdrop, recent scholarship has begun calling for more nuanced categories that reflect subtle differences in ownership, editorial independence, and international involvement (Lei, 2017).

This study proposes a conceptualization of “inclination-oriented media” as a more nuanced approach that transcends the binary of state vs. non-state. In this model, media outlets are

classified into three broad categories: state media, private media, and international media. State media serve as the official mouthpieces of the government, private media attempt to balance commercial interests and regulatory constraints, and international media channels often present content that may diverge from official narratives (Huang, 2015; Stockmann, 2013). Such a tripartite categorization recognizes that different media sources produce varying degrees of propagandistic or critical content, thereby providing a richer theoretical framework for understanding media influence in an authoritarian context.

In China, audiences rely on a wide range of media platforms, from traditional television broadcasts and party newspapers to social media platforms like Weibo and WeChat (Shen & Guo, 2013). State-run media consumption has been consistently associated with the maintenance of political trust due to their strong emphasis on official achievements, selective coverage of policy successes, and reinforcement of nationalist sentiments (X. Chen & Shi, 2001; Huang, 2015). By contrast, private media present a more complicated picture. While these outlets still operate under censorship constraints, their relative editorial and commercial freedom sometimes allows for more critical reporting on local governance issues, potentially eroding trust in local officials. However, when covering the central government, they often still maintain a generally positive tone due to stricter regulations and perceived “red lines” of media content (Lei, 2017; Stockmann, 2013).

International media consumption can have yet another distinct effect. International outlets, including foreign news media accessed through virtual private networks (VPNs) or other proxy tools, often expose Chinese audiences to narratives that challenge or criticize the central government’s policies (Luqiu, 2020). Such critical exposure may foster skepticism, limit the

effectiveness of state propaganda, and reduce political trust—particularly when these outlets highlight policy failures, corruption, or human rights issues that are downplayed or suppressed by domestic media (Huang, 2015).

Beyond political trust, inclination-oriented media consumption may also affect other political attitudes and behaviors. International media exposure, for instance, has been linked to increased political knowledge and a willingness to question official narratives (Lei, 2017). Private media consumption can generate greater attention to economic issues or social problems, potentially catalyzing calls for policy reforms at the local level. Thus, understanding the inclination-oriented categorization not only provides insight into trust but also enriches our broader understanding of political attitudes in authoritarian contexts.

### **Political Trust**

Political trust is broadly conceptualized as the public's confidence in the government's competence, fairness, and legitimacy (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015). Determinants of political trust vary widely, including economic performance, policy outcomes, and the perceived integrity of political leaders (J. Chen & Dickson, 2010). Media play a critical role in shaping political trust by framing government actions, setting agendas, and influencing the tone and content of public discourse (Shen & Guo, 2013).

In China, trust in the central government and party committee is a crucial indicator of regime legitimacy. Due to the hierarchical structure of governance, local-level authorities are often perceived as more prone to corruption or mismanagement, whereas the central government endeavors to project an image of benevolent, competent leadership (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). Analyzing trust in the central government thus offers insights into how

effectively the regime maintains legitimacy in the face of socio-economic changes, information challenges, and emerging new media technologies.

### **Effect of Media Consumption on Political Trust**

The link between media consumption and political trust in China has been studied but remains less systematically understood than in democratic contexts. Existing literature suggests that state media consumption often correlates with higher political trust by virtue of its carefully curated narratives that glorify the central government's performance, stability, and resilience (Stockmann, 2013). These outlets excel in constructing "rally 'round the flag" sentiments and reinforcing nationalist discourses, thereby consolidating trust.

Meanwhile, the effect of private media consumption may be mixed. In earlier periods, private media's more critical tendencies led some scholars to find a negative correlation between private media usage and trust in government. Over time, however, private outlets have become more integrated into the propaganda system, adopting a cautious tone toward central authorities while occasionally highlighting social and economic issues. Some scholars argue this shifting balance could moderate previous negative effects and potentially produce a neutral or even modestly positive correlation with trust in the central government (Lei, 2017; Shen & Guo, 2013).

Consumption of international or Western media, despite its limited accessibility, can erode political trust by challenging official narratives and offering alternative viewpoints. Exposure to criticisms of state policies, human rights issues, or governance failures outside the official discourse can raise doubts about the central government's credibility (Huang, 2015; Luqiu, 2020). As a result, international media consumption is commonly theorized to have a negative



impact on trust in central authorities.

Building on the literature, this study proposes following hypotheses:

H1: Consumption of state-sponsored media is strongly positively associated with trust in central government.

H2: Consumption of private media is moderately positively associated with trust in central government.

H3: Consumption of international media is negatively associated with trust in central government.

These hypotheses build upon established findings and propose a dynamic model that accounts for the evolving roles of private media and the relatively consistent effects of state and international media. By incorporating the inclination-oriented media typology, the present research aims to move beyond one-dimensional frameworks and provide a more nuanced understanding of how media in authoritarian contexts influence political trust.

## **Research Design**

### **Data**

This study uses a combination of time-series online survey data from the Social Survey on Chinese Netizens (SSCN) from 2014 to 2021. This national survey is designed and conducted by Professor Deyong Ma at Renmin University of China, supported by the National Social Science Fund of China, and stored in Chinese National Survey Data Archive. The dataset comprises eight waves of surveys conducted in 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, January–February 2020, November–December 2020, and 2021. This data includes a sample of 29,840

netizens in total after filtering based on IP address and answering time and deleting invalid responses. The limitation of this survey is that it does not follow random sampling. As illustrated in Table 1, the study measures trust in government as the dependent variable and media consumption (state, private, and international) as the independent variables, which are assessed on different scales across survey waves. These variables are directly measured using specific survey questions, detailed in the Appendix A.

## Methods

*Logistic Regression Analysis.* To assess the relationship between media consumption and trust in the central government, this study employs three ordered logistic regression models and one logistic regression model. Due to inconsistent measurement scales across survey waves, this study uses 4 different models: Model 1 examines the relationship using a 4-scale dependent variable (DV) and 4-scale independent variables (IVs) for the 2014–2018 period; Model 2 focuses on the 5-scale DV and 5-scale IVs for the 2019–2021 period; Model 3 utilizes the 5-scale DV and binary IVs for the 2019–2021 period; and after recoding DV and IVs into binary variables, I use Model 4 to estimate them for the entire 2014–2021 period. The statistical models control for a variety of individual-level covariates, including gender, party membership, income, age, education, and interest in politics, as well as aggregated covariates such as year, standardized GDP, and the standardized liberal score. Marginal effects graphs are utilized to visualize the results, providing a clear representation of the effects of media consumption on trust in the central government.

*Monte Carlo Simulations.* There is a concern that due to Chinese Great Firewall regulations, respondents are likely to underreport their international media use to avoid risks. Given the

potential measurement error in international media consumption, I conducted Monte Carlo simulations to tests whether the key finding of the relationship between international media consumption and trust in central government remains true when I attempt to correct the underreporting bias, which is closer to the actual situation. The simulations were based on the assumption that younger and more educated respondents may systematically underreport their international media consumption. I generated adjusted international media use variables by incorporating education-based and age-based adjustment factors, with both moderate and extreme adjustment scenarios.

In the moderate case, I applied a 30% education-based adjustment (scaled by education level) and a 20% age-based adjustment (inversely scaled by age), each with moderate random variation. The extreme case employed larger adjustments: 60% for education and 40% for age, with wider random variation. For both scenarios, I ran 1,000 simulations, each time generating newly adjusted international media use variables and estimating ordered logistic regression models. The simulations maintained the original scale of the media use variable through appropriate rounding and truncation. I conducted similar steps for Model 1, Model 2, and Model 3.

These adjustments are designed to capture potential biases in the relationship between international media consumption and trust in the central government by accounting for the influence of education and age. Education and age are often key predictors of both media consumption patterns and political attitudes, and failing to account for their influence could lead to misleading conclusions. By applying proportional adjustments based on education and age, the simulations allow us to explore how these demographic factors might amplify or

attenuate media consumption behaviors. The adjustment parameters reflect realistic scenarios: in the moderate case, a 30% adjustment for education with modest variation assumes education has a moderate impact on media consumption, while a 20% adjustment inversely proportional to age captures the tendency for younger individuals to engage more intensively with media than we observed in the data. The extreme case doubles these effects (60% for education and 40% for age), reflecting a scenario with stronger demographic influences and greater variability compared to current report. By incorporating these adjustments, we can assess the robustness of the relationship between international media use and political trust under different levels of demographic influence.

For Model 1 and Model 2 (ordinal independent variables):

If adjustment type is moderate adjustment:

$$Education_{adjusted} = Education / 6 * 0.3 * (1 + N(0, 0.2))$$

$$Age_{adjusted} = (1 - Age / 9) * 0.2 * (0.8 + N(0, 0.2))$$

If adjustment type is extreme adjustment:

$$Education_{adjusted} = Education / 6 * 0.6 * (2 + N(0, 0.2))$$

$$Age_{adjusted} = (1 - Age / 9) * 0.4 * (1.5 + N(0, 0.2))$$

Adjustment for International Media Use:

$$International\ Media\ Use_{adjusted} = International\ Media\ Use * \\ (1 + Education_{adjusted} + Age_{adjusted})$$

For Model 3 (binary independent variables):

If adjustment type is moderate adjustment:

$$Probability\ of\ Underreporting = Education / 6 * 0.3 + (1 - Age / 9) * 0.2$$

If adjustment type is extreme adjustment:

$$Probability\ of\ Underreporting = Education / 6 * 0.6 + (1 - Age / 9) * 0.4$$

Adjustment for International Media Use:

*International Media Use* <sub>adjusted</sub>

$$= \begin{cases} 1, & \text{if } International\ Media\ Use = 0 \text{ and } u < \text{probability of underreporting} \\ International\ Media\ Use, & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

Table 1 Measurement of Key Variables

	Variable	2014-2018 (n=15,523)	2019-2021 (n=14,316)		2014-2021 (n=25,959)
DV	Trust in central government and party committee	1 = None at all 2 = Not very much 3 = A fair amount 4 = A big deal	1 = None at all 2 = Not very much 3 = Fifty fifty 4 = A fair amount 5 = A big deal		0 = Not a big deal 1 = A big deal
IV	State media use	1 = Never 2 = Seldom 3 = Often 4 = Every day	1 = None at all 2 = Not very much 3 = Fifty fifty 4 = A fair amount 5 = A big deal	0 = No 1 = Yes	0 = Not often 1 = Often
	Private media use				0 = Not often 1 = Often
	International media use				0 = Not often 1 = Often
Ctrl	Female, Party membership, Income, Age, Year, Education, Interest in politics, Standardized GDP, Standardized liberal score				

## Results

### Logistic Regression Analysis

The results of the regression analyses, displayed in Table 2 and visualized in the Figure 1, reveal significant relationships between media consumption patterns and trust in the central

government across the four models. Each model evaluates the effects of state media, private media, and international media use on trust, controlling for individual-level characteristics including gender, income, education, party membership, and political interest.

State media use consistently exhibits a positive and statistically significant relationship with trust in the central government across all models. In Model 1, covering the 2014–2018 period with 4-scale ordinal variables, the odds ratio for state media use is 1.1985 ( $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that higher state media consumption is associated with greater trust in the government. Similarly, the effect strengthens in later models, with odds ratios of 1.4292 in Model 2, 1.7418 in Model 3, and 1.6665 in Model 4 ( $p < 0.01$  for all). These findings suggest that state media plays a pivotal role in shaping positive perceptions of government trust, particularly under the binary measurement in Model 3.

