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ZHANG, Xinzhi; LIN, Wan-Ying

Document Version:
Final Published version, also known as Publisher's PDF, Publisher's Final version or Version of Record

Publication record in CityU Scholars:
Go to record

Political Participation in an Unlikely Place:
How Individuals Engage in Politics through Social Networking Sites in China

XINZHI ZHANG[1]
WAN-YING LIN
City University of Hong Kong

This study investigates how individuals participate in different modes of political participation via social networking sites (SNS) in China, where channels for participation are restricted and the online information flow is censored. A survey conducted at two large universities in southern China revealed that information exchange uses of SNS and SNS-based political activities were positively associated with the canonical mode of political participation—that is, contacting media and joining petitions and demonstrations. SNS-based political activities also positively predicted political engagement via private contacts, such as lobbying acquaintances of governmental officials, and facilitated political actions initiated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Affiliation with the CCP was found to be a significant predictor of the contacting-lobbying mode of participation and CCP-initiated political activities.

Keywords: social networking sites, political participation, Mainland China, media effects

The Internet provides new platforms for individuals to engage in political activities. A large and growing volume of literature has documented the extent to which new media facilitate political participation in both democratic societies and nondemocratic or transitional societies (Best & Krueger, 2005; Bimber, 2000; Bucy & Gregson, 2001; de Zúñiga, Puig-i-Abril, & Rojas, 2009; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; W. Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2010). In Mainland China, by the end of 2011, when the number of netizens reached 513 million and the Internet penetration rate exceeded 38% (CNNIC, 2012), social networking sites (SNS) had become an important medium for

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Xinzhi Zhang: xzzhang2@gmail.com
Wan-Ying Lin: wanying@cityu.edu.hk
Date submitted: 2013–01–07

individuals to seek news and express opinions (CNNIC, 2011). New media technologies have enabled the most active Internet users to gather and discuss civil and political issues (Qiu, 2009).

This study examines the association between political participation and the use of social networking sites in Mainland China. Previous studies on political behaviors in China have not been able to provide a complete picture for three reasons. First, people in China have relatively limited channels to participate in politics (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012). The canonical measures of political participation (Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1971), such as voting, petitioning, and demonstration, can only cover and explain a fraction of participatory behaviors. Second, people in China tend to express political concerns or influence the implementation of government policies by lobbying officials privately or via bribery or cronyism (Kuan & Lau, 2002; Shi, 1997; Shyu, 2010). Such types of participation differ from conventional political engagement, which is to achieve public good or influence governmental decisions (Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenking, & Delli Carpini, 2006).

Third, although scholars believe that new media technologies "bring new issues to the fore and reorganize traditional political allegiances" (Neuman, 2001, p. 317), this has not come to fruition in many authoritarian regimes. The underlying assumption of the civic and political impacts of media use is that, media are the primary provider of political information, through which citizens are informed, deliberate with others, and finally reach a basic agreement on social facts (Swanson, 2000). In China, however, although new media help disseminate grassroots or even deviant messages (He, 2008), online information is under severe control and censorship (MacKinnon, 2009). Even though research on SNS is gaining ground, the positive effects of SNS on civic-political participation were found to exist only marginally (X. Zhang, 2010). Moreover, institutionalized participation such as becoming the cadre of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or contributing to CCP-led campaigns adds to the complexity, because such campaigns are organized by the ruling party to promote state legitimacy (S. Zhao, 1998). Hence, we ask: How do individuals engage in politics through social networking sites in China? To what extent is SNS use associated with different forms of political participation?

Different Modes of Political Participation

Political participation refers to those "legal activities by individual citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel" (Verba et al., 1971, p. 9). It is the means through which peoples' desires, interests, and demands are communicated and made known to the government and politicians (Verba, et al., 1971). Some modes of political participation are electoral-related—such as voting and joining campaign activities—whereas other modes are non-electoral—such as citizen-initiated contacts with governmental officials and cooperatively joining organizations (Verba et al., 1971). Recently, with the rapid development of the Internet, people can participate in politics online, such as by joining online discussion groups or virtual organizations (Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001). The essence of political participation is "the citizens who act, through voting and other forms of electoral involvement, contacting public officials, membership in civic organizations, volunteering in their community, or even protesting and demonstrating" (Delli Carpini, 2004, p. 418). An informed and active citizenship is the foundation of a democratic society.

Political Participation in the Context of Mainland China

The political context for political participation in China is different from that of well-established democracies (Brandtzaeg & Heim, 2009; Sayed, 2011). First, citizens have fairly limited official channels to participate in politics (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012; Freedom House, 2011). Central authorities are not elected through free, open, and competitive general elections. Even when elections exist at the local level, the venues for participation are limited, because the nomination of the candidates and voters' eligibility are still subject to local governments and manipulation by the Chinese Communist Party (Li, 2011; Shi, 1999).

