



Study on the Impact of Media Use on Youth Political Trust--An Empirical Study Based on China's 2019 Survey on Internet Users' Social Consciousness

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Abstract. Against the background of today's rapid development of information technology and extensive use of media, social opinion is greatly influenced. The level of political trust among Chinese youth is related to political and social stability and long-term development, so it is of great significance to study how media use affects youth political trust. This study utilizes data from the 2019 Chinese Internet Users' Social Cognition Survey to explore the relationship between media use and youth political trust. The study finds that Chinese youth generally access current affairs news with high frequency, and their level of political trust is correspondingly high. There is a significant positive relationship between trust in domestic and foreign media and Chinese youth political trust, and trust in foreign media does not weaken youth political trust. Based on the results of this study, targeted recommendations are proposed to improve Chinese youth's political trust. This study provides valuable insights for improving youth political trust.

Keywords: Social cognitive survey of Internet users; Media use; media trust; Specific political trust; Broad political trust.

1 Introduction

In today's era of rapid development of information technology and wide application of media technology, social opinion has been greatly influenced in China. The 53rd Statistical Report on the Development Status of the Internet in China released by the China Internet Information Center (CNNIC) on March 22, 2024 shows that as of December 2023, the number of Internet users in China has reached 1.092 billion, an increase of 24.8 million from December 2022, and the Internet penetration rate has reached 77.5%. Among all age groups of Internet users, the age group of 20-29 years old accounted for 13.7%, 30-39 years old accounted for 19.2%, and 40-49 years old accounted for 16.0%. It can be seen that the youth group is the main component of China's Internet users, with a top-ranking and large proportion.

The theory of culmination proposed by American communication scholar Gerbner (Gerbner) in 1969 argues that the audience's worldview and values are influenced by

the mass media in a subtle way. With the development of the times, conflicts of interest and social contradictions in Chinese society are becoming increasingly complex, while the rapid development of information technology and the wide application of media technology have made it possible for all kinds of information and ideas to influence everyone through the media. The level of youth's political trust is related to the long-term stability and development of politics and society, and thus becomes the focus of political trust research. It is of great practical significance to study the relationship between media use and youth political trust. "Media use" is usually used as a measurement tool in research rather than as an independent field of study, so there is no unified and authoritative definition of the concept. In previous studies, media use has been examined mainly in terms of channel of use, frequency of use, type of information, motivation for use, level of trust and effect of use. For example, Zhou Baohua (2008) and others examined media use from the perspectives of news content or entertainment content, and media tools such as newspapers or television[1]; Jin Hengjiang (2017) and others measured Chinese women's media use through their use of political news; and Lu Chunling (2021) argued that listening to and watching the news is not the same as receiving information about the news[2], and therefore media trust also needs to be included in the media use measurement[3].

Political trust is an important prerequisite for social governance and a key factor in social development and stability. Western academics began to pay attention to the study of political trust as early as the 1960s. With the decline of public political trust in Europe and the United States, the issue of political trust has received more and more attention from scholars. In the 1960s, the American scholar Stork (1962) first added relevant questions involving political trust in the U.S. election surveys to study the public's political attitudes. With the decline of public political trust in Europe and the United States, political trust is getting more and more attention from scholars[4].

The study found that the impact of media use on political trust can be broadly categorized into three groups: pessimists believe that the media's tendency to report or over-interpret negative political news is the main cause of public mistrust of political institutions and figures; optimists believe that media use has a positive effect on increasing the level of public political trust; and neutrals believe that media use does not have a substantial impact on political trust[5].

At the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese scholars have also begun to focus on research on the relationship between media use and political trust, mainly using empirical research paths or empirical tests to comprehensively examine the political trust of specific populations. Li Zhengliang (2016) defines media trust as "the audience's belief that the news reported by the media is fair, unbiased, complete, correct, and reliable". However, most of the studies have focused on specific groups of people, such as farmers, college students, and women, with less attention paid to the political trust of the overall youth population. In addition, most current studies rely on non-probability sampling data rather than national sampling data. Therefore, it is necessary to utilize national survey data to analyze the current situation of political trust among Chinese youth[6].