Table 2: Logistic Regression Models

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>	<b>Model 4</b>
	Ordered Logistic, 2014-2018, 4-scale ordinal DV & IVs	Ordered Logistic, 2020-1, 2021 5-scale ordinal DV & IVs	Ordered Logistic, 2019, 2020-2, 5-scale ordinal DV & binary IV	Logistic, 2014-2021, binary DV & IV
	Odds Ratio	Odds Ratio	Odds Ratio	Odds Ratio
Trust				
State media use	1.1985*** (0.0269)	1.4271*** (0.0662)	1.7437*** (0.0733)	1.6596*** (0.0514)
Private media use	0.9134** (0.0285)	1.7031*** (0.0941)	1.6378*** (0.1176)	1.2577*** (0.0509)
International media use	0.8762*** (0.0184)	0.6706*** (0.0239)	0.7690*** (0.0343)	0.7600*** (0.0247)
Female	1.1261** (0.0409)	0.9636 (0.0664)	0.9712 (0.0384)	0.9168** (0.0264)
Party membership	1.3568***	0.5584***	0.8416***	0.8033***

	(0.0504)	(0.0425)	(0.0351)	(0.0240)
Income	0.9058***	0.9463**	1.0075	0.9088***
	(0.0141)	(0.0200)	(0.0126)	(0.0087)
Age	0.9765*	1.0984***	1.0437**	1.0496***
	(0.0093)	(0.0178)	(0.0137)	(0.0082)
Year	0.9440***	1.0000	1.0718	1.6477***
	(0.0136)	(.)	(0.0429)	(0.0916)
Education	1.5582***	1.2314***	0.9515*	1.4339***
	(0.0192)	(0.0440)	(0.0201)	(0.0151)
Interest in politics	0.8912***	1.0738*	1.6167***	1.3419***
	(0.0158)	(0.0364)	(0.0347)	(0.0206)
GDP				0.8278
				(0.0954)
Liberal score				1.0592
				(0.0326)
Observations	11213	3651	10528	25959
Log-likelihood	-13581.2488	-3526.8704	-11046.7691	-14683.6919
Pseudo-R squared	0.1089	0.0647	0.0422	0.1488
Wald-chi2	3321.0635	488.3166	973.3620	5133.4650
Prob>chi2	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000

The relationship between private media use and trust is more complex and varies by model. In Model 1, private media use shows a negative and statistically significant association with trust (odds ratio = 0.9134,  $p < 0.05$ ), indicating a slight erosion of trust with higher private media consumption during the 2014–2018 period. However, in Model 2 (2020–2021 with 5-scale variables), the relationship reverses, with private media use demonstrating a strong positive association (odds ratio = 1.7007,  $p < 0.01$ ). This pattern continues in Model 3 and Model 4, with odds ratios of 1.6445 and 1.2623, respectively ( $p < 0.01$  for both). These findings may reflect evolving dynamics in the private media landscape and its growing influence on fostering trust.

International media use consistently demonstrates a negative association with trust in the

central government across all models. The odds ratios are 0.8762 in Model 1, 0.6683 in Model 2, 0.7671 in Model 3, and 0.7595 in Model 4, all statistically significant at the  $p < 0.01$  level. These results indicate that exposure to international media may lead to decreased trust in the central government, possibly due to differing narratives or criticism of government policies presented in international outlets.

Among the control variables, several significant patterns emerge. Party membership is a strong positive predictor of trust across all models, with odds ratios exceeding 1.35 in Model 1 ( $p < 0.01$ ) and maintaining significance in subsequent models. Education also shows a consistent positive relationship, with higher educational attainment being associated with greater trust in government, particularly in Model 4 (odds ratio = 1.4274,  $p < 0.01$ ). Conversely, income and age exhibit mixed effects, with weaker associations that vary in significance across models. Political interest has a nuanced effect, being negatively associated with trust in Model 1 but positively related in later models, reflecting potentially shifting dynamics over time.

The coefficient plot provides a clear comparison of the magnitude and direction of media effects across the four models. State media use consistently demonstrates the strongest positive effect on trust, while international media use consistently exerts a negative influence. Private media use shows variability, with its effect shifting from negative in earlier waves to strongly positive in later waves, reflecting the dynamic role of private media over time.



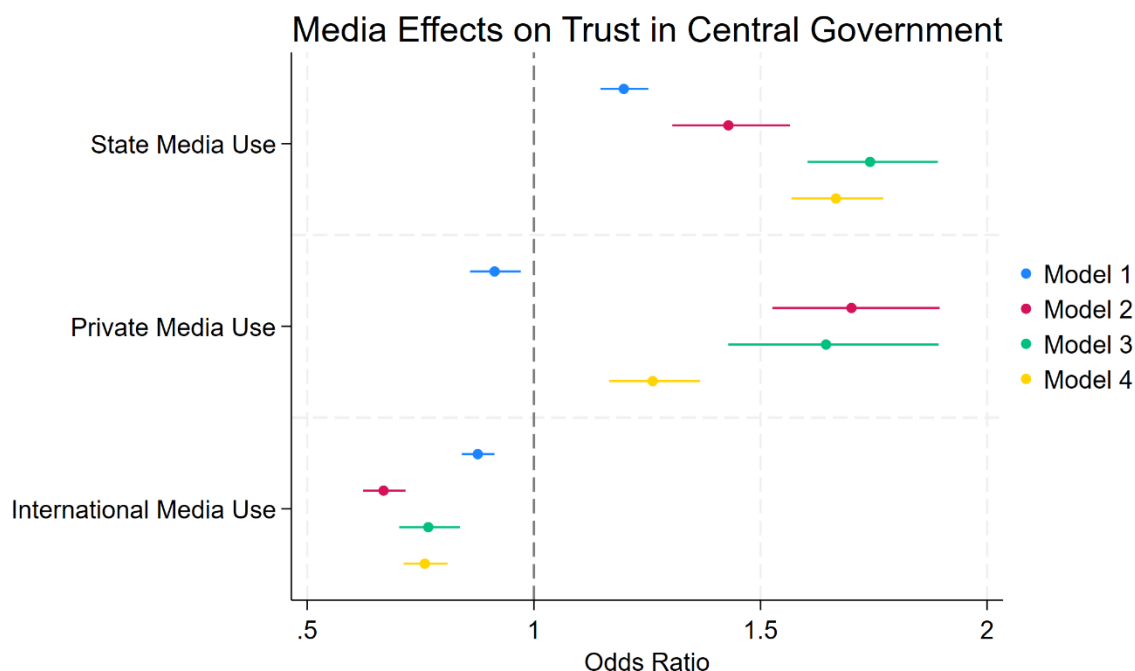


Figure 1 Coefficient Plots for Model 1-4

Further, Figure 2 reveals distinct patterns in the predicted probability of trust in the central government across different levels of media consumption for Model 1 (2014-2018, 4-Scale Variables). For state media use, the probability of high trust ("A big deal") increases as consumption shifts from "Never" to "Every Day," while lower trust categories ("None at all" and "Not very much") decrease correspondingly. This suggests a strong positive relationship between frequent state media use and trust.

In contrast, private media consumption exhibits a modest increase in trust for "A fair amount" but remains relatively stable for the lowest and highest trust levels. For international media use, frequent consumption ("Every Day") is associated with higher probabilities of distrust ("None at all" and "Not very much"), indicating a negative relationship with trust in the central government. These trends highlight the diverging impacts of state and international media on trust formation during this period.

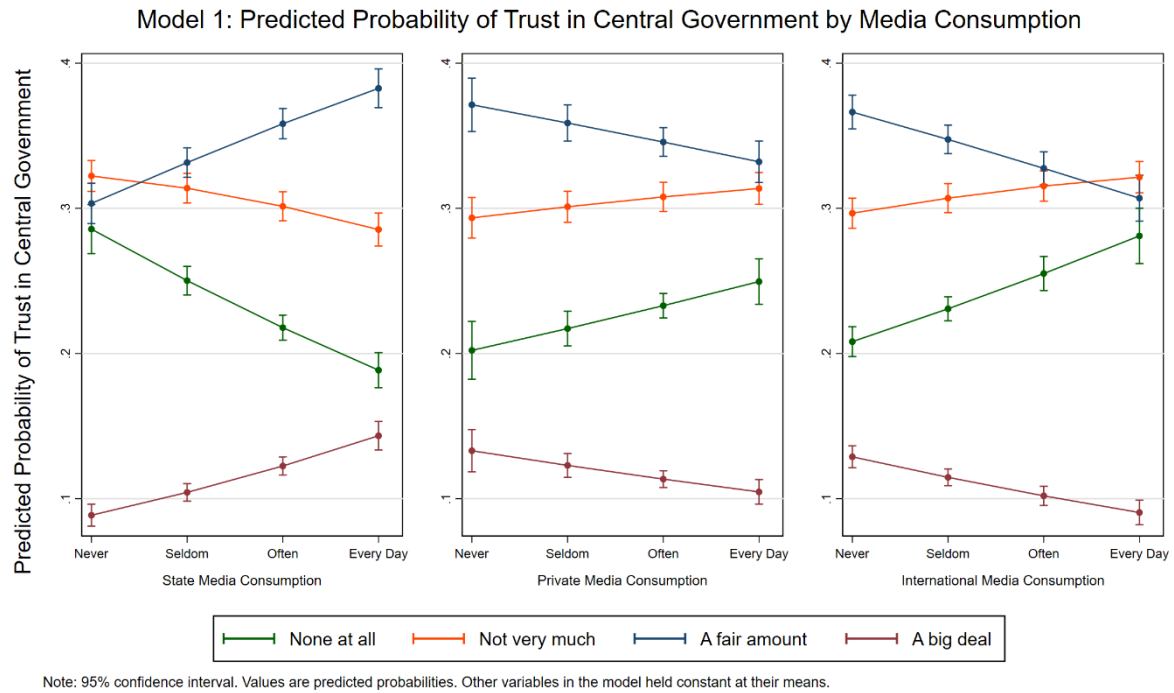


Figure 2: Predicted Probability Plot of Model 1

In Model 2 (2020–2021, 5-Scale Variables), the probability patterns for state media consumption remain consistent with Model 1, with trust ("A big deal") rising steadily as state media use increases. However, the expanded 5-scale dependent variable introduces a nuanced middle category ("Fifty fifty"), which also increases slightly with higher state media consumption. Private media consumption demonstrates a notable positive effect, with the highest trust levels ("A big deal") increasing significantly as consumption rises, while distrust categories ("None at all" and "Not very much") decrease. For international media, the probability of trust declines sharply as consumption increases, reinforcing its negative association with trust in the central government. These results emphasize the stronger role of private media in shaping positive trust perceptions in the 2020–2021 period.

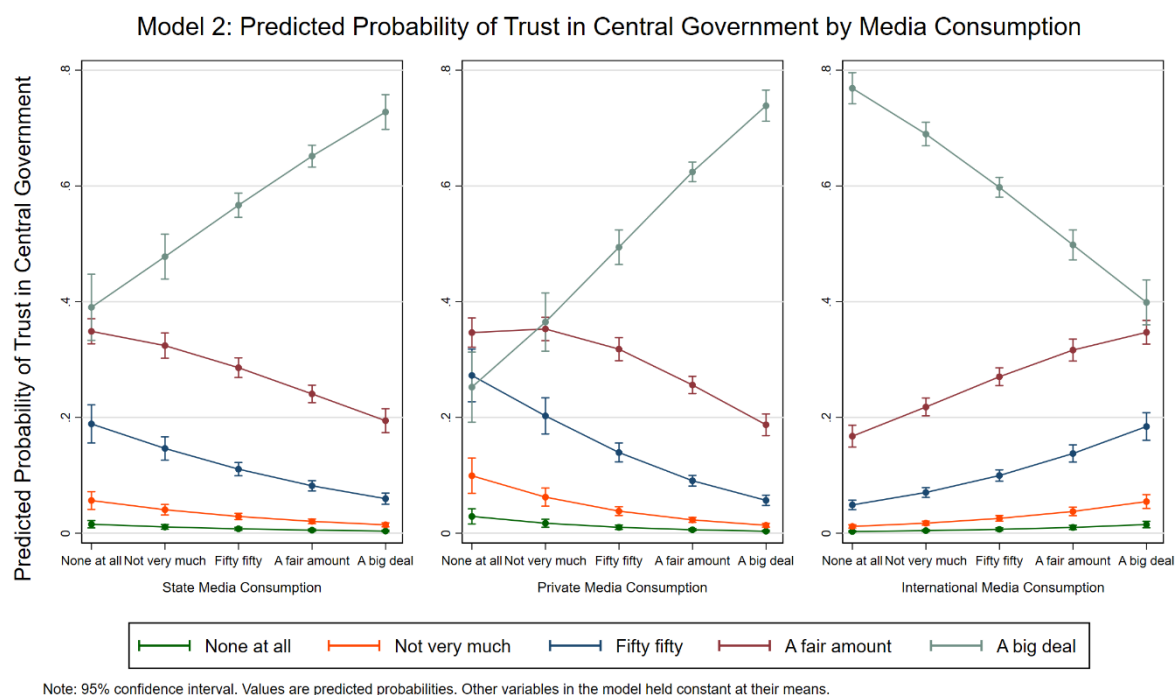


Figure 3: Predicted Probability Plot of Model 2

The predicted probability plot of Model 3 (2019–2020, 5-scale DV and binary IVs) simplifies media consumption into binary categories ("No" vs. "Yes"). State media use maintains its positive relationship with trust, with individuals consuming state media exhibiting significantly higher probabilities of expressing trust ("A fair amount" and "A big deal"). Private media consumption also shows a positive effect, albeit weaker than state media. Conversely, international media use continues to display a negative relationship with trust. Respondents who consume international media are more likely to report lower trust levels ("None at all" and "Not very much"). The binary independent variable approach underscores the consistent influence of state and international media on trust outcomes.

