

MEDIA TRUST IN CHINA: EXPOSURE TO INFORMATION, COGNITIVE
CONSISTENCY, AND KNOWLEDGE GAP

by

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ABSTRACT

TENGTENG CAI. Media trust in China: Exposure to information, cognitive consistency, and knowledge gap (Under the direction of DR. STEPHANIE MOLLER)

This research examines media trust in China in the new Internet era. Cognitive consistency model and the model of knowledge gap and media trust are employed to explain the public trust in different sources of media. According to the cognitive consistency model, people are more likely to trust a specific media source if it is the only information source for them, while access to alternative information sources may result in lower trust in the original source. The Internet provides an alternative information source to the Chinese domestic mainstream media due to its openness and efficiency in spreading information. The model of knowledge gap and media trust argues that highly educated people are less likely to be affected by the Internet, while people with less education are more affected by the Internet. Less-educated people are less likely to trust the domestic mainstream media and more likely to trust foreign media when they use the Internet. Through separate analysis of data from urban and rural subsample, I report the factors that affect public trust in media and how these factors work in China. Overall, both urban and rural residents who use the Internet are less likely to trust the domestic mainstream media, and are more likely to trust foreign media. However, this influence is only significant among less-educated people. Additionally, in the case study of China, people are also educated in the process of facing divergent information from different media sources. The results confirm the prediction of the cognitive consistency model and the model of knowledge gap and media trust.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to ordinary people, who work hard and insist on pursuing their dreams.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The media plays an important role in modern societies. It functions as a gatekeeper for political power and as a tool for propaganda, and it affects people's social trust, social capital and political participation (DiMaggio et al 2001). Media trust is the public trust in media. Because it is an important component of the media's influences in society, media trust draws substantial attention from communication scholars. Although media trust is important for democracy, previous studies found a declining trend of media trust in democratic countries, including the United States, Australia, and New Zealand (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Gronke and Cook 2007; Hanitzsch, Dalen, and Steindl 2018). Previous research also demonstrates that public trust in media remains low in some post-communist countries in Eastern Europe (Pjesivac 2017; Hanitzsch, Dalen, and Steindl 2018). Since public trust of media has a large impact on the audiences' news selection, audiences' response to media, and citizens' trust of democracy (Tsfati and Cappella 2003, 2005; Ariely 2015; Tsfati and Ariely 2014), declining media trust should be a concern for the governments, political leaders, and scholars.

This study explores media trust in China. China is a post-communist country with a new media environment where access to foreign media has expanded with the Internet. The changes brought by the Internet affect Chinese citizens' trust in the domestic mainstream media. Media trust and political trust are highly associated with each other in China because media is governed directly by the government in authoritarian countries. The next sections reviews factors that affect media trust in both democratic and post-communist countries. I then articulate the role of the Internet by explaining media bias from the perspective of selective exposure, arguing that the rise of the Internet in China

exposes citizens to more diverse perspectives. I propose that this exposure coupled with education influences public trust of media.

2. MEDIA TRUST AND POLITICAL TRUST

The two concepts of political trust and media trust are closely related. Media trust is a form of confidence in political institutions (Dalton 1999). Hanitzsch, Dalen, and Steindl (2018) confirmed the nexus between media trust and political trust. The relationship has become stronger over time, particularly in politically polarized societies. Studies have shown that declining political trust affects media trust (Cappella and Jamieson 1997). Usually the use of a specific type of media will increase the trust in that particular media (Hopmann, Shehata, and Strömbäck 2015), but the framing of politics as a strategic game produces political cynicism that decreases political trust, and in turn hurts media trust (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Hopmann, Shehata, and Strömbäck 2015).

The relationship between media trust and political trust varies in different societies. The media can present plural voices for mass communication in a liberal environment, or function as an instrument of the government or an integral part of a state (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956). In democratic countries, the government does not have a controlling relationship with media. Based on the principle of free expression, one of the roles played by the media is to criticize the government (Xu 2012). Thus, people's trust in these two institutions are distinguished and dissociated (Gunther, Hong, and Rodriguez 1994; Chaffee, Nass, and Yang 1991). By conducting comparative studies for fifty-three countries with longitudinal data, Ariely (2015) demonstrated that the two kinds of trust have a weak relation in countries with high levels of media autonomy and journalistic professionalism. In contrast, in authoritarian societies the media is an organ of the government. Since the two institutions do not perform independently, there is a

close bond between media trust and political trust (Chaffee, Nass, and Yang 1991).

Media trust is closely connected with political trust in countries where there is limited media autonomy and journalistic professionalism (Ariely 2015; Hanitzsch, Dalen, and Steindl 2018; Chen and Shi 2001; Yang and Tang 2010). For instance, studies of political trust in China include public trust in either mass media or state media in the measurements of political trust (Chen and Shi 2001; Sheng 2013).

The importance of media trust is apparent, and media trust in post-communist countries deserves more exploration because most research on the factors affecting media trust focuses on democratic countries such as the United States (Tsfati and Cappella 2003, 2005; Gronke and Cook 2007; Daniller et al 2017), or conducts cross-national comparative studies of different regimes (Tsfati and Ariely 2014; Ariely 2015; Hopmann, Shehata, and Strömbäck 2015; Hanitzsch, Dalen, and Steindl 2018). Studies of democratic countries find that the factors that affect media trust include personal use of media (Hopmann, Shehata, and Strömbäck 2015; Tsfati 2010), partisanship and ideological polarization (Hanitzsch, Dalen, and Steindl 2018), political trust (Avery 2009), media systems which are mainly determined by the degree of commercialization and the degree of “political parallelism” in different countries (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Strömbäck, and Dimitrova 2006; Hopmann, Shehata, and Strömbäck 2015).

Few studies explore the predictors of media trust in post-communist countries. Some studies illustrate that post-communist countries display low levels of media trust because of the effects of the lingering communist culture (Sztompka 2000; Pjesivac 2017). For example, one of the latest studies (Pjesivac 2017) explored the origins of distrust of the institution of news media in Serbia and found that both cultural theories

and performance theories explained the media trust in Serbia. Cultural theorists argue that institutional trust is exogenous and comes from cultural norms and beliefs, and people learn the attitudes toward trust in early life (Almond and Verba 1963). Fear of the controlling regime is characteristic of the culture in Eastern Europe countries (Rose 1994). Performance theorists state that institutional trust is a rational response to institutional performance, such as policy outcomes, so it is endogenous (Hetherington 1998; Mishler and Rose 2001).

Yet very few studies have explored media trust in post-communist countries in relation to the rise of the Internet. This is an important gap in the literature since the Internet generates differential exposure to information. I will make use of the cognitive consistency model which is based on exposure to information and freedom of choice to explain declining domestic media trust in post-communist countries. Specifically, I will focus on media trust in the new media environment in China where Internet-use has expanded. Different from post-communist countries in Eastern Europe, China launched economic reform since the late 1970s. Nowadays, governed by the communist party, China is an authoritarian country with a free-market economy. Previous studies, such as Xu (2012), demonstrated that in China, media trust is negatively correlated with the frequency of Internet-use but has no significant relationship with the frequency of traditional media use, such as books, TV, newspapers/magazines. However, Xu (2012) did not provide an explanation for the negative relationship between the frequency of Internet-use and the media trust of state-sponsored media in China.

I argue that media trust, especially public trust in domestic mainstream media, is largely affected by the upsurge of the Internet because the Internet creates a space for

self-selection of news exposure and challenges information control in authoritarian countries. The rapid developments of the Internet have brought vast changes to post-communist countries' media environments, altering the scope and ease of acquiring information (Taubman 1998). The Internet also offers different modes of communication and diverse contents (text, images, video, etc.) (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, and Robinson 2001). The Internet provides more freedom for selecting news (Zillmann, Chen, Knobloch, and Callison 2004), which means it can generate opportunities for individuals to select their exposure to the news. This may generate differences in public opinions towards media trust between people who rely on the Internet and people who do not.