In addition to the limitations of the research methodology and existing studies mentioned above, this study draws on the Uses and Satisfaction Theory and Agenda Setting

Theory. Uses and gratification theory suggests that audiences' media exposure activities are designed to fulfill specific needs, such as entertainment, information acquisition, and shopping. The agenda-setting theory, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of the media in influencing the public's attention to issues. These theories provide a solid theoretical foundation for this study and help us understand how media use affects political trust.

2 Theoretical Framework

Political trust is an important prerequisite for social governance and a key factor in social development and stability. The study of political trust began in the 1960s, when American scholar Stork (1962) first included questions related to political trust in the U.S. election surveys to study the public's political attitudes. With the decline of public political trust in Europe and the United States, the issue of political trust has received more and more attention from scholars. Easton (1975) emphasized that political trust is the confidence of citizens that the government or political system will function according to their expectations and produce results [7]; Moon (2003) argued that people's trust in the government is dependent on whether or not the level of government performance meets or exceeds their expectations ; Yang Jianghua (2021) and others point out that political trust is divided into micro specific political trust (specific political trust) and macro broad political trust (diffuse political trust) [8] .

In Western academia, research on the relationship between media use and political trust began earlier and has produced a large body of research. These studies can be broadly categorized into three groups based on the different impacts of the media on political trust:

Pessimists, argue that the media's tendency to report or over-interpret negative political news is the main cause of public distrust of political institutions and politicians. For example, Robinson (1976) found that members of the public who obtained their information primarily through television media had lower levels of social trust and lower levels of political trust [9].

Optimists, believe that media use has a positive effect on increasing the public's level of political trust. norris (2000) emphasized that there is a mutually reinforcing virtuous circle relationship between media use and an individual's political interest[10], political knowledge, and participation ; Offer (1995) found that the frequency of media use by the public in Japan is positively proportional to their trust in the government[11] .

Neutralists, argue that media use has no substantial effect on people's political trust. For example, Wilkins (2000) found that obtaining political information from television, newspapers, or the Internet did not significantly affect people's political trust. [12]

At the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese scholars also began to pay attention to the study of the relationship between media use and political trust, mainly adopting empirical research paths or empirical tests to comprehensively examine the political trust of specific groups of people. Lu Spring (2015) and others found that traditional media effectively increased people's trust in the government[13], while the opposite

was true for new media; Su Zhenhua (2015) and others suggested that there is a correlation between people's sense of political trust and the degree of Internet use[14]; Zhu Bowen (2019) and others found that utilizing offshore media to obtain information on current political affairs significantly reduces the level of public trust in the government[15].

Despite the abundance of academic research on the relationship between media influence and political trust, relevant combing reveals that most studies have focused on specific groups of people, such as farmers, college students, women, etc., with less attention paid to the political trust of the youth group as a whole. [16]Moreover, most current studies rely on non-probability sampling data from individual regions rather than national sampling data. Therefore, it is necessary to utilize national survey data to analyze the current situation of political trust among Chinese youth[17].

Based on the previous research review, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: The frequency of use of current news information in the media has a significant positive effect on youth political trust.

H1a: The frequency of use of current affairs news information has a significant positive effect on youth specific political trust.

H1b: The frequency of use of current affairs news information has a significant positive effect on youth broad political trust.

H2: There is a significant positive relationship between youth's trust in domestic mainstream media and their political trust.

H2a: There is a significant positive correlation between youth's trust in domestic mainstream media and their specific political trust.

H2b: There is a significant positive correlation between youth's trust in domestic mainstream media and their broad political trust.

H3: There is a significant negative effect of youth's trust in foreign media on their political trust.