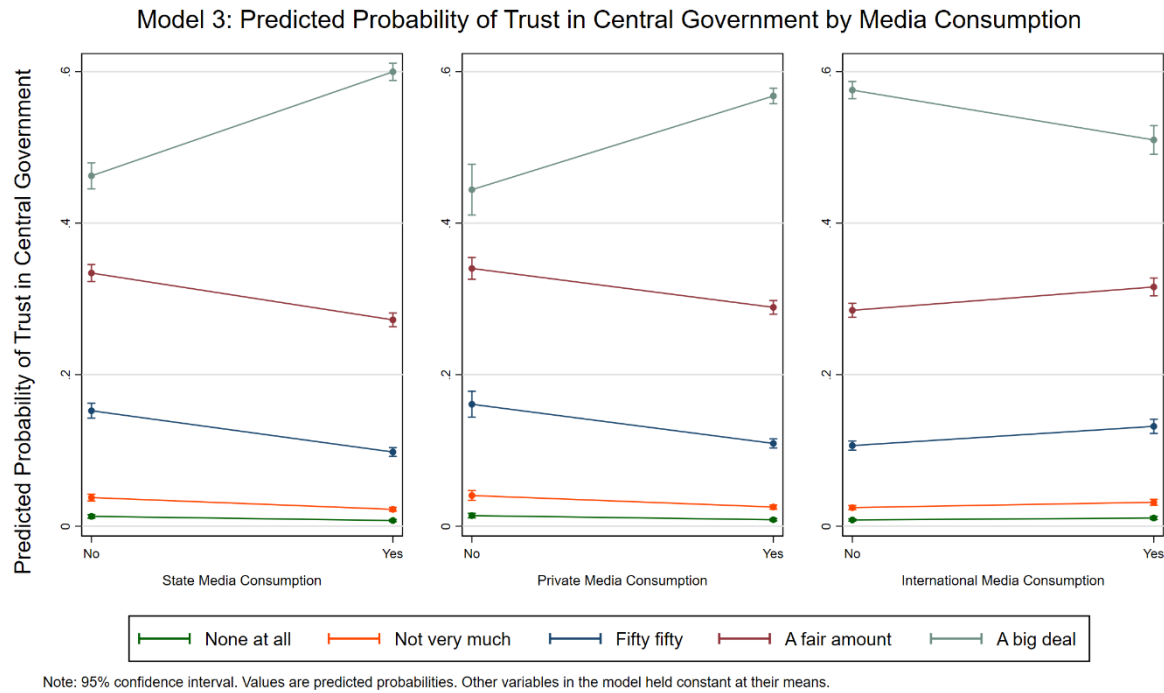


Figure 4: Predicted Probability Plot of Model 3

In Model 4, with binary dependent and independent variables from 2014 to 2021, the predicted probabilities focus on "High trust" versus "Not high trust." State media consumption is strongly associated with increased probabilities of high trust, reinforcing its pivotal role across all models. Private media use also exhibits a positive association, though to a lesser extent. International media consumption continues to negatively affect the likelihood of high trust, with those consuming international media displaying lower probabilities of trust in the central government. This binary model provides a succinct confirmation of the general trends observed in the earlier ordinal models.

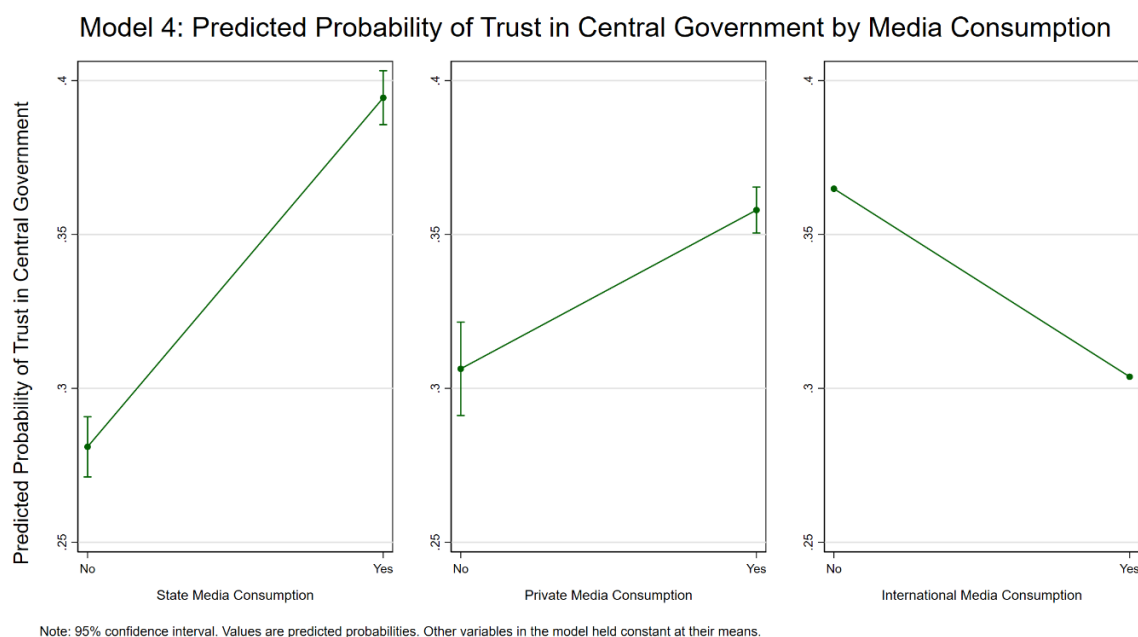


Figure 5: Predicted Probability Plot of Model 4

Across all models, state media consistently emerges as a robust positive predictor of trust, while international media exhibits a negative influence. Private media's effect transitions from neutral or slightly negative in earlier periods to strongly positive in later models, reflecting evolving dynamics in media consumption and trust formation. The results collectively highlight the complex and divergent impacts of different media sources on public trust in the central government over time.

### Monte Carlo Simulations

To address potential social desirability bias in the dataset, this study employed Monte Carlo simulations to mitigate the issue of underreporting international media use, which can be sensitive in the Chinese context due to administrative regulations, including the Great Firewall. Specifically, international media consumption was adjusted based on respondents' education and age, as younger and more educated individuals are more likely to underreport their

consumption. For each model, 1,000 simulations were conducted to compare the effects of the adjusted and original measures of international media consumption on trust in the central government.

The comparison between original and adjusted international media consumption reveals systematic patterns of adjustment across education levels and age groups. The crosstab (Table 3) shows that among the 15,466 observations, the moderate adjustment primarily affected middle-range responses, with notable shifts from lower to higher categories. For instance, while 4,747 respondents remained in the lowest category, 379 cases moved from category 1 (none at all) to 2 (not very much), and 4,443 cases shifted from category 2 (not very much) to 3 (often).

Table 3 Comparison between Adjusted and Original International Media Use in Moderate Case

Moderately adjusted media international use	International Media Consumption				Total
	1	2	3	4	
1	4,736	0	0	0	4,736
2	390	1,399	0	0	1,789
3	0	4,499	237	0	4,736
4	9	7	2,992	1,197	4,205
Total	5,135	5,905	3,229	1,197	15,466

The scatterplots further illustrate these patterns by education level and age groups. The education-stratified plots (Figure 6) demonstrate that the upward adjustment was more pronounced among those with higher education levels (Bachelor's degree and above), reflecting the assumption that more educated respondents tend to underreport their international media use.

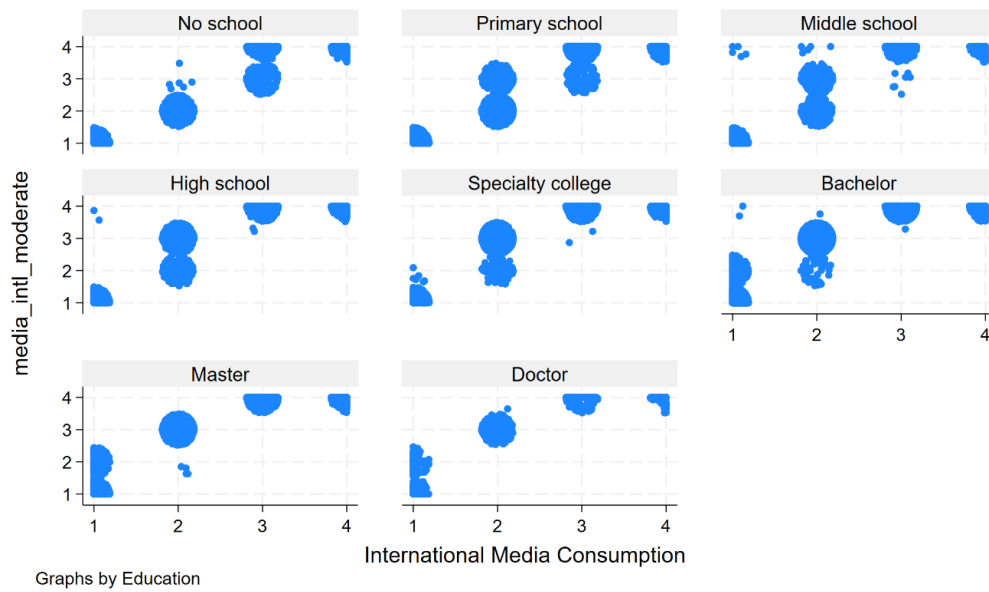


Figure 6 Comparison between Adjusted and Original International Media Use by Education in Moderate Case

Similarly, the age-stratified scatterplots (Figure 7) show stronger upward adjustments among younger age groups (18-34), particularly in the middle range of the scale, while older age groups (55+ years) exhibited more stability between original and adjusted values. These visualization patterns confirm that our adjustment procedure effectively implemented the theoretical assumptions about differential reporting patterns across demographic groups.

