Zihan Gao

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Education

University of Wisconsin-Madison *Madison, WI*

PHD CANDIDATE IN INFORMATION SCIENCE *2021 - 2026 (expected)*

- Advisor: Dr. Jacob Thebault-Spieker
- Research area: Human-AI Interaction; Location-based Computing; LLM Alignment; Geographical Bias; Human-Computer Interaction

Peking University *Beijing, China*

B.S. IN INFORMATION SCIENCE, B.S. IN PSYCHOLOGY *2017 - 2021*

- Advisor: Dr. Pengyi Zhang
- Graduate with Honors

Publications

PEER-REVIEWED CONFERENCE AND JOURNAL PUBLICATION

Zihan Gao, Jacob Thebault-Spieker. Is Your Chatbot a Tourist or a Townie? Quantifying Geographic and Localness Disparities in LLM Representations of Place. *In Proceedings of the 29th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing, CSCW 2026*

Zihan Gao, Yifei Xu, Jacob Thebault-Spieker. LOCALBENCH: Benchmarking LLMs on County-Level Local Knowledge and Reasoning. *The 40th Annual AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence, AAAI 2026*

Zihan Gao*, Mohsin Yar Khan Yousufi*, Jacob Thebault-Spieker. Collective Narrative Grounding: Community Coordinated Data Contributions to Improve Local AI Systems. *The 39th Annual Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems Workshop on Algorithmic Collective Action, NeurIPS 2025*

Zihan Gao, Justin Cranshaw. Jacob Thebault-Spieker. Journeying Through Sense of Place with Mental Maps: Characterizing Changing Spatial Understanding and Sense of Place During Migration for Work. *In Proceedings of the 27th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing, CSCW 2024*

Zihan Gao, Jacob Thebault-Spieker. Investigating Users' Responses to Permanent Suspension on Social Media. *In Proceedings of the 27th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing, CSCW 2024*

Zihan Gao, Jiepu Jiang. Evaluating human-AI hybrid conversational systems with chatbot message suggestions. *In Proceedings of the 30th ACM International Conference on Information & Knowledge Management, CIKM 2021*

PREPRINTS & UNDER REVIEW

Zihan Gao, Justin Cranshaw, Jacob Thebault-Spieker. A Turing Test for "Localness": Conceptualizing, Defining, and Recognizing Localness in People and Machines. *Under review at the ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction, TOCHI, Preprint*

WORKSHOP/POSTER/DEMO

Zihan Gao, Jiaying Lizzy Liu, Yifei Xu, Jacob Thebault-Spieker. From Clips to Communities: Fusing Social Video into Knowledge Graphs for Localness-Aware LLMs. *Companion Publication of the 2025 Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing, CSCW '25 Companion*

Zihan Gao, Jacob Thebault-Spieker. From Fact-Checking to Narrative Grounding: Toward Local Narrative Infrastructures for Epistemic Justice. *The 27th Acm Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing Workshop on Beyond Information, CSCW 2025*

Jieli Liu, **Zihan Gao**, Pengyi Zhang. 2020. Exploring how topic characteristics influence online discussion quality. *In Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology 2020, ASIS&T 2021*

Other Research Activities

Research Camps

| 2025 | CSST: Summer Research Institute for the Science of Socio-Technical Systems, CSST2025, Indian Lake, NY |
| 2025 | Oxford—Berkeley Summer Doctoral Programme, Oxford Internet Institute & UC Berkeley School of Information |

Awards, Fellowships, & Grants

2025	Student Research Grants Competition ($1500), University of Wisconsin-Madison
2025	Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship ($3600), University of Wisconsin-Madison
2021	SIGIR Travel Grant, SIGIR
2021	Graduate with Honors, Peking University
2020	Annual Excellent Student, Peking University

Services

Peer Review

Reviewer	ACM CHI conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, 2024,2025*
Reviewer	ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing, 2022,2023,2024*,2025*
Reviewer	ACM Symposium on User Interface Software and Technology, 2025
	means Special Recognition of Outstanding Reviews,

Services

| Student Volunteer | ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing, 2022 |

Presentations

10/2021. Evaluating human-AI hybrid conversational systems with chatbot message suggestions. Paper presentation: CIKM2021, virtual.

11/2024. Investigating Users' Responses to Permanent Suspension on Social Media. Paper presentation: CSCW2024 San José, Costa Rica.

11/2024. Journeying Through Sense of Place with Mental Maps: Characterizing Changing Spatial Understanding and Sense of Place During Migration for Work. Paper presentation: CSCW2024 San José, Costa Rica.

Teaching Experience

2025	Introduction to Web Development, **UW-Madison**, Teaching Assistant
2022 - 2023	Data and Algorithms: Ethics and Policy, **UW-Madison**, Teaching Assistant
2020 - 2021	Information Retrieval, **Peking University**, Teaching Assistant

Mentoring

2025 - now	**Sanyukta**, Undergraduate Student, Computer Science, UW-Madison
2025 - now	**Xuancheng Tu**, PhD Student, Computer Science, UW-Madison
2024 - 2025	**Haiyi He**, Undergraduate Student, Computer Science, UW-Madison
2024 - 2024	**Jingwen Pan**, Undergraduate Student, Computer Science, UW-Madison
2023 - 2024	**Tara Awate**, Undergraduate Student, Computer Science, UW-Madison
2023 - 2025	**Rushali Dinesh Bhudeka**, Graduate Student, Information School, UW-Madison
2022 - 2023	**Xinze Liu**, Undergraduate Student, Computer Science, UW-Madison