Just like the economic reform in China, media in China also experienced monumental changes during the reform era since the late 1970s. Before the reform, Chinese mass media were entirely state owned. After the reform, marketization was brought in to the field of Chinese media. However, there are still restrictions on private ownership and all major newspapers, radio, and television stations are still registered under state or party organizations, which means traditional Chinese media remains subject to the Propaganda Department (Stockman and Gallagher 2011; Hu 2003). While traditional forms of Chinese propaganda portrayed political institutions positively, post-reform domestic media in China covers both positive and negative content about political institutions. However, in general, whether the media is commercialized or not, the Chinese media presents a more positive image of high-profile institutions that are at the high levels of the political system or have pivotal political significance, such as the central government, while only providing negative images of low-profile institutions,

including institutions at lower levels in the government hierarchy or with less political significance (Yang, Tang, Zhou, and Huhe 2014). Generally speaking, because of lingering control upon the media, the domestic media in China provides the audience with the same or similar opinions of positive images of Chinese political system, especially the high-level institutions in the system.

The Internet enhances access to information and provides exposure to more diverse voices compared to traditional Chinese media. The Internet differs from traditional media because of its decentralized nature (Taubman 1998). The Internet is “an alternative news agency” which has the ability to undermine authoritarian control over the flow of information (Ferdinand 2000). Chinese leaders are unsure about the impact of the Internet on their people (Ferdinand 2000). The Chinese government controls domestic websites and limits access to foreign websites (Taubman 1998), but the Internet developed quickly in China and brought new challenges to the governments’ management of media. According to the reports from the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) (2014), until December 2013, there were 618 million Internet users in China, and the rate of Internet coverage reached 45.8%. As previously mentioned, the government still puts controls on this new media platform, but censorship and control of the Internet are much harder to enforce than controlling traditional media, such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013, 2017; Taubman 1998).

3. SELECTIVE EXPOSURE AND MEDIA BIAS

For countries with a free press, the media environment is like a news market. However, the media market is not perfect and media biases exist in the market. People's capacity of consuming news and information is limited, which means consumers need to select which news to read/watch. The a priori preferences of consumers result in media biases from the demand side. Based on the audience autonomy assumption, the hypothesis of selectivity and of inattention and incomprehension argue that the media will reinforce existing preferences (Klapper 1960; MacKuen 1984). Because people have a taste for consistency, they are inclined to interpret new evidence in ways that confirm to their pre-existing beliefs, which is known as confirmatory bias (Yariv 2002). This confirmatory bias leads to the selective exposure of political information since people choose to receive information which they believe so they are selectively exposed to political information. In the situation of selective exposure, adding new sources of information into the media market may exacerbate bias because it allows consumers to self-segregate more effectively (Mullainathan and Shleifer 2005).

Information selection follows an expectancy-value model, which means the individual information-seekers will evaluate the rewards, value, and expenditures, of obtaining the message (Palmgreen, Rayburn, II. 1982; Knobloch-Westerwick et al 2005). Based on the activation model dealing with message sensation value and emotional arousal, viewers are less likely to consume media messages that generate too little or too much emotional arousal (Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, and Peeters 2008; Morgan et al 2003). In addition to biases from subjects and production styles of media messages, consumers also have ideological predispositions and different political attitudes. Readers

have a substantial preference for like-minded news, because it will take a longer time to scrutinize arguments which are incompatible with their beliefs (Edwards and Smith 1996).

In western countries, information selection varies significantly for conservative and liberal consumers (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010). According to the results of a project about political polarization in America, there is little overlap in the news sources for the liberals and conservatives (Mitchell et al 2014). Kaye and Johnson's (2016) also confirmed the ideological slant by examining the media use during the 2012 presidential election. They found that Obama supporters preferred liberal media while Romney supporters chose conservative media.

For post-communist countries, there also exist biases from the viewers/readers' side. Many studies have shown that citizens of these countries doubted or distrusted news media during the communist period, and the pervasiveness of distrust and skepticism remain in the post-communist era (Mishler and Rose 1997; Sztompka 2000; Pjesivac 2017). Studies about Chinese public opinion towards domestic media and foreign media demonstrated that some Chinese citizens have higher pro-Western orientations, and these pre-existing orientations will affect people's selection about positive or negative news about foreign countries (Huang and Yeh 2017). In a survey experiment, Huang and Yeh (2017) find that Chinese Internet users with higher pro-Western orientations are more likely to read news which is positive about foreign countries.

Besides the media biases from the demand-side, media biases from the supply side are also pervasive, and these biases restrict the scope for people to select news. News providers may respond to economic incentives, political ideology, and political power. In

many western countries, competition in the news market places economic pressures upon news organizations as they are stimulated by economic profits. To cater to the consumers' demand, television news coverage tends to be equipped with an increasing number of sensationalist features, such as "dramatic subjects," "audiovisual production features," and laypersons' comments on an issue (Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, and Peeters 2008; Slattery, Doremus, and Marcus 2001). Newspapers also respond to consumers' preferences strongly and tailor their slant to meet their consumers' ideological predispositions (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010).

In addition to market-driven biases, supply-side biases can also come from political pressure. For example, McMillan and Zoido (2004) documented that the Peruvian government can dispense with legality and explicitly bribe the media. For post-communist countries, traditional media is under the state control and the supply-side biases under political pressure still exist. King, Pan and Roberts (2013, 2017) analyzed selective censorship of Chinese social media and found that the censorship program aimed at restraining collective action by preventing some foreign websites from entering into China, disallowing posts which contain banned words or phrases, or removing comments which spur social mobilization from the Internet.

Other scholars put forward ways of reducing the effects of selective exposure and media biases. The economists, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006, 2008) stated that a free press is necessary in the news market. For competitive media markets in democratic countries, they argued that the increasing independently-owned firms on the news market can lead to the truth, because each potential entrant in the independent news market is endowed with a separate piece of evidence. The accumulation of evidences leads to the

clarification of truth. Meanwhile, competition may push firms to provide accurate information. They (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006, 2008) emphasized that having more sources of information available and leading to consumers' beliefs closer to the truth can only happen when consumers are exposed to all the information from competitive sources. In post-communist countries, the expansion of access to the Internet provides citizens a relatively competitive media environment, compared to traditional media markets of the communist era. There are more competitive media outlets on the Internet and political control is harder to implement. Consumers in post-communist countries enjoy more freedom of choice on the Internet, so they can accumulate evidences through the Internet and get the clarification of truth like people do in democratic countries.

4. COGNITIVE CONSISTENCY MODEL

In authoritarian countries, the rise of the Internet may reduce media bias but it also decreases media trust. I argue that the theory of cognitive dissonance helps clarify the mechanism that media trust has declined in authoritarian countries in the new Internet era. Festinger (1957) originally developed the theory of cognitive dissonance to deal with the problem of psychologically inconsistent cognitions. Cognition is a mental representation which is beyond of information given to direct perceptions (Tomasello and Call 1997). To deal with the unpleasant experience of inconsistency, the person needs to make sense of his/her beliefs and of environment, and needs to adjust one or both cognitions to reach consistency. Applying this theory to media trust, when there is contradiction between the news content and people's cognitions, people believe that the media is lying, or convince themselves with more consonant cognition, or alter their cognitions (Chen and Shi 2001). When people choose the first option that the media is lying, they won't believe the content and decrease their trust in the media. However, the theory does not solve the problem regarding selectivity. Bounded-rational human-beings cannot access all information or know the environment comprehensively. People face different environments and they hold various opinions towards their environments. This means when people face the same news, they can refer to different cognitions and may form opposite views. The individual also has multidimensional perceptions of the same information. He/she will select one perception to match the new information. When people have greater access to diverse information, they judge and select one more convincing cognition to coordinate with the new information.