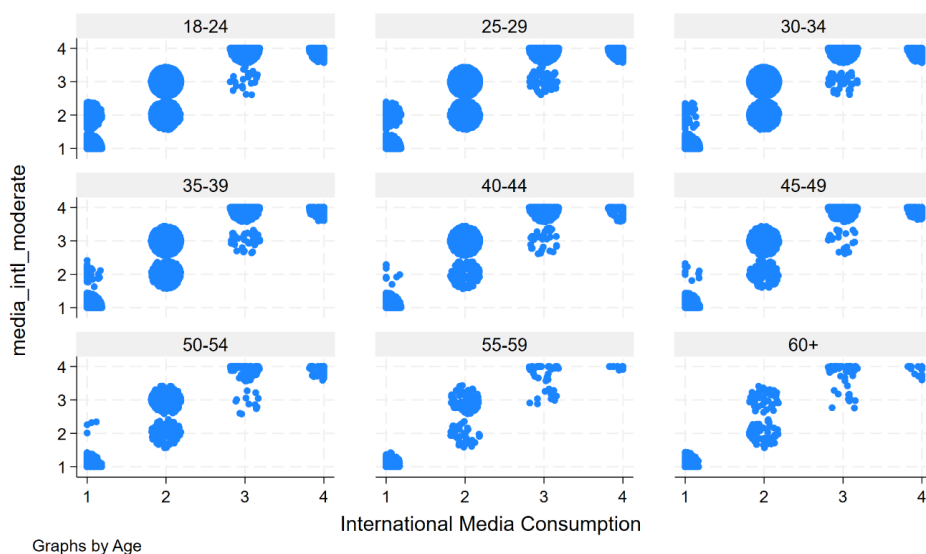


Figure 7 Comparison between Adjusted and Original International Media Use by Age in Moderate Case

In the extreme adjustment scenario, the shifts in reported international media consumption were substantially more pronounced. The crosstab (Table 4) reveals a dramatic upward adjustment across categories, with only 223 respondents remaining in the lowest category (none at all) compared to the original 5,135, indicating a massive shift toward higher consumption levels. Most notably, 9,704 cases (nearly 63% of the sample) were adjusted to the highest category (almost every day), with substantial movements from lower categories - 5,255 cases moved from category 2 (not very much) to 4 (almost every day), and 3,228 cases shifted from category 3 (often) to 4 (almost every day).

Table 4 Comparison between Adjusted and Original International Media Use in Extreme Case

Extremely adjusted media international use	International Media Consumption				Total
	1	2	3	4	
1	247	0	0	0	247
2	3,177	6	0	0	3,183
3	1,682	652	1	0	2,335
4	29	5,247	3,228	1,197	9,701
Total	5,135	5,905	3,229	1,197	15,466

The education-stratified scatterplots for the extreme case (Figure 8) demonstrate even more dramatic upward adjustments than in the moderate scenario, particularly among those with higher education levels. The pattern is especially visible for respondents with Bachelor's degrees and above, where there is a clear clustering of adjusted values in the higher international media use regardless of their original reported consumption level. This reflects



the amplified assumption about underreporting among more educated respondents in the extreme scenario.

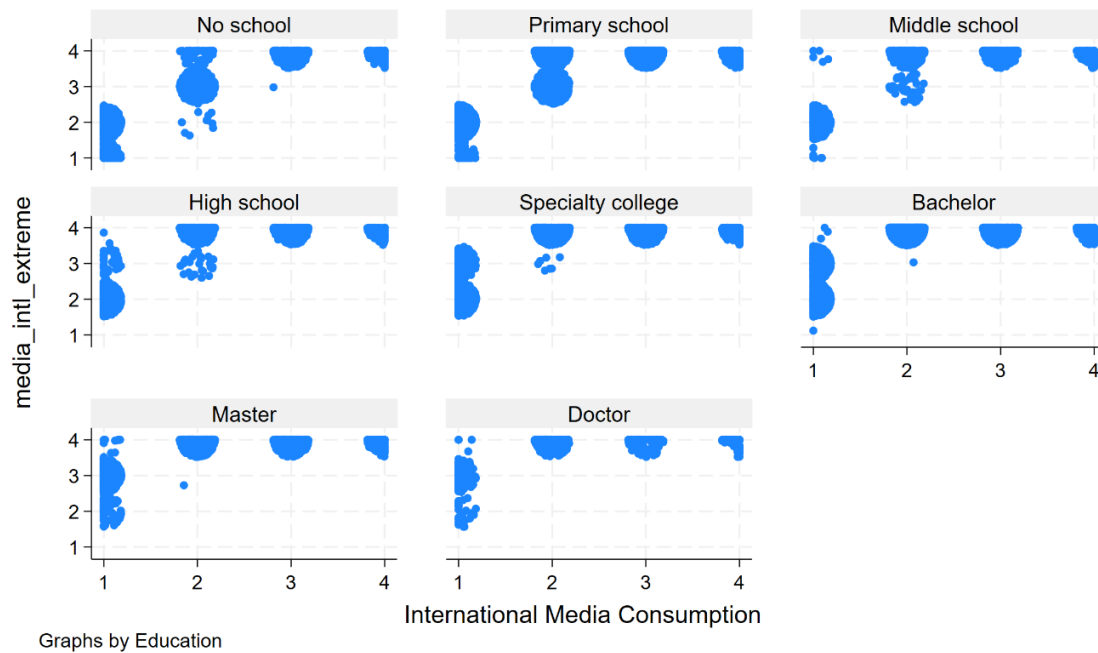


Figure 8 Comparison between Adjusted and Original International Media Use by Education in Extreme Case

The age-stratified scatterplots (Figure 9) similarly show more dramatic adjustments for younger age groups (18-34), with a strong tendency for reported values to shift upward by multiple categories. The adjustment effect gradually diminishes with age, as shown by the more dispersed patterns in the 55+ age groups, though the upward adjustment remains more substantial than in the moderate case. This visualization effectively demonstrates how the extreme adjustment parameters intensify the theoretical assumptions about age-based reporting patterns, resulting in more dramatic shifts from original values particularly among younger respondents.

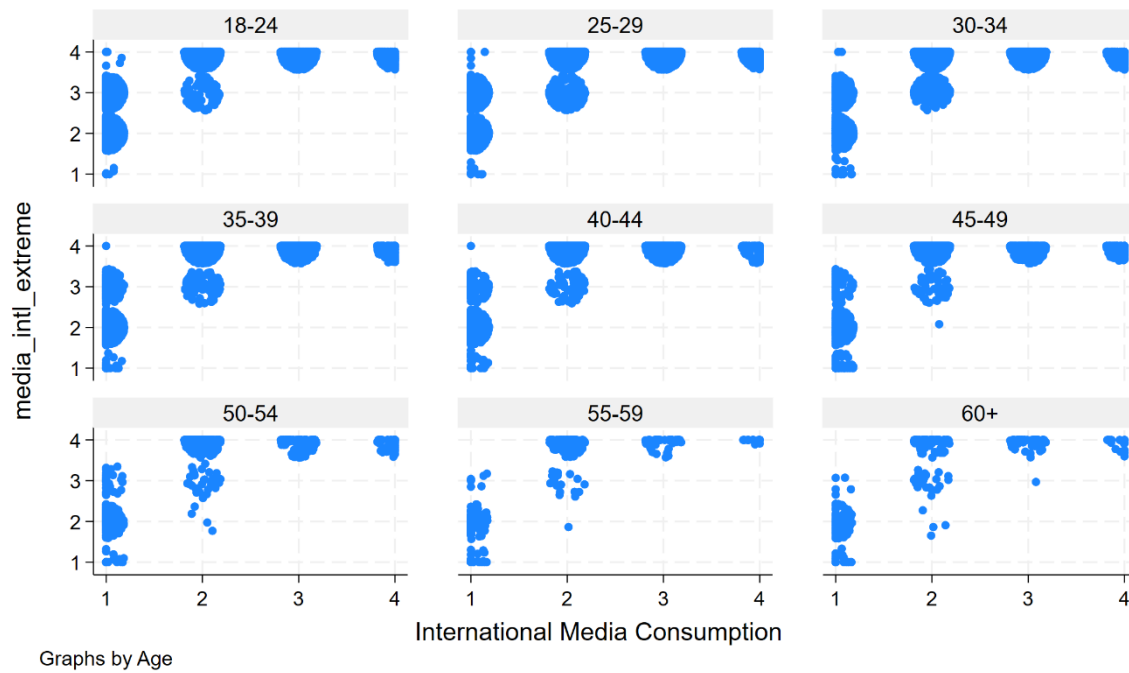


Figure 9 Comparison between Adjusted and Original International Media Use by Age in Moderate Case

Regarding simulation process, each adjustment scenario was simulated across 1,000 iterations to account for variability for each model. For each iteration, the adjusted international media consumption variable was recalculated, the ordered logistic regression model was re-estimated, and the key statistics (coefficients, t, and odds ratio) for adjusted international media use were stored. Further, this study compares the odds ratio from the original unadjusted model with the mean of simulated values under the moderate and extreme scenarios across all three models, as illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5

	Original Odds Ratio	Mean Adjusted Odds Ratio	
		Moderate Case	Extreme Case
Model 1	0.876	0.916	0.939
Model 2	0.671	0.706	0.667
Model 3	0.769	0.593	0.817

The simulation approach revealed how varying levels of bias adjustment in media consumption could alter the perceived relationship with trust in the central government. First, examining the 2014-2018 period (Model 1), I found that while adjusting for potential measurement error in international media consumption somewhat attenuated the negative relationship with trust in central government, the association remained robust. The original odds ratio of 0.876 shifted to 0.916 under moderate adjustment and 0.939 under extreme adjustment scenarios, suggesting that even substantial corrections for potential underreporting by younger and more educated respondents do not fundamentally alter the relationship's direction or significance. The distribution of simulated odds ratios of international media use on trust in government for Model 1 under moderate and extreme cases are shown in Figure 10 and Figure 11, respectively. The figures for Model 2 and Model 3 can be found in the Appendix D.

For the 2019-2021 period using ordinal measures (Model 2), the relationship is stable across different adjustment scenarios. The original odds ratio of 0.671 changed only marginally to 0.706 under moderate adjustment and 0.667 under extreme adjustment, indicating that the stronger negative association observed in this later period is particularly robust to potential measurement error.

The analysis using binary measures for the 2019-2021 period (Model 3) showed more variability across adjustment scenarios, with odds ratios ranging from 0.593 (moderate adjustment) to 0.817 (extreme adjustment), compared to the original 0.769. While this greater variation might reflect the increased sensitivity of binary measures to adjustment procedures, the consistently negative odds ratios across all scenarios reinforce the robustness of the fundamental relationship.

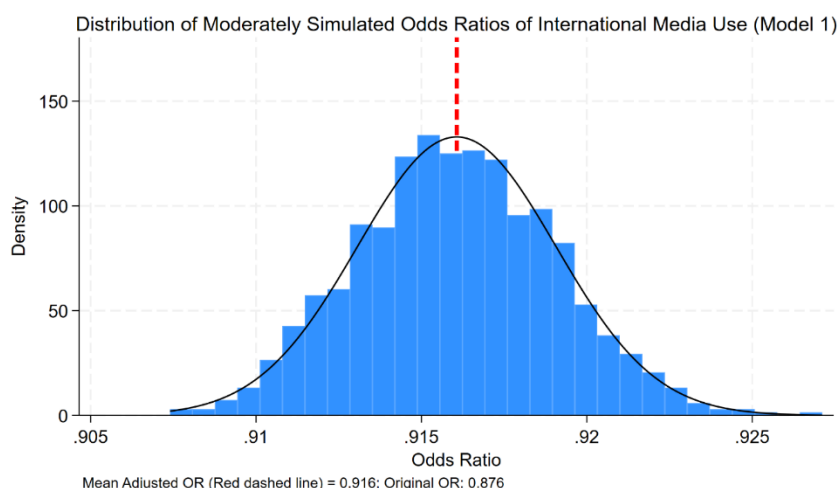


Figure 10 Distribution of Simulated Odds Ratios of International Media Use on Trust in Central Government for Model 1 Under Moderate Case

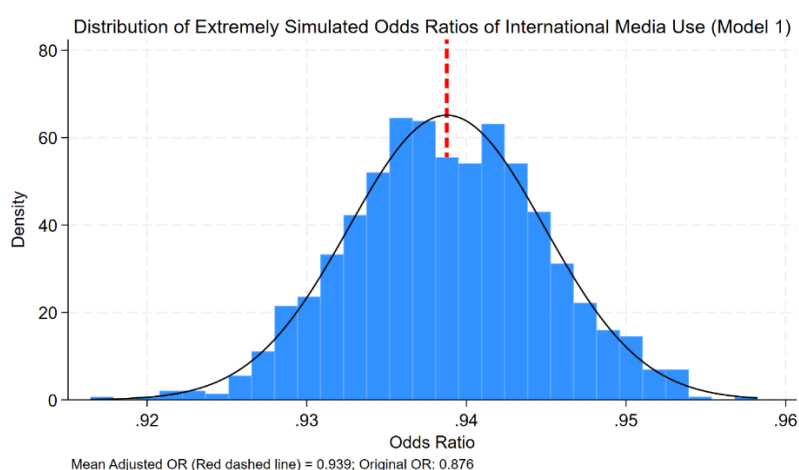


Figure 11 Distribution of Simulated Odds Ratios of International Media Use on Trust in Central Government for Model 1 Under Extreme Case

The Monte Carlo simulation analyses demonstrate that the negative relationship between international media consumption and trust in central government is robust to potential measurement error arising from systematic underreporting by younger and more educated respondents. While adjusting for such potential underreporting leads to some fluctuations in the magnitude of the relationship, with effects sometimes becoming slightly weaker (as in Model 1) and sometimes stronger (as in certain scenarios of Models 2 and 3), the fundamental

negative association remains consistent across all specifications. The odds ratios, ranging from 0.593 to 0.939 across different adjustment scenarios and time periods, consistently indicate that higher international media consumption is associated with lower trust in central government. This persistence of the negative relationship, even under extreme adjustment assumptions, provides strong evidence that the observed association is not merely an artifact of measurement error in media consumption reporting. Rather, it appears to reflect a genuine underlying pattern in how exposure to international media relates to citizens' trust in central government, thereby strengthening confidence in the substantive conclusions of this research.