H3a: There is a significant negative effect of youth's trust in foreign media on their specific political trust.

H3b: There is a significant negative effect of youth's trust in foreign media on their broad political trust.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Data Source

The data for this study comes from the 2019 "Survey on Social Cognition of Internet Users" in China Academic Survey Data (CNSDA)¹. The survey targeted Chinese netizens and collected samples through online platforms such as Questionnaire.com, Weibo and WeChat. A total of 4,882 samples were collected, and 3,403 valid samples were obtained after excluding invalid samples with less than one minute of response time, untrustworthy content, and age ineligibility².

3.2 Sample Characteristics

In order to ensure the accuracy and validity of the statistical analysis, the sample of this study comprised young people between the ages of 18 and 44 years old, which is in line with the definition of the “youth” age group by the United Nations General Assembly, the National Bureau of Statistics of China and the World Health Organization. The distribution of demographic indicators of the sample is shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Distribution of demographic indicators in the sample

Demographic indicators	options (as in computer software settings)	frequency	percentage
(a person's) age	18-24 years	796	23.39%
	25-29 years	1231	36.17%
	30-34 years	883	25.95%
	35-39 years	357	10.49%
	40-44 years	136	4.00%
distinguishing between the sexes	male	2031	59.68%
	women	1372	40.32%
political profile	The masses	1640	48.19%
	Communist Party member	866	25.45%
	Democratic party	124	3.64%
	Communist Youth League member	773	22.72%
educational attainment	specialized training school	1300	38.20%
	undergraduate (adjective)	1956	57.48%
	scholarly	147	4.32%
Specialization	Literature, History and Philosophy, Arts	350	10.29%
	Social sciences	1493	43.87%
	Science and engineering as academic subjects	1422	41.79%
Area of residence	Agriculture, animal husbandry and medicine	138	4.06%
	(Large (mega) cities, provincial capitals	1064	31.27%

3.3 Variable Definition and Measurement

The dependent variables in this study include specific political trust and broad political trust. Specific political trust was measured by the questionnaire's “How much do you trust the following institutions or organizations?” Five items of the question were measured. These items relate to “central government”, “local government at county and township levels”, “courts”, “public security bureau”, and “police”. Trust in the “police” was rated on a five-point Likert scale (0-4). Broad political trust was measured by the questionnaire's seven items in the question “How do you feel about the following statements?” These statements relate to “adhering to the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics” and “continuing to open up to the outside world” and are also rated on a 5-point Likert scale (0-4).

The independent variables include the frequency of using current news information, domestic mainstream media trust and foreign media trust. The frequency of using current news information was measured by the questionnaire's "How often do you browse current news?" question in the questionnaire and rated on a six-point Likert scale (0-5). Domestic mainstream media trust was measured by the questionnaire on "CCTV, its microblog and WeChat public number" and "Xinhua News Agency, its microblog and WeChat public number", and rated on a five-point Likert scale (0-4). Trust in foreign media was measured by the questionnaire for "The New York Times (U.S.)", "BBC (U.K.)", "Apple Daily (Hong Kong)", etc., and a five-point Likert scale (0-4) was used to rate the trust. A five-point Likert scale (0-4) was used for scoring.

Control variables including age, gender, political profile, education level, specialty and area of residence were coded through categorical numbering. Specific age was categorized as 18-29 years (0) and 30-44 years (1). Gender was categorized as female (0) and male (1). Political affiliation was categorized as mass (0), Communist Party member (1), Democratic Party member (2), and Communist Youth League member (3). Education level is categorized as specialist (0), undergraduate (1), and graduate and above (2). Specialties are divided into literature, history, philosophy and art (0), social sciences (1), science and technology (2), agriculture, animal husbandry and medicine (3). Area of residence is categorized as township (0), village (1), and overseas (2).