Therefore, I argue that the cognitive consistency model, which is based on the theory of cognitive dissonance, can explain the problem of media trust in China. A key component of the cognitive consistency model is that when people receive new information, in order to avoid unlikable experience of dissonance, people will try to search a cognition which is consistent with the new information. Therefore, if people are only exposed to one source of information and receive a single view, they are more likely to accept the view because it is effortless for them to find a cognition to match the new information. Then, if people obtain more freedom of choice and are exposed to different sources of information, they will face a wider range of vision and form various opinions because they can find different cognitions and select one to match a piece of the information.

By applying the cognitive consistency model to media trust, I can explain the differences in who is trusting which sources of media. If people can only acquire one voice from the media, they are more likely to believe the contents from the media because they can reach the consistency of cognitions simply. Therefore, people will generate high trust of the media. Where there exists exposure to alternative information sources, trust of the original media will be lessened, because when people receive new information from other competitive media, they can also find the matched-cognition to those alternative opinions. Importantly, the formation of media distrust in the original source of media requires competitive media outlets and freedom of accessibility to different sources of information.

Chinese people can have a high level of freedom of choice about consuming online news. Based on the cognitive consistency model, people who have more freedom

of news selection are less likely to trust the domestic mainstream media. Since Chinese people who use the Internet are more likely to obtain the freedom of news consumption, they can be exposed to differing opinions from domestic mainstream media more easily. Specifically, Chinese people who use the Internet can access more information from media sources that are not under the state control. Different from the domestic mainstream media which has the unified voice, the Internet exposes Chinese citizens to different opinions. According to the cognitive consistency model, they should have lower trust in the domestic mainstream media.

Hypothesis 1 People who use the Internet in China are less likely to trust the domestic mainstream media, compared to people who do not use the Internet in China.

Most previous studies about media trust stop here, rather than asking what is next. If people don't trust the mainstream media, what are their other choices? Do they trust other media sources? Scholars have examined the association between media trust and audience news exposure patterns (Tsfati and Cappella 2003; Tsfati 2010). The simple hypothesis is that when people do not trust their domestic mainstream news, which generally includes television, radio, and newspapers, they find alternative nonmainstream sources of media (Tsfati and Cappella 2003). Online journalism is widely thought to be an alternative to traditional domestic mainstream journalism. However, in contrast to his hypothesis, Tsfati (2010) found in an Israeli study that generally the relationship between mistrust in mainstream media and consumption of online news is negative. The more people have trust on the Israeli mainstream media, the more people are exposed to online news which is from nonmainstream media. Different from these studies on association of media trust and media exposure, here I don't explore the alternative forms of media but

pay attention to the alternative sources of information. Xu (2012) explored the media trust by different information sources in China. The sources include government, state media, experts of relevant areas, and word-of-mouth communications (p39). A negative correlation was found between the Internet use and trust in state media. Here, I focus on the competition of news from domestic mainstream media and foreign media. As a post-communist country, there is no news market or competition among domestic mainstream media like democratic countries. No competition means no meaningful alternatives. All the domestic mainstream media report one-sided and uncontested information. The Internet, as an exceptional one, provides the competitive environment with tremendous information. Through the Internet, people have the freedom to select and obtain information from different sources of media. Indeed, it is easier to access foreign media by using the Internet. Foreign media is independent from the domestic mainstream media, so it can be taken as a “meaningful” alternative from the domestic mainstream media and provides Chinese people with different perspectives.

Hypothesis 2 People who use the Internet in China are more likely to trust foreign media, compared to people who do not use the Internet in China.

5. KNOWLEDGE GAP AND MEDIA TRUST

Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien (1975) found different effects from the mass media on people from different socioeconomic strata. The problem of mass communication is not about increasing knowledge, but about the relative deprivation of knowledge. They (1975) posed the knowledge gap hypothesis, arguing that the gap of knowledge will be enlarged by mass media because people with higher socioeconomic strata acquire information faster than population with lower socioeconomic strata. To further explain knowledge inequality, Grabe, Lang, Zhou, and Bolls (2000) posited that not only physical access to information, but also cognitive access or information processing competence is a critical factor, and for the first time they designed experiments to test the relationship for television viewers from different education groups. They found that although participants with high or low education paid the same and relatively high attention to the news stories, people with more education could better memorize the facts from the news stories. The findings suggested that people with more education are better at translating information from audio-visual media.

By applying the knowledge gap hypothesis to Internet use in China, I argue that there is a relationship between the knowledge gap and media trust. Individuals among the high socioeconomic strata can more easily access different forms of information. They are less likely to rely on a single source of media to form their own opinions. People from the low socioeconomic strata lack access to diverse information. They are largely affected by a univocal source of media.

As an important indicator of socioeconomic strata, education affects people's attitudes and behavior and is negatively related with media trust in the United States

(Tsfati and Ariely 2014), and negatively correlated with trust in state-run media in China (Xu 2012). According to 33rd report from China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) (2014), until the end of 2013, 67.2% Internet users in China have middle school, high middle school or vocational education degree. Particularly, students are the largest group who use the Internet, the percentage of this group is 25.5%. Chinese Internet users continue to expand to people with low education degree. The trend deserves detailed and systematic analysis here to find the influence of relying upon the Internet on Chinese people with different education levels.

According to the knowledge gap hypothesis, people with more education can access various sources of information regardless whether they use the Internet or not. Thus, the Internet has limited influence on people with higher education. In contrast, people with less education do not enjoy an abundant information if they do not use the Internet. Their opinions will be changed after they use the Internet.

Thus, combining the knowledge gap hypothesis and the cognitive consistency model, since there is no new competitive information for highly-educated people, their attitudes will not be influenced by using the Internet. For instance, many highly-educated people can access foreign news even without using the Internet, so they have already formed their opinions based on the consideration of both domestic mainstream media and foreign media. Some other studies also show the same demonstration. As Mullainathan and Shleifer (2005) found that people in Arabic countries who watch or listen to Western news are already sympathetic to its perspective and they may already watch foreign media, so they are unlikely to be strongly affected by the entry of new media outlets.

People who are highly educated have already been exposed to diverse information sources, regardless whether they use the Internet or not. While for people with less education, the Internet will have large impact on them. Internet use exposes them to other sources of information more frequently, rather than only being exposed to domestic mainstream media. In accordance with the cognitive consistency model, the trust of people with less education on the domestic mainstream media will be reduced after they use the Internet.

Hypothesis 3a For people who are highly educated in China, their media trust is less likely to be affected by the Internet use, compared to people who are less educated.

Hypothesis 3b For those who are less educated in China, people who use the Internet are less likely to trust the domestic mainstream media, compared to people who do not use the Internet.

6. DATA AND METHODS

6.1 Dataset

In this paper, I analyze data from the 2013 Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS). Started from 2003, CGSS is a nationally comprehensive and sequential academic survey program. The database includes a sample with a diverse background, such as different geographical areas, various social levels, complex social network, etc. The sample for CGSS data from 2010 to 2019 is selected by two levels, mandatory selection-level and selection level. Both levels have three stages of selecting units. The mandatory selection-level focuses on metropolis, and the three stages are subdistrict (*jiedao*), residential committees (*juweihui*), and household. The selection level targets for households in urban and rural areas excluding metropolis in the mandatory selection-level. The three stages in this level are district (*qu*), county-level city (*xianjishi*) and county (*xian*), residential committees (*juweihui*) and villager committees (*cunweihui*), and household. The 2013 data is appropriate for my study because it provides sufficient time for the Internet to develop and influence individuals.