To sum up, the results provide strong support for H1, demonstrating a consistently positive association between state-sponsored media consumption and trust in the central government; partial support for H2, with private media consumption showing a neutral or weak positive effect initially but evolving into a moderate positive association over time; and robust support for H3, as international media consumption is negatively associated with trust in the central government across all models, whose robustness is supported by Monte Carlo Simulations.

## **Conclusion**

This study investigates the relationship between state, private, and international media consumption and trust in the central government in an authoritarian context, using survey data from the Social Survey on Chinese Netizens (SSCN) spanning 2014 to 2021. Specifically, this study conceptualizes inclination-oriented media to depict the media owned by different actors, under varying level of state control, and produce information with different purpose and inclination; it develops a new typology of inclination-oriented media sources, classifying them

into state, private, and international media outlets based on their ownership, levels of state control, and orientation to stance and inclination; further it examines how consumption of these media sources influences trust in central government across different time periods within an authoritarian context.

The findings indicate that state media consumption consistently promotes trust in the central government across all models and time periods, reflecting its instrumental role in reinforcing state legitimacy. Private media, while initially showing a negative or neutral association with trust, has emerged as a positive influence in recent years, suggesting its evolving function in public discourse and its potential alignment with state narratives under certain conditions. Conversely, international media consumption exerts a consistently negative effect on trust. These patterns emphasize the differential roles of media sources in fostering or eroding trust in authoritarian governance.

The Monte Carlo simulation analyses in this study serve as a rigorous robustness check by testing whether the observed negative relationship between international media consumption and trust in central government holds up when accounting for potential systematic measurement error in international media use. By simulating adjusted international media consumption values under different assumptions about underreporting patterns among younger and more educated respondents, these analyses demonstrate that while the magnitude of the relationship may fluctuate, the fundamental negative association remains consistent, thereby strengthening confidence in the study's main findings.

This study contributes to the broader literature on media and political trust by offering a refined conceptualization and typology of inclination-oriented media in authoritarian countries,

and further providing evidence which demonstrates how media types exert distinct influences on trust over time, reflecting shifting media ecosystems and state-society dynamics. For policymakers and media practitioners in authoritarian contexts, the findings highlight the strategic role of state media in fostering political trust and legitimacy. However, the growing influence of private media suggests that authorities must carefully navigate the balance between control and openness in managing public discourse. The persistent negative association of international media with trust underscores the state's sensitivity to global narratives and the potential challenges posed by external information flows.

## References

- Arceneaux, K., & Johnson, M. (2013). *Changing Minds or Changing Channels?: Partisan News in an Age of Choice*. University of Chicago Press.
- Chen, J., & Dickson, B. J. (2010). *Allies of the State: China's Private Entrepreneurs and Democratic Change*. Harvard University Press.
- Chen, X., & Shi, T. (2001). Media effects on political confidence and trust in the People's Republic of China in the post-Tiananmen period. *East Asia*, 19(3), 84–118.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-001-0011-3>
- Hetherington, M. J., & Rudolph, T. J. (2015). *Why Washington Won't Work: Polarization, Political Trust, and the Governing Crisis*. University of Chicago Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226299358>
- Huang, H. (2015). Propaganda as Signaling. *Comparative Politics*, 47(4), 419–444.  
<https://doi.org/10.5129/001041515816103220>
- Iyengar, S., & Hahn, K. S. (2009). Red Media, Blue Media: Evidence of Ideological Selectivity in Media Use. *Journal of Communication*, 59(1), 19–39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.01402.x>
- Lei, Y.-W. (2017). *The Contentious Public Sphere: Law, Media, and Authoritarian Rule in China*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400887941>
- Levendusky, M. (2013). *How Partisan Media Polarize America*. University of Chicago Press.
- Luqiu, L. W. R. (2020). *Propaganda, Media, and Nationalism in Mainland China and Hong Kong*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Prior, M. (2007). *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in*



*Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*. Cambridge University Press.

Shen, F., & Guo, Z. S. (2013). The last refuge of media persuasion: News use, national pride and political trust in China. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 23(2), 135–151.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2012.725173>

Stockmann, D. (2013). *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China*. Cambridge University Press.

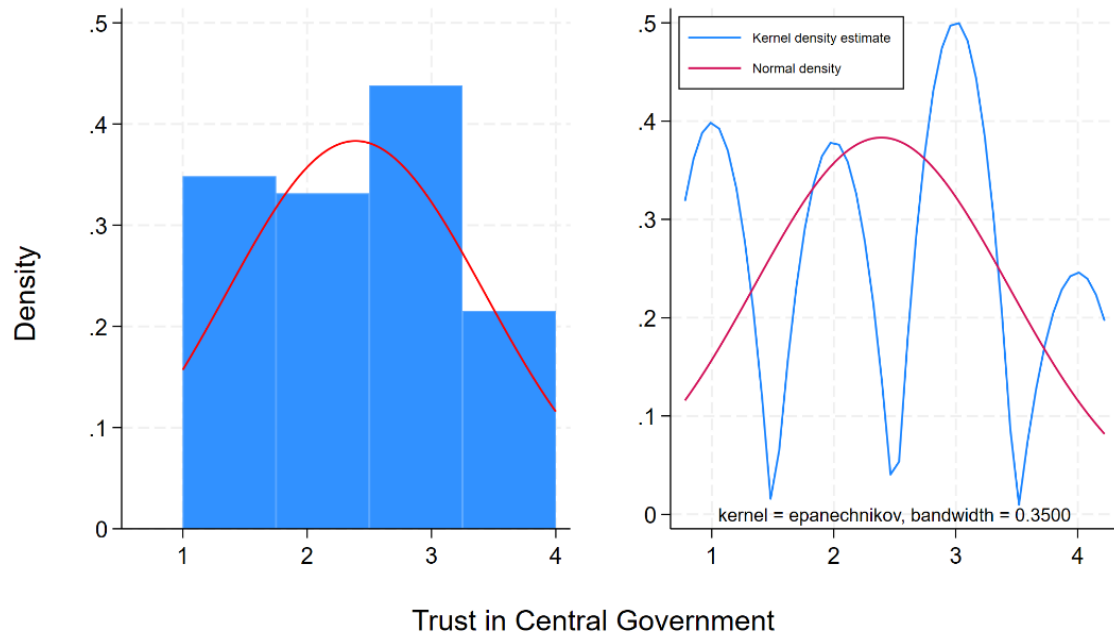
Stockmann, D., & Gallagher, M. E. (2011). Remote Control: How the Media Sustain Authoritarian Rule in China. *Comparative Political Studies*, 44(4), 436–467.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414010394773>

Strömbäck, J., & Esser, F. (2015). Introduction: Making sense of the mediatization of politics. In *Making Sense of Mediatized Politics*. Routledge.

## Appendix

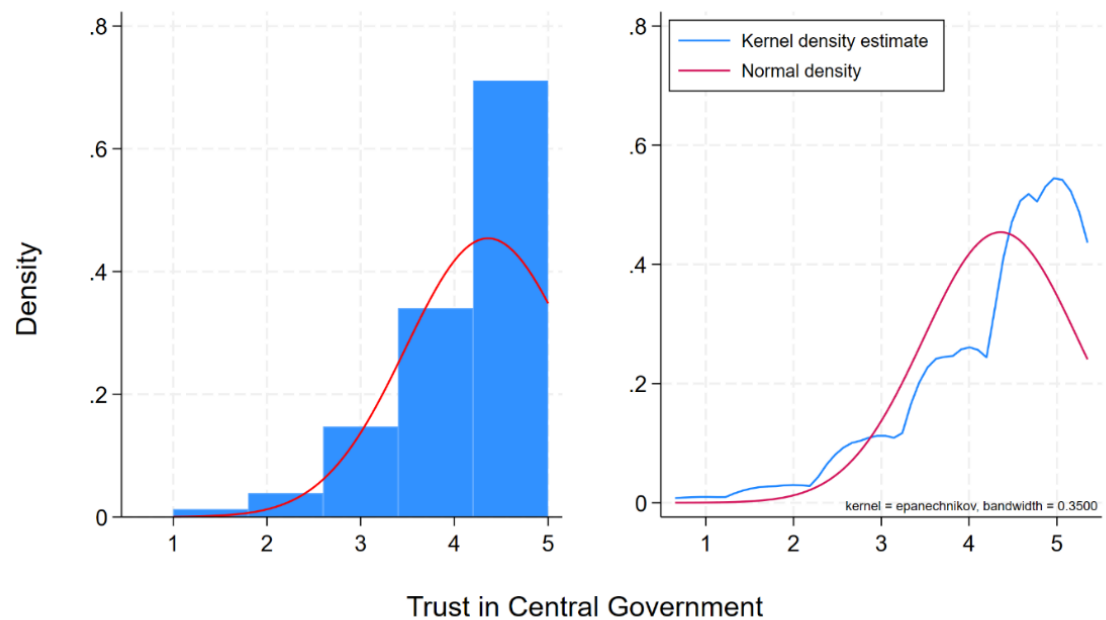
### Appendix A. Histogram and Kernal Density of Dependent Variable