3.4 Research Model

Based on the aforementioned research overview, problem hypotheses and variable definitions, this study adopted a stepwise regression analysis in order to more comprehensively analyze the impact of media use on youth political trust. In the regression analysis, three models were constructed: model 1 contains only control variables to analyze the independent effects of control variables on political trust; model 2 adds independent variables on top of this to analyze the independent effects of the independent variables; and model 3 demonstrates a complete model that contains all control and independent variables, presenting the combined effects of each variable. The research model is shown in Figure 1:

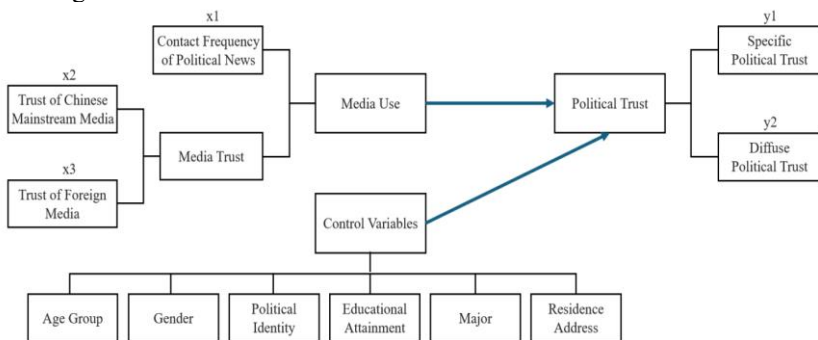


Fig. 1. Diagram of the study model

Figure 1 shows the structure of the research model, which includes the relationship between the dependent, independent and control variables: the dependent variables include specific political trust and broad political trust; the independent variables include the frequency of use of current news information, trust in domestic mainstream media and trust in foreign media; and the control variables include age, gender, political affiliation, level of education, specialty and region of residence.

3.5 Data Analysis Method

This study uses SPSS25.0 software to conduct reliability test, descriptive analysis, correlation analysis and multiple linear regression analysis on the data of the 2019 “Social Cognition Survey of Internet Users”. Through these analytical methods, we can clarify the basic situation of media use and political trust among young people, explore the relationship between their influence, and provide empirical evidence for making relevant recommendations.

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistical Analysis

In this study, the sample data were first analyzed with descriptive statistics to understand the basic situation of media use and political trust among youth groups. The results are shown in Table 2:

Table 2. Results of descriptive statistical analysis

variant	minimum value	maximum ues	val-average value	standard S.E.	error
Frequency of use of current news information	0	5	3.170	1.185	
Domestic mainstream media trust	0	4	2.956	0.688	
Foreign media trust	0	4	2.320	0.701	
Specific political confidence	0	4	3.107	0.687	
Broad political confidence	0	4	2.885	0.668	

As can be seen from Table 2, the frequency of use of current news information and the level of trust in domestic mainstream media are relatively high among youth groups, while the level of trust in foreign media is low. In addition, the youth group also has higher levels of specific political trust and broad political trust.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

In order to clarify the relationship between the variables, Spearman's correlation analysis of the main variables was conducted in this study. The results are shown in Table 3:

Table 3. Results of correlation analysis

variant	Frequency of use of current news information	Domestic mainstream media trust	Foreign media trust	Specific political confidence	Broad political confidence
Frequency of use of current news information	1	0.299**	0.053**	0.297**	0.306**
Domestic mainstream media trust	0.299**	1	0.293**	0.565**	0.533**
Foreign media trust	0.053**	0.293**	1	0.237**	0.199**
Specific political confidence	0.297**	0.565**	0.237**	1	0.521**
Broad political confidence	0.306**	0.533**	0.199**	0.521**	1

Note: ** $p < 0.01$

Table 3 shows that there is a significant positive correlation between the frequency of current news information use and domestic mainstream media trust, foreign media trust, specific political trust and broad political trust. Similarly, there is a significant positive correlation between domestic mainstream media trust and the above variables, while the correlation between foreign media trust and specific political trust and broad political trust is weaker.