When analyzing data, the large and deep disparity between urban and rural areas in China need to be considered carefully. The household registration system (*hukou* system) is a special system in China in charge of population mobility, especially rural-urban migration (Chan and Zhang 1999). As a “birth-subscribed” system, every Chinese citizen is classified by the household registration system at birth as rural or urban personnel (Potter 1983; Chan and Zhang 1999). With the household registration system, Chinese urban and rural areas follow different development paths and implement distinctive policies. Based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China, at the

end of 2013, there were 731.11 million urban residents and 629.61 million rural residents. In 2013, in urban areas, the disposable personal income (DPI) was 26,955 Chinese yuan, the number of graduates from general high school was 7.73 million, and the per capita health expenditure was 3234.12 Chinese yuan. In contrast, for the same year in rural areas, the DPI for rural residents was 8,896 Chinese yuan, the number of graduates from general high school was only 0.26 million, and the per capita health expenditure was 1274.44 Chinese yuan. Knigh and Song (1999) pointed out that the urban-rural divide is the exceptional characteristic of Chinese inequality. The division is shrinking overtime but it still exists. Commonly, residents in urban areas live in a more convenient environment, enjoy more opportunities to access diverse information, and have higher socioeconomic strata.

Urban and rural residents also hold distinctive attitudes of political trust. Li (2004) stated that many rural Chinese villagers retain trust and confidence in central authorities. According to Zhai (2018), Chinese traditional political values and social values positively affect people's political trust in institutions and government officials, meanwhile Chinese traditional family values is also positively correlated with the public trust in government officials. Zhai (2018) claimed that though the trend of traditional values is declining in China, rural residents hold a higher degree of traditional family and social values than their urban counterparts, which means people in rural China should maintain a higher degree of political trust in the political authority, compared to people living in urban China. As I stated above, media trust is not independent of political trust in authoritarian countries. The trust in the domestic mainstream can be taken as an indicator of political trust. Therefore, the high-level of political trust among rural

residents may reflect a correspond with a high-level of public trust in the domestic mainstream media.

Given the large differences between urban and rural residents in China, the factors that affect their attitudes towards media may diverge. Therefore, I will analyze urban and rural data separately. The original sample size is 5,666. After cleaning data, in total, there are 5,399 respondents included in the dataset. There are 3,311 respondents in the urban sample, while there are 2,088 respondents in the rural sample.

6.2 Variables

My dependent variable is media trust. The original question in the survey is that “when there exists divergence between reports from the domestic mainstream media and from foreign media, which one will you believe?” There are four categories of this variable: (1) believe reports from domestic mainstream media, (2) believe reports from foreign media, (3) believe neither but have own independent judgements, and (4) don’t know which one to believe. The four categories cover all possible situations. For the urban sample, 37.9% people choose believing domestic mainstream media, while only 8.6% (285 respondents) believe foreign media. 30.4% people do not believe either one but have their own judgements, and 23.1% people respond “Don’t Know”. For the rural sample, 44.9% people believe domestic mainstream media, 3.0% (62 respondents) believe foreign media. 18.3% people do not believe either one but have their own judgements, and 33.8% people respond “Don’t Know”. The percentage of believing foreign media is relatively small, especially for the rural sample. In Figure 1, I present the percentage of each category of media trust for urban and rural residents.

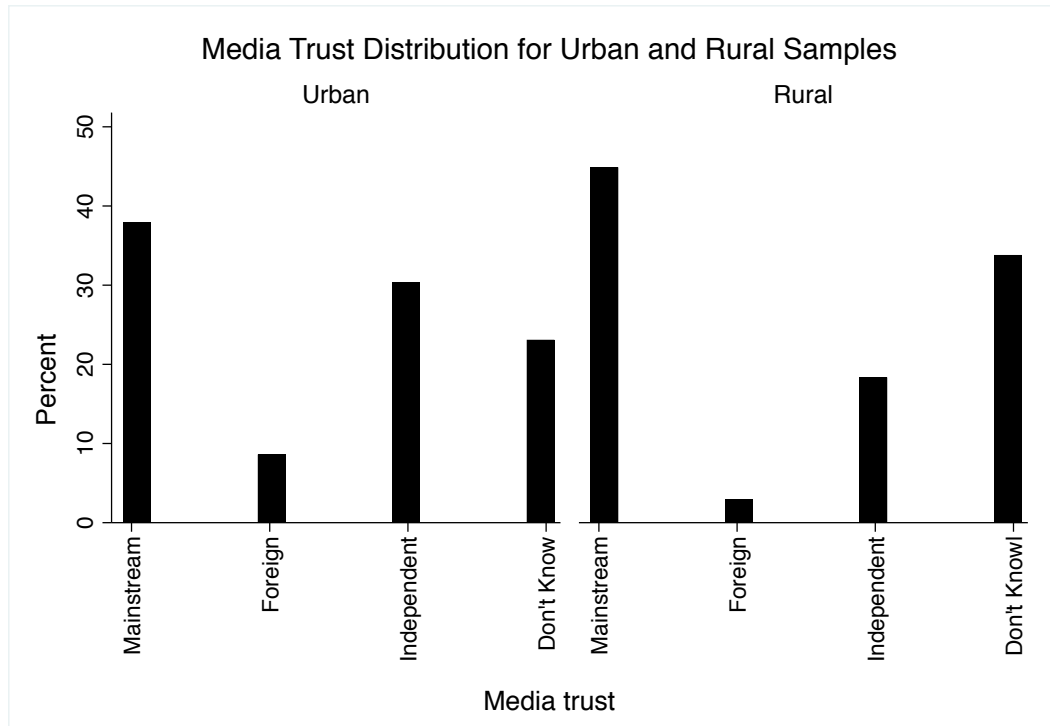


Figure 1 Media trust distribution for urban and rural samples

Based on the cognitive consistency model, I put forward *Hypothesis 1* and *Hypothesis 2*, that Internet use is associated with lower trust in the domestic mainstream media and is associated with higher trust in foreign media. To test these hypotheses, my key independent variable is a dummy variable of using the Internet or not. The original question from the survey is how the information from the Internet affects your thoughts and actions. The answers are categorized as don't know, largely affected, somewhat affected, slightly affected, no effects, and not applicable because of not using the Internet. This variable is recoded as a dichotomous measure of Internet usage¹. I have 2,153 respondents (65.0%) using the Internet and 1,158 respondents (35.0%) who do not use

¹ There are 54 people who answer "Don't Know" in total. People who answer "Don't Know" were assigned into the category of using the Internet. If people cannot describe the impact of the Internet on them rather than answering not using the Internet directly, they were supposed to use the Internet.

the Internet in urban areas. 725 respondents (34.7%) use the Internet and 1,363 respondents (65.3%) do not use the Internet in rural areas.