#### Histogram and Kernal Density of Trust in Central Government



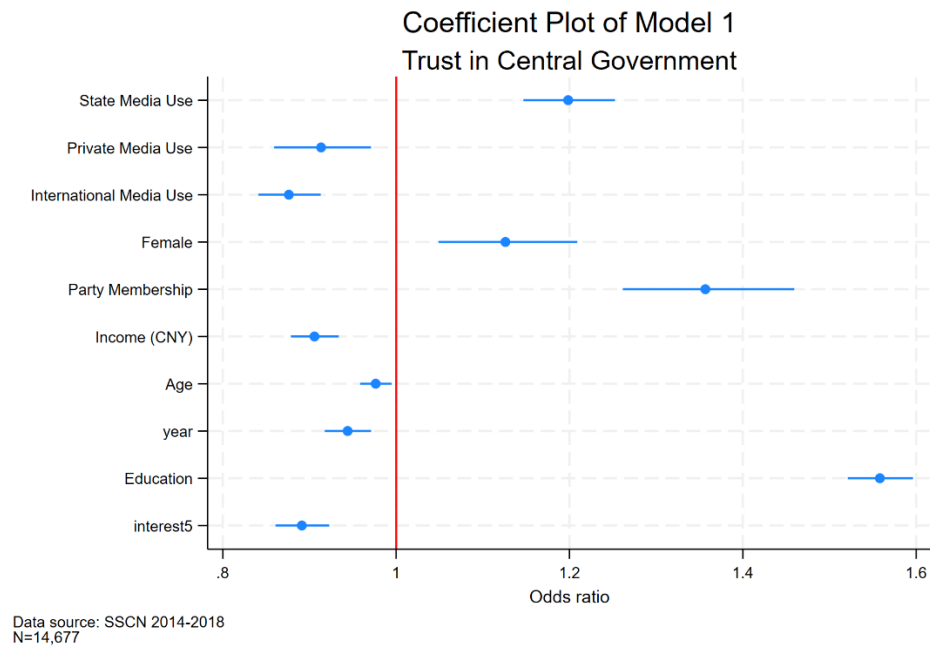
Data source: SSCN 2014-2018

#### Histogram and Kernal Density of Trust in Central Government

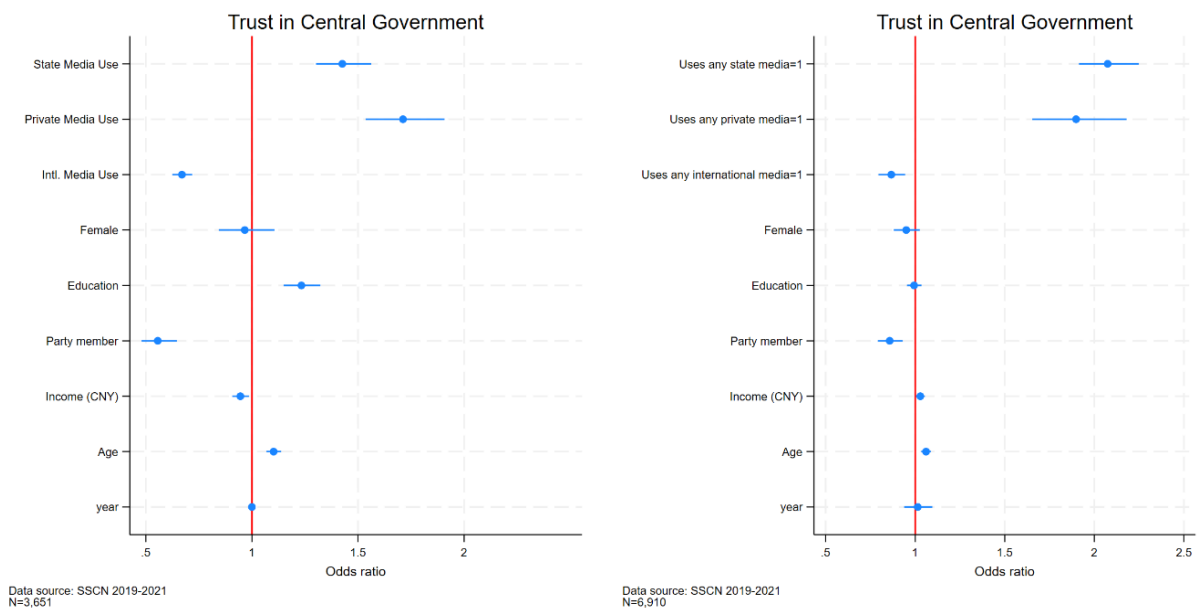


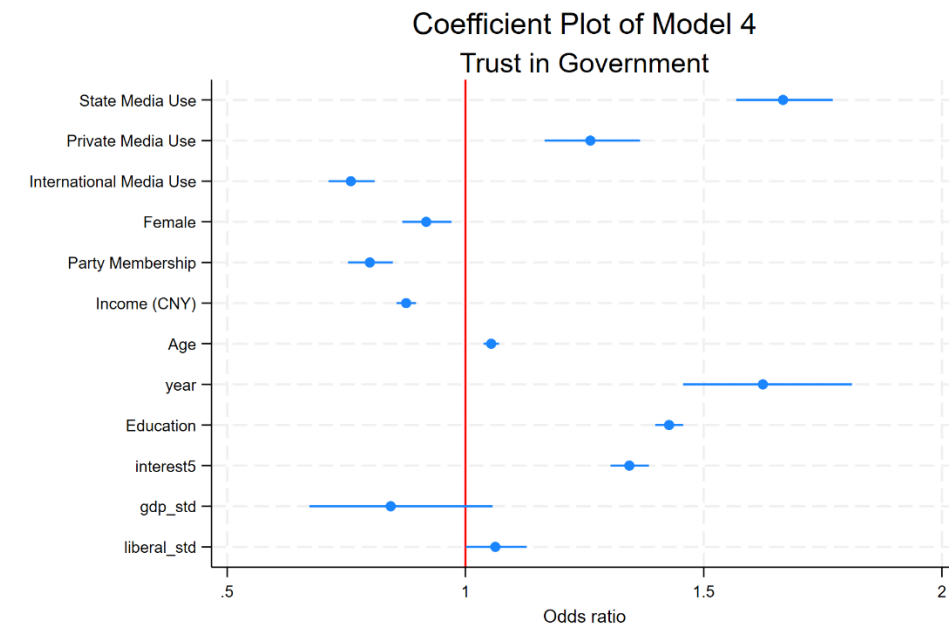
Data source: SSCN 2019-2021

*Appendix B. Coefficient Plots of Model 1-4*



**Coefficient Plots of Model 2 and Model 3**





*Appendix C. Survey Questions Related to Key Variables*

1. Survey question for **dependent variable** trust in government (translation in English and original Chinese question):

Please tell us how much trust you have in the institutions below? Is it: a great deal of trust, quite a lot of trust, neutral, not very much trust, or none at all? (can be answered from memory)

(Matrix Single Choice Questions \*Mandatory)

	None at all	Not very much	Fifty Fifty	A fair amount	A great deal
Central government					
County government					
Police office					
Court					
Hospital					
Resident committee or village committee					

请问您对下列这些机构或组织的信任程度如何？（可以凭印象回答）（矩阵单选题 \*必答）

	完全不信任	不太信任	一半一半	比较信任	非常信任	不知道(不想说)
中央政府	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
区、县政府	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
公安局	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
法院	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
医院	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
居委会或村委会	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2. Survey question for **independent variable** consumption of inclination-oriented media (translation in English and original Chinese question):

How often do you use the following channels of information access? (Matrix Single Choice Questions \*Mandatory)

	Never	Seldom	Occasionally (once or twice per month)	Often (a couple of times per week)	Almost every day
Domestic portals (Sina, Tencent, Netease, Phoenix, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Domestic paper newspapers and magazines (People's Daily, Southern Metropolis Daily, Half Moon Talk, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Domestic television and radio stations and their microblogging and microblogging accounts (CCTV news channels, local television stations, the Central People's Broadcasting Station, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
WeChat friend circle, WeChat group forwarded all kinds of news, WeChat public account article	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information posted by non-government individuals or organizations on Sina Weibo	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Western media and their websites (BBC, New York Times, Twitter, Youtube, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mobile News Client APP (Today's Headlines, Netease News, Sina News, Huffington Post, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Professional online forums (e.g. Zhihu, Douban, Baidu Bar, Hupu, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Short videos (Douyin, Kwai, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pop-up video sites (Beili, iQIYI, Youku, Tencent Video, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Overseas, Taiwan, and Hong Kong media (DuoWei News, Liberty Times, The Epoch Times, Apple Daily, etc)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

在下面这些信息获取的渠道中，您的使用情况如何？（矩阵单选题 \*必答）

	从来不使用	很少使用	偶尔使用 (一个月 1-2 次)	经常使用 (一周几次)	几乎每天都用
国内门户网站(新浪、腾讯、网易、凤凰等)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
国内纸版报纸和杂志(人民日报、南方都市报、半月谈等)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

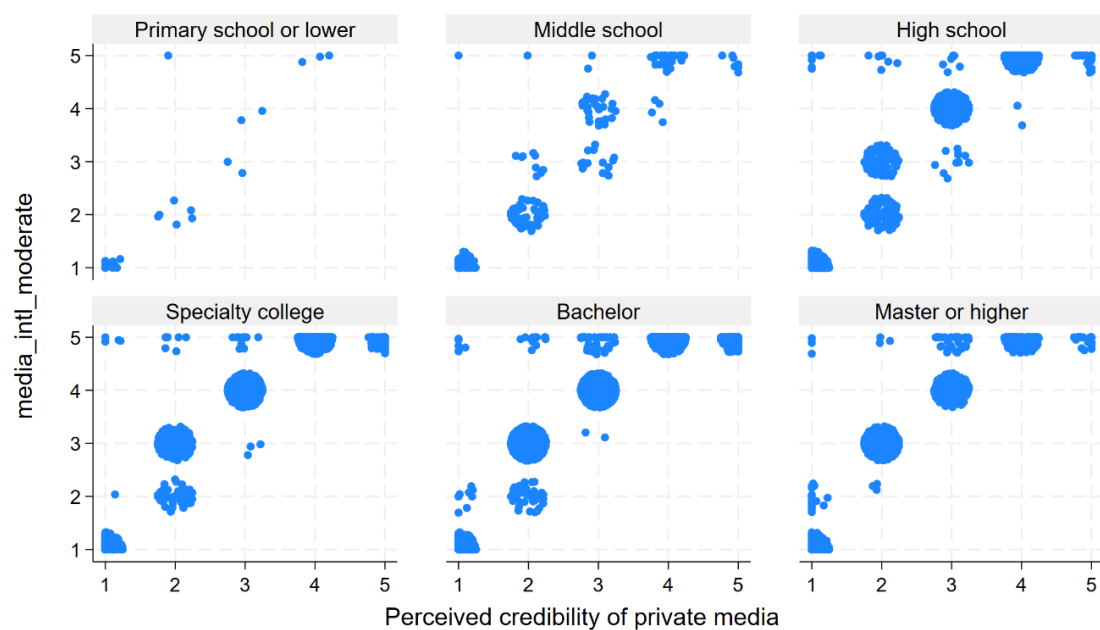
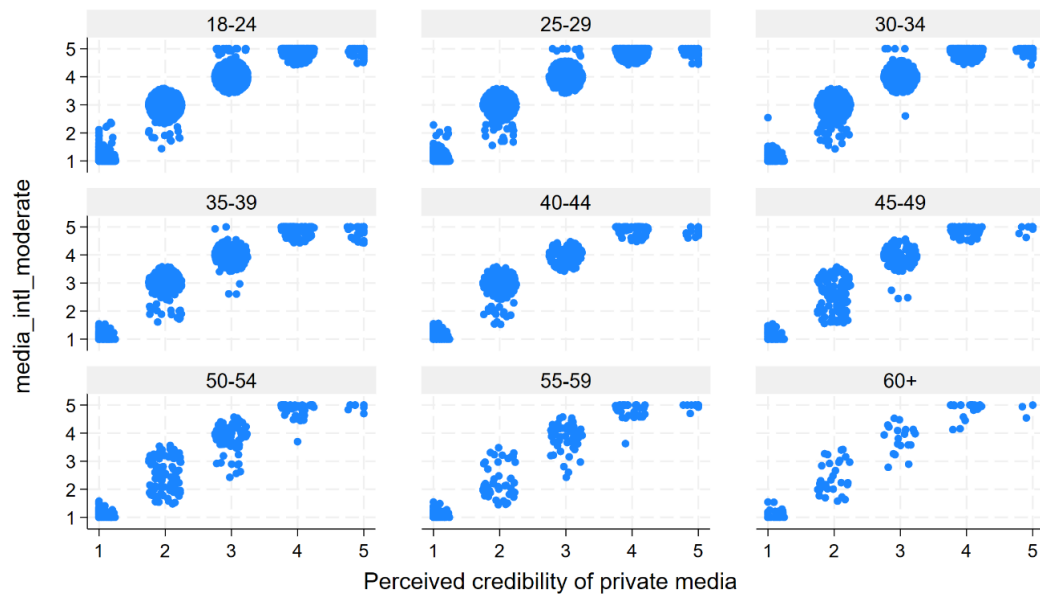
国内电视台和电台及其微博、微信账号(央视新闻频道、地方电视台、中央人民广播电台等)	○	○	○	○	○
微信朋友圈、微信群转发的各种消息、微信公众号文章	○	○	○	○	○
新浪微博非政府类个体或组织账号发布的信息	○	○	○	○	○
西方媒体及其网站(BBC、纽约时报、推特、Youtube等)	○	○	○	○	○
手机新闻客户端APP(今日头条、网易新闻、新浪新闻、虎嗅等)	○	○	○	○	○
专业性网络论坛(如:知乎、豆瓣、百度贴吧、虎扑等)	○	○	○	○	○
短视频(抖音、快手等)	○	○	○	○	○
弹幕视频网站(哔哩哔哩、爱奇艺、优酷、腾讯视频等)	○	○	○	○	○
境外及港台中文媒体(多维新闻、自由时报、大纪元时报、苹果日报等)	○	○	○	○	○