4.3 Regression Analysis

In order to further explore the impact of media use on youth political trust, this study conducted a multiple linear regression analysis. The results of the regression analysis are shown in Tables 4 and 5:

Table 4. Regression analysis of specific political trust

predictor variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
(a person's) age	0.058 (3.253)***	0.029 (1.679)	-0.009 (-0.626)
distinguishing between the sexes	-0.035 (-1.992)*	-0.033 (-1.937)	-0.007 (-0.465)
Comparison group: political profile_general public	-	-	-
control variable			
Political Affiliation_Communist	0.017 (0.879)	0.004 (0.207)	-0.001 (-0.060)
Political Affiliation_Democratic Party Member	-0.041 (-2.377)*	-0.029 (-1.719)	-0.020 (-1.418)
Political Affiliation_Communist Youth League	-0.021 (-1.094)	-0.019 (-1.050)	-0.013 (-0.832)
Control group: education_specialized	-	-	-

	Education_Bachelor's Degree	0.043 (2.430)*	0.010 (0.606)	-0.003 (-0.176)
	Education_Master's Degree	-0.029 (-1.636)	-0.047 (-2.769)**	-0.028 (-1.949)
	Control group: majored in _Literature, History and Philosophy, Art	-	-	-
	Major_Social Sciences	0.047 (1.594)	0.035 (1.246)	-0.006 (-0.266)
	Major_Science and Technology	-0.006 (-0.189)	-0.014 (-0.473)	-0.026 (-1.080)
	Specialization_Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Medicine	-0.017 (-0.841)	-0.016 (-0.868)	-0.029 (-1.793)
	Control group: area of residence _ towns in the territory	-	-	-
	Area of residence_Rural areas of the countryside	-0.046(-2.667)**	-0.025 (-1.520)	0.006 (0.466)
	Area of Residence_Overseas	-0.007 (-0.435)	-0.007 (-0.454)	-0.001 (-0.103)
independent variable	Frequency of use of current affairs news	-	0.285 (17.130)***	0.139 (9.488)***
	Level of confidence in the mainstream media in the country	-	-	0.514 (33.109)***
	Confidence in offshore media	-	-	0.063 (4.229)***
	F	5.013***	27.599***	124.723***
	R ²	1.70%	9.60%	35.60%
	adjusted R ²	1.40%	9.20%	35.30%

Note:(1)* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

(2)The values in the table are the standardized regression coefficients β , with t in parentheses.

(3) Model 1 contains control variables, Model 2 adds independent variables to Model 1, and Model 3 demonstrates the combined effects of all variables.

Table 4 shows that the frequency of current news information use, domestic mainstream media trust and foreign media trust have a significant positive effect on specific political trust.

Table 5. Regression analysis of broad political trust

predictor variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
(a person's) age	0.065 (3.647)***	0.036 (2.098)*	-0.001 (-0.049)
distinguishing between the sexes	-0.007 (-0.421)	-0.005 (-0.300)	0.020 (1.342)
Comparison group: political profile_general public	-	-	-
control variable Political Affiliation_Communist	0.046 (2.473)*	0.034 (1.870)	0.030 (1.922)
Political Affiliation_Democratic Party Member	-0.010 (-0.556)	0.003 (0.172)	0.012 (0.812)
Political Affiliation_Communist Youth League	0.003 (0.142)	0.004 (0.238)	0.011 (0.684)