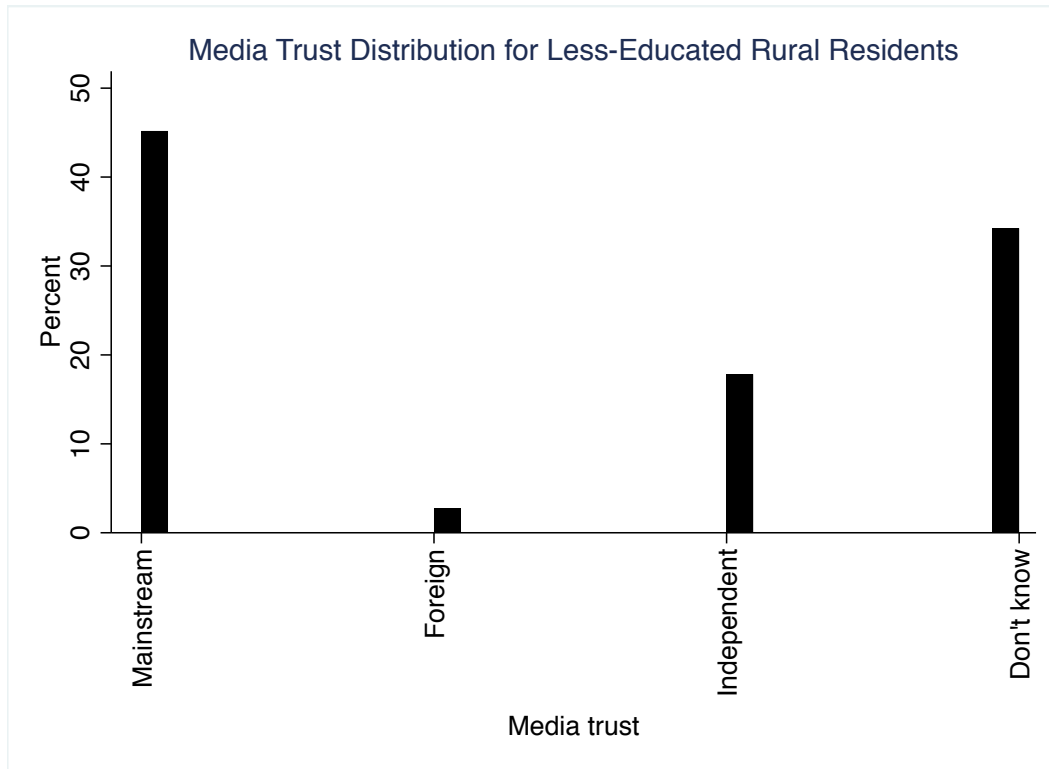


Figure 2 Media trust distribution for less-educated rural residents

According to the knowledge gap model, I argue that education can be a key factor which leads to different reactions towards media trust by people who use the Internet. Education will be included in the model as a control variable. I will also run the regression for highly-educated and less-educated people respectively to see whether and how the Internet use affects media trust in China. The higher-educational system of nation-wide examination for college entrance in China decides that college degree is a vital criterion of evaluating people's educational level. Thus, people who have a college degree are categorized as highly educated, while people who have not obtained college

degree are categorized as less-educated. In urban areas, 25.4% residents accomplish college education or above. In contrast, only 2.5% of rural residents complete college education or above. This phenomenon is largely decided by the uneven distribution of educational resources and the labor market. Since there are only 52 highly-educated people among 2,088 rural residents, it is imbalanced to run regression with dummy variable of education for the rural sample. To avoid any bias resulting from the special group of highly-educated rural residents, for rural sample, I exclude the 52 rural residents and just see whether Internet usage affects less-educated rural residents' media trust. The distribution of media trust for less-educated rural residents is shown in Figure 2. It does not vary much from the distribution of media trust of the whole population in rural areas.

In rural China, people who are highly educated have recognizable demographic differences from people who are less educated. Highly-educated rural residents are much younger, enjoy higher social rank, are more likely to be a member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and are more likely to have a non-agricultural status of household registration. Based on the analyses of the descriptive data, only 7 out of the 52 highly-educated rural residents do not use the Internet. The rates of using Internet among rural residents with college degree or above have reached 86.5%. For highly-educated rural residents who do not use the Internet, most of them (71.4%) trust the domestic mainstream media, only the rest of 2 people answer not trusting either domestic mainstream media or foreign media, but having their own judgements. Basically it is apparent that when highly-educated rural residents do not use Internet, they won't trust foreign media. For highly-educated rural residents who use Internet, 26.7% of them trust domestic mainstream media, 13.3% people choose to trust foreign media. 40.0% people

answer that they won't trust either one but have their own judgements, and also 20.0% people answer "Don't Know". Comparing the rates of media trust for highly-educated rural residents who use with who do not use the Internet, it is apparent to find that Internet usage is an influential factor on reducing the public trust of domestic mainstream media, and increasing the public trust of foreign media. Thus, even before running regression, *Hypothesis 1* and *Hypothesis 2* are seemingly supported by the sample of highly-educated rural residents.

I also include a list of other control variables in my study, such as age, gender, total income last year, CCP membership, current social rank, and the status of household registration (*hukou*). In order to present results clearly, I divide age by 10, and use natural log of total income last year¹. For current social rank, the respondents are asked to indicate their perceptions of their social rank on a 1-10 scale, 1 is the lowest rank and 10 is the highest. The status of household registration reflects the life experience of people, such as where they are born and raised up. Combining the information of household registration and where people currently live, I can identify the original residents and the migrants. Including the variable of household registration in the model can help me to see if the life experience influences people's media trust. There are two categories of the status of household registration, the agricultural or non-agricultural *hukou*. Because information received from different media outlets is various, the frequency of exposure to different media sources will affect people's obtainment of information, knowledge accumulation, and formation of attitudes. Thus, whether people using the traditional

¹ The total income last year which exactly equals to zero has been changed to the lowest income of 150 Chinese yuan and then taken the natural logarithm of them. The change does not affect the distribution of the two variables.

media as their main information sources is also involved in my model. For the original question, the respondents are asked to indicate which media is their main information source. Newspaper, magazine, radio, and television are classified as the traditional media here. The Internet and customized text-message are taken as the new media.

Table 1 Summary table for 2013 CGSS urban and rural samples¹

<i>Variable</i>	Urban		Rural ²	
	Observation	Mean (S.d.)	Observation	Mean (S.d.)
<i>Media trust</i> ³	3,311	1.40 (1.21)	2,036	1.44 (1.36)
<i>Use the Internet</i>	3,311	.63 (.48)	2,036	.30 (.46)
<i>Highly educated</i>	3,311	.25 (.43)	--	--
<i>Age/10</i>	3,311	4.85 (1.73)	2,036	5.35 (1.54)
<i>Female</i>	3,311	.49 (.50)	2,036	.51 (.50)
<i>Total income last year (ln)</i>	3,311	9.58 (1.64)	2,036	8.45 (1.63)
<i>Party membership</i>	3,311	.13 (.34)	2,036	.05 (.22)
<i>Current social rank</i>	3,311	4.34 (1.66)	2,036	4.03 (1.71)
<i>Non-agricultural hukou</i>	3,311	.65 (.48)	2,036	.05 (.22)
<i>Main source (traditional media)</i>	3,311	.71 (.45)	2,036	.94 (.23)

¹ All variables have been weighted by individual weights.

² The rural sample does not include highly-educated rural residents.

³ The coding for media trust is: believing reports from domestic mainstream media is coded as 0, believing reports from foreign media is coded as 1, believing neither but have own judgements is coded as 2, and not knowing which one to believe is coded as 3.

Table 1 illustrates the socio-economic and demographic differences between the urban and rural samples. The rate of Internet use is much higher in urban areas compared to rural areas. Compared to residents in rural areas, residents living in urban areas are more likely to be younger, male, richer, a member of CCP party, and enjoy a higher current social rank. In urban areas the rate of migrants is higher than in rural areas. Furthermore, residents in rural areas have a high level of reliance on information from traditional domestic media, compared to people living in urban areas.