*Appendix D. Adjustment and Simulation Results*

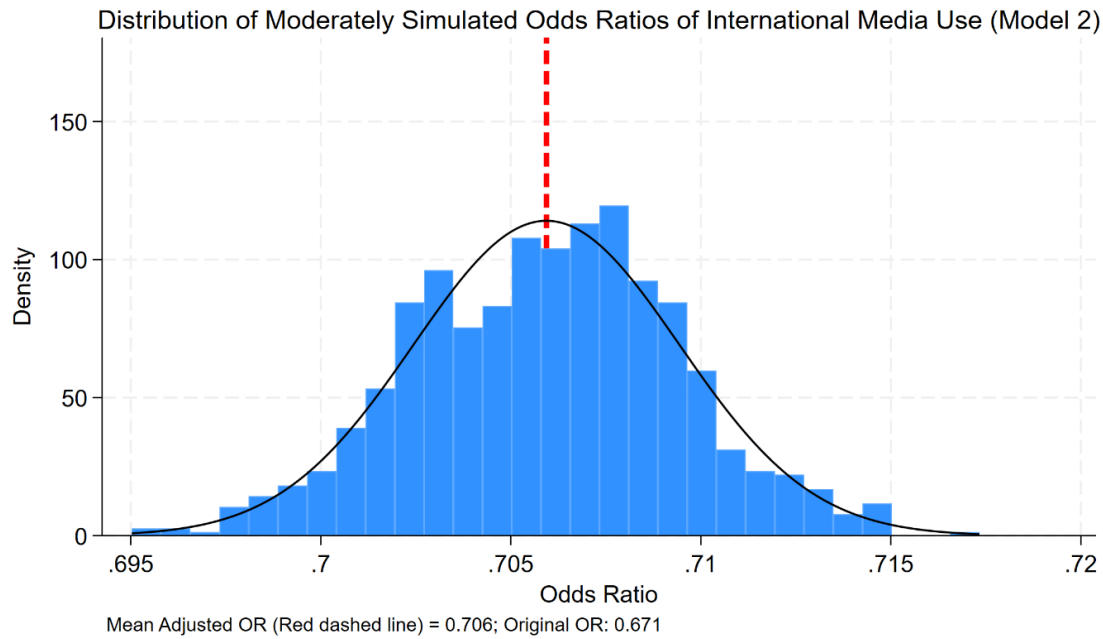
**Model 2**

**Moderate case**

media_intl _moderate	Perceived credibility of private media					Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
1	1,043	0	0	0	0	1,043
2	27	250	0	0	0	277
3	0	1,459	33	0	0	1,492
4	0	0	1,575	6	0	1,581
5	20	30	89	1,028	256	1,423
Total	1,090	1,739	1,697	1,034	256	5,816



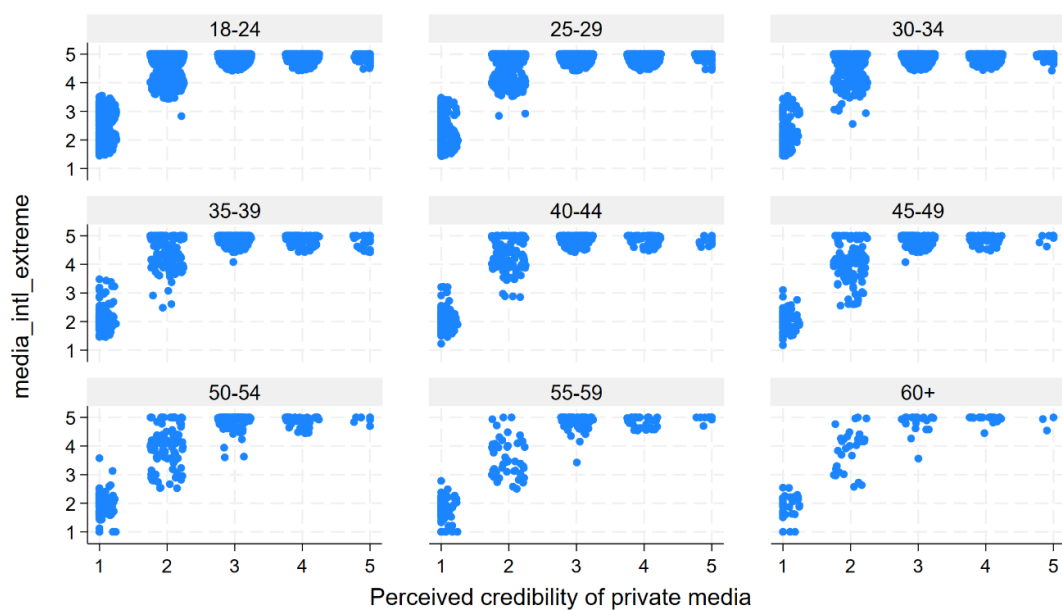




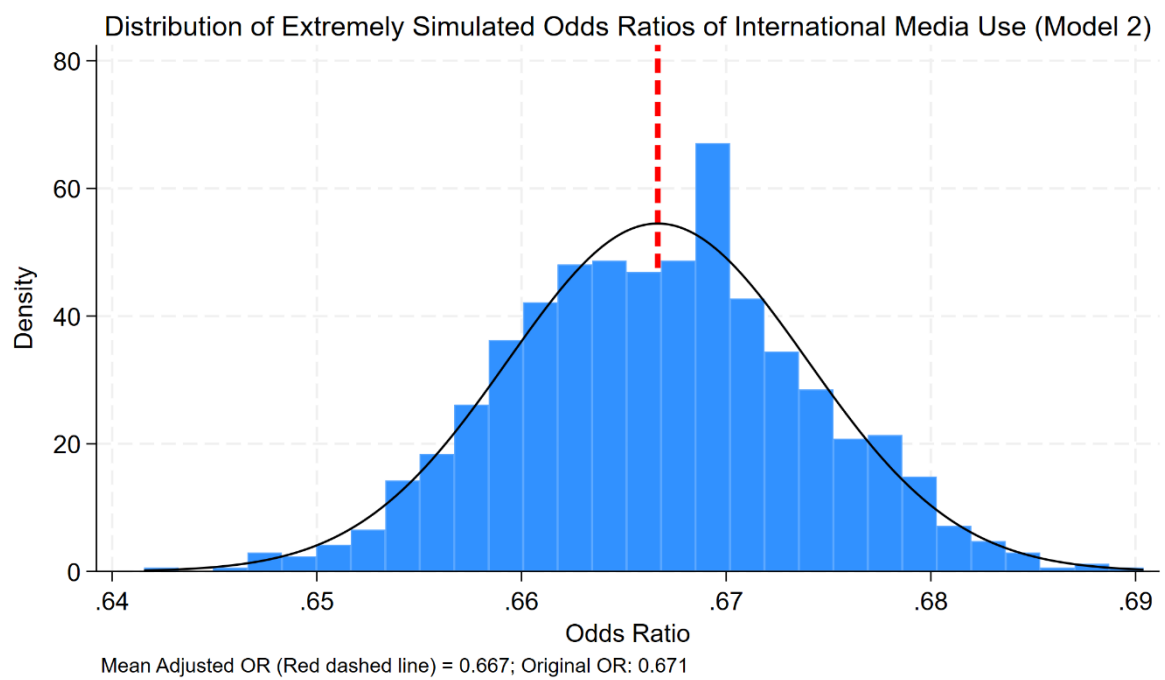
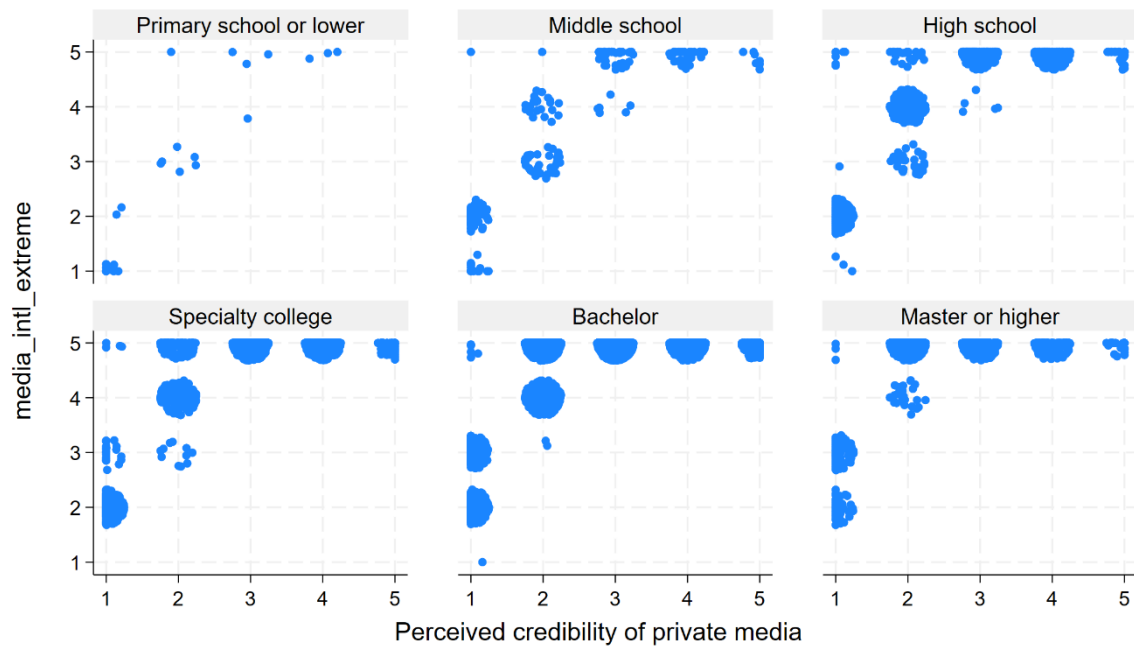
## Model 2

### Extreme case

media_intl_extreme	Perceived credibility of private media					Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
1	29	0	0	0	0	29
2	773	0	0	0	0	773
3	268	90	0	0	0	358
4	0	553	12	0	0	565
5	20	1,096	1,685	1,034	256	4,091
Total	1,090	1,739	1,697	1,034	256	5,816