	Control group: education_specialized	-	-	-
	Education_Bachelor's Degree	0.019 (1.048)	-0.014 (-0.812)	-0.027 (-1.803)
	Education_Master's Degree	-0.033 (-1.849)	-0.051 (-2.981)**	-0.033 (-2.231)*
	Control group: majored in _Literature, History and Philosophy, Art	-	-	-
	Major_Social Sciences	0.049 (1.657)	0.037 (1.314)	-0.002 (-0.067)
	Major_Science and Technology	0.001 (0.045)	-0.006 (-0.227)	-0.019 (-0.764)
	Specialization_Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Medicine	-0.004 (-0.191)	-0.004 (-0.190)	-0.015 (-0.941)
	Control group: area of residence _towns in the territory	-	-	-
	Area of residence_Rural areas of the countryside	-0.075 (-4.372)***	-0.054 (-3.298)***	-0.024 (-1.708)
	Area of Residence_Overseas	-0.031 (-1.803)	-0.031 (-1.879)	-0.025 (-1.760)
	Frequency of use of current affairs news	-	0.283 (17.013)***	0.144 (9.667)***
independent variable	Level of confidence in the mainstream media in the country	-	-	0.490 (30.939)***
	Confidence in offshore media	-	-	0.051 (3.330)***
<hr/>				
	F	5.093***	27.367***	110.2***
	R ²	1.80%	9.50%	35.80%
	adjusted R ²	1.40%	9.20%	32.50%

Note:(1)* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

(2)The values in the table are the standardized regression coefficients β , with t in parentheses.

(3)Model 1 contains control variables, Model 2 adds independent variables to Model 1, and Model 3 demonstrates the combined effects of all variables.

Table 5 shows that frequency of use of current news information, trust in domestic mainstream media and trust in foreign media have a significant positive effect on broad political trust.

5 Conclusion

This study utilized data from the 2019 China Internet Users' Social Cognition Survey to explore the relationship between media use and youth political trust. The findings show that youth groups generally access current news information at a high frequency, and that this high-frequency use is significantly associated with higher levels of political trust. This suggests that access to current news information enhances youth trust in

the political system to some extent. At the same time, youth with higher levels of trust in domestic mainstream media also have relatively higher levels of political trust. This further confirms the key role of domestic media in shaping and maintaining youth political trust. Despite the lower level of youth trust in foreign media, there is still a significant positive correlation between trust in foreign media and political trust. This suggests that trust in foreign media has not weakened youth's trust in their home political system, but rather may have contributed to more comprehensive political awareness and trust due to the plurality of information.

Based on the above findings, this study makes a number of policy recommendations. First, the media should increase the transparency of information and ensure the truthfulness and fairness of reporting in order to enhance public trust in the media. The government can promote the healthy development of the media through appropriate policy guidance and supervision. Second, the government should formulate targeted political propaganda strategies according to the needs and characteristics of different groups. Especially for youth groups, new media and smart technologies should be utilized to increase the participation and effectiveness of political propaganda. It is also important to encourage young people to obtain information through a variety of channels to enhance their overall knowledge of politics. The Government and educational institutions can enhance young people's awareness and capacity for political participation by organizing lectures and forums.

Although this study provides an empirical basis for research on the relationship between media use and youth political trust, there are still some limitations and directions for further research. Future research can expand to other age groups and regional samples to conduct a larger comparative study to verify the generalizability of this study's results. In addition, with the rapid development of new media, future research can further explore the impact of new media, such as social media, on youth political trust and the differential impact of different types of media use. In future studies, qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, can be combined to gain a deeper understanding of the specific impact mechanisms of media use on political trust.

Note

1. The questionnaire of the 2019 "Survey on Social Consciousness of Internet Users" was designed by Prof. Ma Deyong, who is responsible for the implementation of the survey, and we would like to express our deepest gratitude to him. The address for data acquisition:

<http://www.cnsda.org/index.php?r=projects/view&id=54034919>.

2. During data cleaning, 8 samples were excluded from question 15 due to lack of confidence in the content; 10 samples were excluded due to the answer time being less than 1 minute; 145 samples were excluded due to not meeting the study's definition of the age range of "youth"; and 1,316 samples were excluded due to the presence of missing values in question 6. Question 6 excluded 1316 samples due to the presence of missing values.

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