6.3 Model

Since the dependent variable is a nominal variable, I will test the hypotheses with a multinomial logit model (MNL). Since individuals within provinces have more similar life experiences than individuals between provinces, I test intraclass correlation between provinces (significant 7.6%), and have corrected it by including the cluster of province in my model. Because both Internet use and higher education can provide people with more access to diverse information sources and affect people's trust in media, I will include the interaction term of the two in the model. Y is a stratified array of j kinds of media trust. $j=1$ denotes trust in foreign media, $j=2$ represents independent judgements, and $j=3$ reflects "Don't Know". The probabilities of trusting in the domestic mainstream media can be acquired by simply using 1 to deduct the summation of probabilities of all other kinds of media trust. Because I would like to see how Internet use and/or education affects the public trust in media, public trust in the domestic mainstream media is the reference category. m represents one category of media trust. I designates whether people use Internet. E indicates the level of education. C signifies the list of control variables.

$$\Pr(Y = m) = \frac{\exp(\partial_m + \beta_{mI}I_i + \beta_{mE}E_i + \beta_{mIE}I_iE_i + \beta_{mC}C_i)}{1 + \sum_{j=1}^3 \exp(\partial_j + \beta_{jI}I_i + \beta_{jE}E_i + \beta_{jIE}I_iE_i + \beta_{jC}C_i)} \quad (1)$$

7. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

7.1 Media Trust in Urban China

7.1.1 Full Model

Table 2 Multinomial logistic regression of media trust in urban China, 2013

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Media trust</i> (Reference category: trust domestic mainstream media)					
	Model 1			Model 2		
	Foreign media	Independent judgement	Don't know	Foreign media	Independent judgement	Don't know
<i>Use Internet</i>	1.78***	.43**	.03	1.77***	.49**	.02
<i>Highly educated</i>	.18	.34**	-.54**	.08	.80	-1.25**
<i>Age</i>	-.02	-.04	-.09	-.02	-.02	-.09
<i>Age-squared</i>	.01	.01	.04	.01	.004	.03
<i>Female</i>	-.32*	-.09	.24*	-.32*	-.09	.24*
<i>Total income last year (ln)</i>	.19**	.13**	-.01	.19**	.13**	-.01
<i>Party membership</i>	-.89**	-.12	-.22	-.89**	-.14	-.21
<i>Current social rank</i>	-.03	-.07*	-.09**	-.03	-.07*	-.09**
<i>Non-agricultural hukou</i>	.08	-.14	-.69***	.08	-.14	-.69***
<i>Main source (Traditional media)</i>	-.66**	-.50***	-.20	-.66**	-.51***	-.18
<i>Interaction: Use Internet X Highly educated</i>				.09	-.52	.80
<i>Intercept</i>	-4.14***	-1.04	.24	-4.13***	-1.06	.22
<i>Number of cases</i>		3,311			3,311	

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2 presents the effects of Internet use and educational level on media trust in urban China with Model 1 and Model 2. Model 2 includes the interaction term of Internet use and education. According to the results from Model 1, the Internet use significantly

affects people's trust of foreign media. Thus, *Hypothesis 2* is supported among urban residents. The results are consistent with the predictions of the cognitive consistency model. Internet usage also has a significant impact on forming independent judgment for urban residents. When facing diverse opinions from domestic media and foreign media, people living in urban China are more likely to have their own judgements, compare to trust in domestic mainstream media. They will not trust either information source easily. Combining the results from two categories of trusting foreign media and having independent judgement, the results partially support *Hypothesis 1* for urban residents. Less trusting of the domestic mainstream media does not necessarily mean the increasing trust of foreign media. Another choice is that people will not trust either one but rely on their own judgements based on all the information they can obtain. I have also checked the probabilities of media trust. In different situations regarding all of the control variables, urban residents are more likely to trust in foreign media and less likely to trust in the domestic mainstream media if they use the Internet.

According to Model 1, education does not significantly affect people's trust of foreign media, compared to domestic mainstream media in urban areas. I checked the probabilities of media trust for highly-educated and less-educated urban residents in different situations regarding Internet use and the control variables except education. The results indicate that urban residents who are highly-educated are more likely to trust in foreign media and less likely to trust domestic mainstream media, compared to their less-educated counterparts. This is consistent with the cognitive consistency model and the model of knowledge gap and media trust, because highly-educated people should have it easier to access diverse information sources then have lower trust of domestic

mainstream media. The insignificant result in Model 1 is possibly because that although highly-educated people can access diverse information and may not trust domestic mainstream media, they may also have more generalized trust on political institutions since the educational system can create trust (Knack and Keefer 1997; Knack and Zak 2003), in this way they will trust the news media institution (Pjesivac 2017). The mixed directions lead to the weak effects of education in Model 1. In addition, education increases the rate of having independent judgement and reduces the rate of answering “Don’t Know” for urban residents, compare to trusting the domestic mainstream media. This is sensible since education can help people to generate their own opinion when facing conflicting information.

There are also other interesting findings from the results of the multinomial logistic regression for people living in urban China in Model 1. First, individuals with higher income are more likely to trust foreign media, or trust neither media source but to generate their own judgements. This makes sense because, usually people who are rich are also enjoy broader social network, and can access various sources of information. Diverse sources of information will reduce the support for the domestic mainstream media according to the cognitive consistency model.

However, when urban residents have higher social rank, they are more likely to trust the domestic mainstream media, rather than having their own judgements or answering “Don’t Know”. This is likely because people with higher subjective social rank are closer to the center of the political power. They embrace a higher level of acceptance of the current system and are more likely to support the domestic mainstream

media. In addition, the membership of CCP significantly decreases trust of foreign media. This is easily understandable that CCP members are less likely to trust in foreign media.

Second, female respondents are less likely to trust in foreign media, compared to trusting domestic mainstream media. According to the further examination of the dataset, this is likely attributable to the fact that females living in urban China are less educated and poorer than their male counterparts. Females also have a lower rate of Internet use. Thus, they may have limited access to different voices from media and rely on the domestic mainstream media. The full descriptive statistics of male and female respondents are presented in Appendix Table A1. Female respondents are also more likely to answer “Don’t Know”. There are several reasons which I think are reasonable to explain this phenomenon: (1) Females have less political knowledge so that they cannot make judgements easily when facing divergent information from media; (2) Females lack interests in determining the credible media sources; (3) Females are more careful when they answer questions, so they are more likely to pick “Don’t know” if they are not sure. The specific reasons need further study to explore.

Third, individuals’ major information source affects public trust in media. People who rely on traditional media are less likely to trust foreign media, or form their own judgements, compared to trust in domestic mainstream media. This is in accordance with the cognitive consistency model. Simply depending on one source of information will make people trust the information source more effortlessly. However, there also exists a self-selection problem. Although people can pick their main information source, current media environment decides that the main information source for most people is still traditional media, such as TV and newspaper. In the urban sample, most people (70.6%)

take the traditional media as their main information sources. Undoubtedly people are more likely to be exposed to the domestic mainstream media. For people who choose to use the Internet and take the Internet as their main information source, they are younger, richer, enjoy higher social rank, and specifically have relatively much higher education (see Appendix Table A2 for the full descriptive statistics of Internet users and non-users, and Table A3 for the full descriptive statistics of Internet users who take or do not take the Internet as their main information source). These demographic characteristics affect both people's choice about both their main information source and their attitudes towards media trust.

Based on the results presented in Model 2, the interaction effect for Internet use and college education is not significant. Thus, there is no significant interaction effects of Internet use and education for urban residents. Based on the results of the Wald test, the interaction term of Internet use and education as a whole in urban sample does not have significant effects across all of the categories of media trust. The probability of Wald Chi-Squared test is .17.

7.1.2 Educational Subsamples

To test *Hypothesis 3a* and *3b*, I run the multinomial logit model for highly-educated and less-educated urban residents respectively and see the differences of how the Internet use affects their media trust. The highly-educated urban residents are largely different from the whole sample. The results for highly-educated urban residents are reported in Table 3. For all three categories, the Internet use does not have statistically significant effects on media trust of highly-educated urban residents. *Hypothesis 3a* is partially supported here.