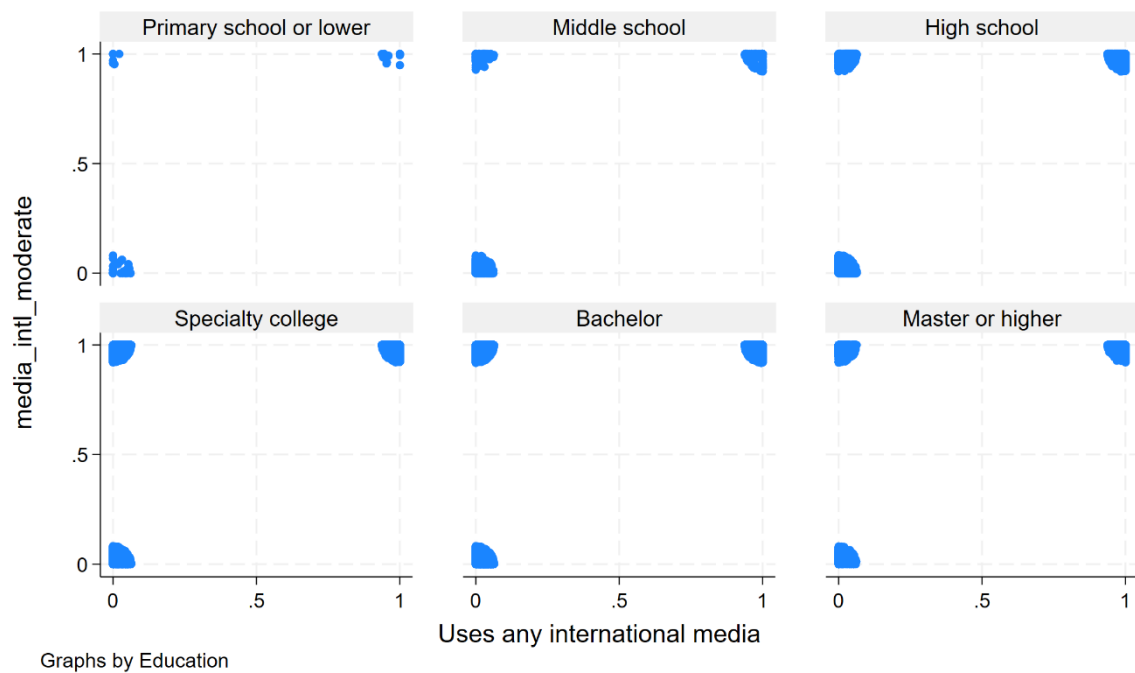
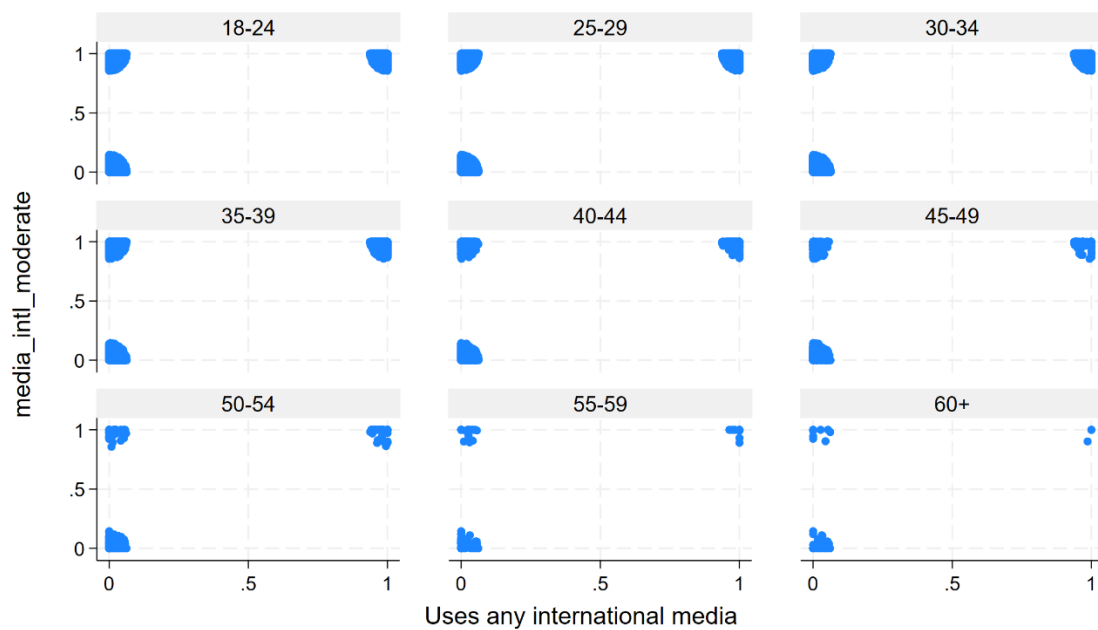


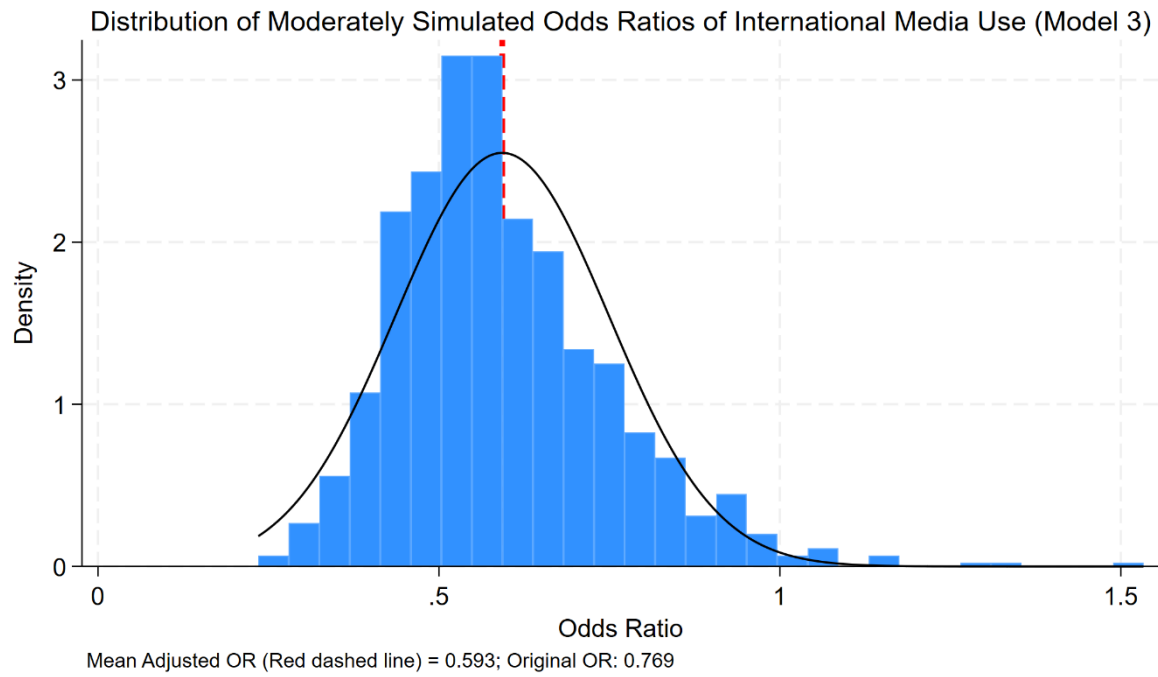
Graphs by Age



**Model 3****Moderate case**

media_intl_moderate	Uses any international media		Total
	0	1	
0	4,981	0	4,981
1	2,771	2,777	5,548
Total	7,752	2,777	10,529

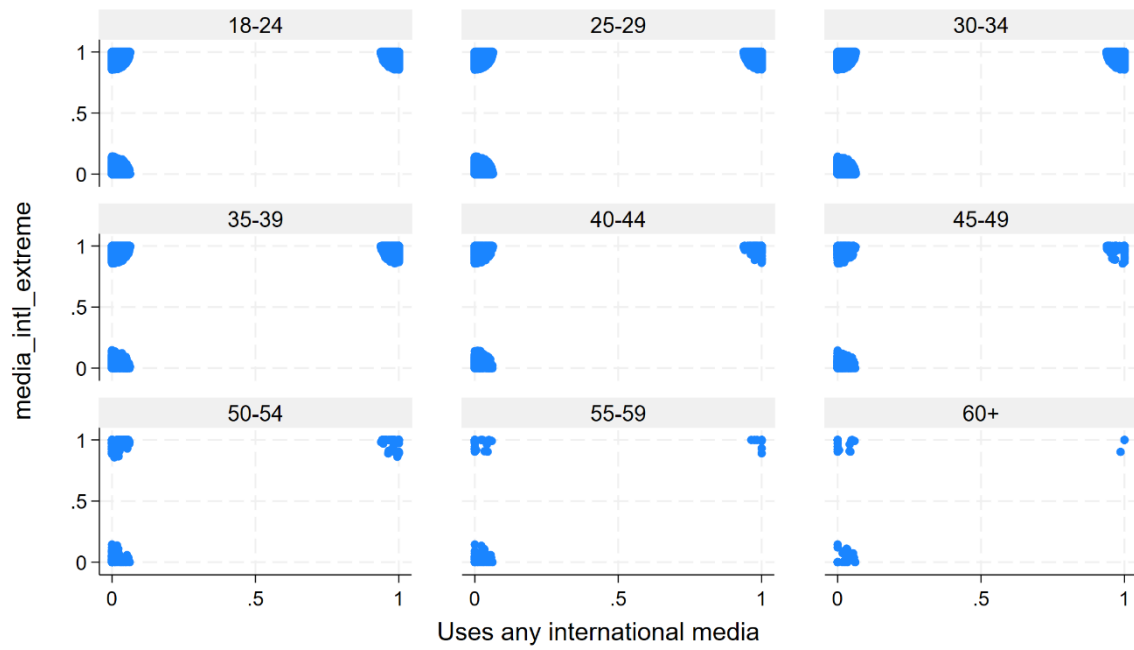




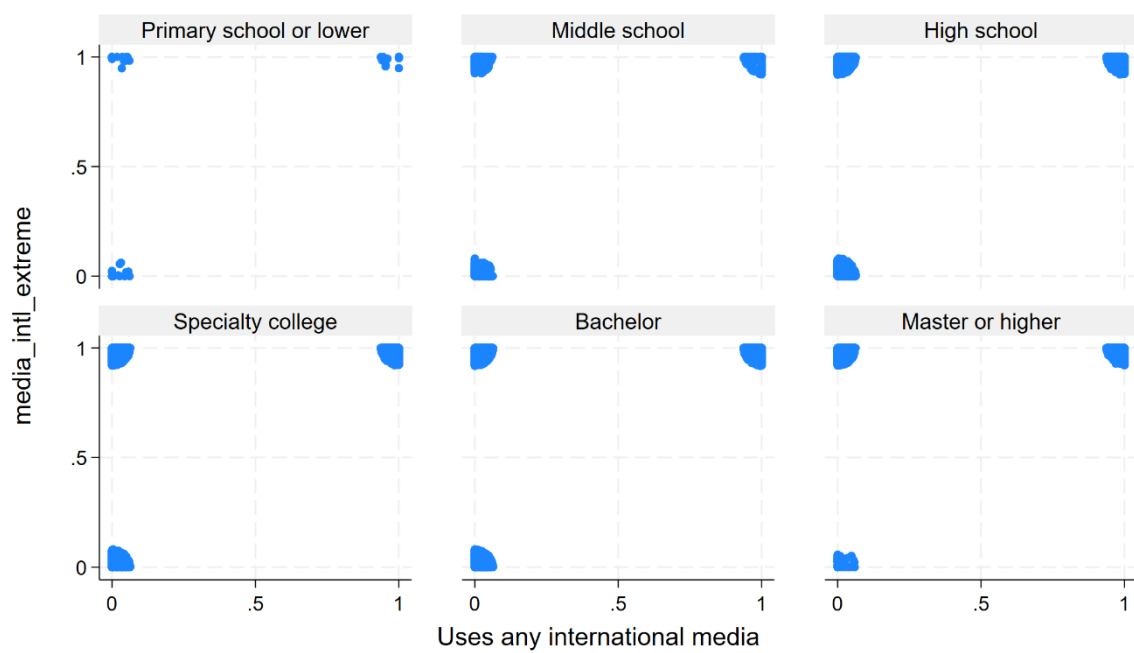
### Model 3

#### Extreme case

media_intl _extreme	Uses any international media		Total
	0	1	
0	2,338	0	2,338
1	5,414	2,777	8,191
Total	7,752	2,777	10,529



Graphs by Age



Graphs by Education