For control variables, like the whole sample in the urban areas, gender, income and party membership of CCP significantly affect residents' trust in foreign media. Female and CCP members are less likely to trust foreign media, compared to trust in the domestic mainstream media. While for people who are richer, they are more likely to trust foreign media, compared to trust in the domestic mainstream media. However, the function played by the main information source changes largely among highly-educated urban residents. Whether people relying traditional media to receive information influences their trust in foreign media insignificantly. The probable reason is that people who are highly educated can access information from various sources, and they have better ability to understand the information. Hence, information from a single source has a weak impact on media trust of highly-educated urban residents.

Table 3 Multinomial logistic regression of media trust in urban China, 2013 (highly-educated)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Media trust (Model 3)</i>		
	<i>(Reference category: trust domestic mainstream media)</i>		
	Foreign media	Independent judgement	Don't know
<i>Use Internet</i>	1.67	.25	.29
<i>Age</i>	-.03	-.68	.05
<i>Age-squared</i>	-.001	.08*	-.02
<i>Female</i>	-.46*	-.13	.57
<i>Total income last year (ln)</i>	.24*	.13	.17*
<i>Party membership</i>	-.68*	-.22	.17
<i>Current social rank</i>	-.03	-.08	-.19**
<i>Non-agricultural hukou</i>	.28	-.03	.27
<i>Main source (Traditional media)</i>	-.71	-.58*	-.02
<i>Intercept</i>	-4.33*	.79	-2.82
<i>Number of cases</i>		841	

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Less-educated residents account for the majority among the urban populations. Table 4 demonstrates the regression results for less-educated urban residents. According to Model 4, the Internet use has significant effects on media trust among less-educated urban residents. When they use the Internet, they are more likely to trust foreign media, *Hypothesis 2* is supported. Meanwhile, Internet use also increases the probability of having independent judgements. Thus, *Hypothesis 1* and *Hypothesis 3b* are partially supported in this sample.

Table 4 Multinomial logistic regression of media trust in urban China, 2013 (less-educated)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Media trust (Model 4)</i> (Reference category: trust domestic mainstream media)		
	Foreign media	Independent judgement	Don't know
<i>Use Internet</i>	1.84***	.47**	.05
<i>Age</i>	-.03	.19	-.04
<i>Age-squared</i>	.01	-.02	.02
<i>Female</i>	-.24	-.03	.19
<i>Total income last year (ln)</i>	.17	.15**	-.03
<i>Party membership</i>	-1.37**	-.03	-.34*
<i>Current social rank</i>	-.03	-.07**	-.08*
<i>Non-agricultural hukou</i>	.03	-.16	-.76***
<i>Main source (Traditional media)</i>	-.64**	-.50***	-.16
<i>Intercept</i>	-4.03*	-1.76*	.17
<i>Number of cases</i>		2,470	

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Because 74.6% urban residents are less-educated, there exist some similarities in the results between less-educated urban residents and the whole urban sample. For example, current social rank and main information source have similar influences here. However, there are also slight differences in control variables between Model 4 and

Model 1. Gender effects do not exist in the subsample of urban residents. High income can only help people to form their independent judgements but does not affect trust in foreign media. Compared to the full urban sample, the rate of being a member of CCP is also much lower in this subsample, but party membership still plays an essential role in affecting public trust in media. CCP members are less likely to trust foreign media. They are also less likely to answer “Don’t Know”, which means they have an unambiguous choice of trusting which source of media when facing divergent information.

Conclusively, the groups of highly-educated and less-educated urban residents have large differences between each other. Generally, highly-educated urban residents are younger, richer, and enjoy higher social rank compare to their less-educated counterparts. They are more likely to be male and CCP members, and they are much less likely to take traditional media as their main information source. All of the characteristics decide that the influence of the Internet use on media trust varies between the two groups. Since highly-educated urban residents can access more diverse information sources, the expansion of the Internet does not affect them much. In comparison, the Internet use can increase trust in foreign media among less-educated urban residents. It can also help less-educated urban residents to form their own judgements when facing conflicted reports from different sources of media.

7.2 Media Trust in Rural China

Since highly-educated rural residents are not included in Model 5, *Hypotheses 3a* is not applicable here. With Table 5, I report the results of media trust among less-educated rural residents in China. Whether using the Internet or not has significant impacts on public trust in media for less-educated rural residents, too. Less-educated rural

residents who use the Internet are more likely to trust foreign media, compared to the domestic mainstream media. *Hypothesis 2* is supported among less-educated people in rural China. *Hypothesis 1* and *Hypothesis 3b* are partially supported by the results. Additionally, using Internet also decreases the probabilities of answering “Don’t Know” for less-educated people living in rural areas, compared to trusting domestic mainstream media. This result indicates that Internet use is helpful for less-educated rural residents to give rise to their attitudes towards media trust.

Table 5 Multinomial logistic regression of media trust in rural China, 2013 (less-educated)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Media trust (Model 5)</i> (Reference category: trust domestic mainstream media)		
	Foreign media	Independent judgement	Don’t know
<i>Use Internet</i>	.74**	-.07	-.37*
<i>Age</i>	-.11	-.37	-.08
<i>Age-squared</i>	.01	.02	.02
<i>Female</i>	-.28	-.03	.31*
<i>Total income last year (ln)</i>	-.09	-.003	-.05
<i>Party membership</i>	.50	.48	-.46
<i>Current social rank</i>	-.17	-.08	-.17**
<i>Non-agricultural hukou</i>	-.21	.06	-.33
<i>Main source (Traditional media)</i>	-1.01	-.42	.06
<i>Intercept</i>	-.19	1.20	.66
<i>Number of cases</i>		2,036	

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

A distinct difference between urban and rural less-educated residents is that main information source does not affect rural residents’ media trust. Although there are 33.4% less-educated rural residents use the Internet, most of them (81.9%) still rely on traditional media to receive information. Especially, 91.3% less-educated rural residents

choose TV as their main information source. The extremely high rate of reliance on traditional media to obtain information explains the insignificance result. I checked the correlation between Internet use and main information source with media trust among less-educated rural residents respectively. Although both of them can increase public trust of foreign media compared to trust in domestic mainstream media, Internet use is a better predictor variable here according to the larger pseudo R-square.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The public trust in media is vital in understanding media influence, public opinion and political trust in a country, especially in authoritarian countries where media and other political institutions do not operate independently but have a close relationship. This research examines media trust in China and focuses on media trust in the new media environment where the Internet access is expanding. To explore the factors that may affect public trust in media when people have more access to diverse information from both domestic mainstream media and foreign media, I use the cognitive consistency model and the model of knowledge gap and media trust to explain the correlation between the Internet use and media trust. According to the cognitive consistency model, people are more likely to trust in the specific media source if this is the only information source for them, while greater access to alternative information sources may result in lower trust in the original source. Because of attribution of openness and spreading information more conveniently, the Internet can be taken as an alternative information source to the Chinese domestic mainstream media. The model of knowledge gap and media trust argues that highly-educated people are less likely to trust the domestic mainstream media, and people with less education are less likely to trust the domestic mainstream media when they use the Internet. Through the exploration of two key independent variables, Internet use and education, in an urban subsample and rural subsample independently, I report the factors which affect public trust in media and how these factors work in China. To clearly demonstrate the results of hypotheses testing, I list the results in different samples in Table 6.

Table 6 Hypothesis testing results

	Urban	Rural
<i>Hypothesis 1</i>	Partially supported	Partially supported
<i>Hypothesis 2</i>	Supported	Supported
<i>Hypothesis 3a</i>	Partially supported	N/A
<i>Hypothesis 3b</i>	Supported	Supported

Generally, *Hypothesis 1*, *Hypothesis 2* and *Hypothesis 3b* are supported by both subsamples in China. Urban and rural residents who use the Internet are less likely to trust the domestic mainstream media, and are more likely to trust foreign media. This influence is only significant among less-educated people. In the case study of China, people are also educated in the process of access to information from different media sources and learn to form their own judgements when facing divergent information. The results confirm the prediction of the cognitive consistency model. Competitive sources of information bring challenges for people to find matched cognition and generate trust on diverse media sources.

Hypothesis 3a is supported by the urban sample. Although education does not have significant influence of public trust in foreign media for urban residents in Model 1, based on the results from Model 3 and Model 4, highly-educated urban residents are not affected by the Internet use, while less-educated urban residents decrease their trust in domestic mainstream media because of the Internet use. Hence, education plays an important role in influencing urban residents' media trust. For the rural sample, *Hypothesis 3a* is not applicable because I just include rural residents with less education in the model. The interaction effect of Internet use and education cannot be tested

because of the lack of data. But from the descriptive data it is not hard to see that education also has large impact in rural areas. For highly-educated rural residents, there are 32.7% people trusting in domestic mainstream media and 11.5% trusting in foreign media. In contrast, for less-educated rural residents, the percent of trusting in domestic mainstream media is as high as 45.2%, while there are only 2.8% people trust in foreign media. Conclusively, education is a key factor in developing media trust among urban and rural residents. The model of knowledge gap and media trust is supported by the research.

There are also interesting findings about media trust from other demographic features, such as gender, income, social rank, and party membership, but these effects are much larger in urban areas compared to the effects in rural areas. This may be because there are few people who have a higher socio-economic position, such as having higher income, enjoying a higher social rank, and being a member of CCP, being included in the rural sample. In addition, different from the significant effects of main information source in urban areas, because of the high rate of taking traditional media as the main information source, the variable of main information source has insignificant impact on media trust among less-educated rural residents, either.

In conclusion, Internet use plays a vital role in structuring Chinese people's media trust in the new era. The effects from the Internet use vary in highly-educated and less-educated people. This research makes use of a new theoretical explanation to support the argument. This research contributes to the literature of media trust in authoritarian countries, and is also relevant for research of propaganda and public opinion in authoritarian countries. There are also some limitations of this research. First of all, the

prime limitation of this research is the models just test the correlation between the Internet use and media trust rather than the causality between the two factors. Second, from the dataset used in this research, adding the control variable of main information source can help me to detect people who rely on the Internet to receive the information and people do not, but it is not clear about the purposes of people using the Internet. For instance, people who browse news on the Internet accept different information with people who play games on the Internet. Additionally, identifying the information sources more specifically, such as from People's Daily (*Renmin Ribao*), or CNN, would be helpful for improving this research.

Hence, in a future study, I will try to find the causal inference of Internet use and media trust in the next step, such as using propensity score matching or designing an experiment. Next, I plan to collect my own data with detailed information, including the purpose of using the Internet and specific information sources such as newspaper company or broadcaster. Furthermore, I also would like to explore the public trust in media in different provinces in China. I argue that spatial factors will also affect people's media trust. For example, people living in Beijing, which is the capital of China, may have different attitudes towards media from people living in other areas. Moreover, the economic development and marketization is unbalanced in China. Provinces along the east-coastal line have higher level of marketization, compared to provinces in the northeast areas, middle areas, and west areas. Local people may have different levels of access to the Internet and diverse information, then they should hold different opinions of media trust.

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APPENDIX

Table A1 Descriptive statistics for male and female respondents¹

<i>Variable</i>	Urban		Rural ²	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
	Mean (S.d.)	Mean (S.d.)	Mean (S.d.)	Mean (S.d.)
<i>Media trust</i>	1.35 (1.16)	1.45 (1.25)	1.34 (1.34)	1.53 (1.38)
<i>Use the Internet</i>	.65 (.48)	.60 (.49)	.32 (.47)	.28 (.45)
<i>Highly educated</i>	.28 (.45)	.22 (.41)	--	--
<i>Age/10</i>	4.83 (1.71)	4.87 (1.76)	5.45 (1.54)	5.25 (1.54)
<i>Total income last year (ln)</i>	9.94 (1.35)	9.20 (1.81)	8.92 (1.37)	7.99 (1.73)
<i>Party membership</i>	.18 (.39)	.08 (.27)	.08 (.27)	.03 (.16)
<i>Current social rank</i>	4.31 (1.69)	4.38 (1.63)	3.99 (1.77)	4.07 (1.65)
<i>Non-agricultural hukou</i>	.67 (.47)	.63 (.48)	.06 (.24)	.04 (.20)
<i>Main source (traditional media)</i>	.69 (.46)	.73 (.44)	.94 (.24)	.95 (.22)
<i>Number of cases</i>	1,678	1,633	1,003	1,033

¹ All variables have been weighted by individual weights.

² The rural sample does not include highly-educated rural residents. For people with less education in rural areas, 50.45% male residents have middle school degree or above, 35.14% female residents have middle school degree or above. Thus, for less-educated rural residents, males are more likely to have higher education than females.

Table A2 Descriptive statistics for Internet users and non-users¹

<i>Variable</i>	Urban		Rural ²	
	User	Non-user	User	Non-user
	Mean (S.d.)	Mean (S.d.)	Mean (S.d.)	Mean (S.d.)
<i>Media trust</i>	1.36 (1.12)	1.46 (1.34)	1.27 (1.29)	1.52 (1.39)
<i>Highly educated</i>	.37 (.48)	.05 (.22)	--	--
<i>Age/10</i>	4.13 (1.51)	6.06 (1.36)	4.44 (1.70)	5.73 (1.29)
<i>Female</i>	.47 (.50)	.53 (.50)	.48 (.50)	.52 (.50)
<i>Total income last year (ln)</i>	9.84 (1.62)	9.13 (1.56)	8.63 (1.86)	8.37 (1.51)
<i>Party membership</i>	.14 (.35)	.12 (.32)	.06 (.24)	.05 (.21)
<i>Current social rank</i>	4.55 (1.60)	3.99 (1.71)	4.14 (1.64)	3.99 (1.74)
<i>Non-agricultural hukou</i>	.68 (.46)	.59 (.49)	.07 (.26)	.04 (.20)
<i>Main source (traditional media)</i>	.54 (.50)	.986 (.12)	.82 (.38)	.996 (.07)
<i>Number of cases</i>	2,153	1,158	680	1,356

¹ All variables have been weighted by individual weights.² The rural sample does not include highly-educated rural residents.

Table A3 Descriptive statistics for Internet use and main information source¹

Main source	Urban Internet users		Rural Internet users ²	
	Internet	Traditional	Internet	Traditional
<i>Variable</i>	Mean (S.d.)	Mean (S.d.)	Mean (S.d.)	Mean (S.d.)
<i>Media trust</i>	1.39 (1.03)	1.34 (1.19)	1.32 (1.16)	1.25 (1.32)
<i>Highly educated</i>	.58 (.49)	.20 (.40)	--	--
<i>Age/10</i>	3.29 (1.12)	4.83 (1.44)	2.93 (.93)	4.77 (1.65)
<i>Female</i>	.45 (.50)	.48 (.50)	.43 (.50)	.49 (.50)
<i>Total income last year (ln)</i>	9.96 (1.73)	9.75 (1.52)	9.04 (2.02)	8.55 (1.82)
<i>Party membership</i>	.16 (.36)	.13 (.33)	0.08 (.27)	.06 (.23)
<i>Current social rank</i>	4.65 (1.58)	4.47 (1.61)	4.14 (1.68)	4.14 (1.63)
<i>Non-agricultural hukou</i>	.70 (.46)	.67 (.47)	.04 (.19)	.08 (.27)
<i>Number of cases</i>	958	1,195	123	557

¹ All variables have been weighted by individual weights.² The rural sample does not include highly-educated rural residents.