Second, the bureaucratic structure of the Chinese government creates dynamics between people and political actors that differ from those in established democratic societies. Shi (1997) redefined political participation in China as the behaviors performed "by private citizens aimed at influencing the actual results of governmental policy" (p. 21). Based on this updated definition, political behaviors include contacting the government via private personal networks, which are quasi-legal (lobbying) or illegal (bribery). The government's bureaucratic structure empowers local officials to maneuver the implementation of public policies. To fulfill personal or small group–based interests, people make personal contacts with officials at different levels, and maintaining a good relationship with leaders via lobbying and gift exchanging becomes an "economic way or shortcut for instrumental interest articulators" (Shi, 1997, pp. 68–70). Hence, this mode of participation cannot increase or contribute to the total available resources, but is "aimed at competing for already allocated resources" (Shi, 1997, p. 255). In fact, contacting governmental officials or influencing nongovernmental agencies in a private manner is likely to happen in authoritarian regimes in general. When the legal or established channel of political expression is constrained, people seek alternative ways or use social networks and personal relationships to contact political actors, either to express political voices in a safe way or to bypass government repression (Shyu, 2010; Xie, 2008). In the former Soviet Union, where the channel for political participation was fairly limited, it was a rational political behavior for people to occasionally contact governmental agencies in an "approved way" to influence political implementation in "individual cases" (DiFranceisco & Gitelman, 1984, p. 619). In such cases, Back, Teorell, and Westholm (2011) argued that the benefits or outcomes of contacting accrued only to those who participated and therefore brought no contribution to the public good, limiting the likely benefits of the canonical mode of political participation.

Earlier studies have indicated that the single ruling party's authorities in some authoritarian states might propose certain sanctioned political activities to reinforce the party's legitimacy. The institutionalized participation initiated by the Chinese Communist Party adds to the complexity of political participation. Townsend (1969) proposed that such state-led political participation "define[d] the major function of participation as execution of party policies, whereas the democratic style defines it as exerting popular influence on political decisions" (p. 3). He also found that political participation in China would "support a supreme, unified national interest as defined solely by the Communist Party" (p. 3). Although the political context in contemporary China has changed significantly since 1969, the CCP remains the single ruling party of Mainland China. The CCP organizes campaigns and activities to promote state legitimacy (S. Zhao, 1998) such as recruiting young members to serve as the CCP cadre and propagating the Communist ideology in university education. Previous literature suggests that the CCP maintains the

Communist ideology through state-led patriotic campaigns as well as the nationwide education system and state-controlled media (Kennedy, 2009; S. Zhao, 1998). This mode of participation benefits the ruling party, but makes limited contribution to the public good.

Based on the above discussion, the present study concentrates on three modes of political participation:

1. *The canonical mode of political participation.* The outcome of this mode of political participation is aimed at achieving public good rather than private interests. It includes individual or collective actions that aim to increase people's political attentiveness, influence the governmental or institutional decision process, or make one's political concerns known to the public.

2. *The contacting/lobbying mode of political participation.* This is carried out via non-official or alternative channels, from contacting and seeking help from personal networks to lobbying officials privately. Different from the canonical mode of participation, which is aimed at public or collective outcomes, the contacting/lobbying mode of participation benefits private interests and is engaged in individually.

3. *Ruling party–initiated political activities.* This includes CCP-initiated campaign activities, political learning sessions, and elections for the leaders of CCP branches or CCP-supervised institutions.

The Political Impacts of Social Networking Sites

New Media and Political Participation. Many studies have attempted to explain how individuals engage in politics with the help of new media technologies (see, e.g., Bimber, 2000; de Zúñiga et al., 2009; W. Zhang et al., 2010; X. Zhang, 2011). A meta-analysis found a strong argument *against* the view that the Internet had a negative effect on civic or political engagement. Yet the metadata also failed to establish "a substantial impact" on engagement through Internet use (Boulianne, 2009, p. 193). Our study focuses on social networking sites, a platform where users can conduct live chats, upload videos, send e-mails, maintain blogs, form discussion groups, and share files (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Carter, Foulger, & Ewbank, 2008). The optimists believe that online social networking behaviors are positively linked with civic and political participation, ranging from volunteering community services to joining protests or demonstrations to participating in problem-solving actions (de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; de Zúñiga et al., 2009). For example, during the 2008 U.S. presidential election, Facebook allowed users to share political attitudes, support the candidates, and conduct political discussions with others (Vitak et al., 2011). The pessimists argue that the magnitude of the association between the use of social networking sites and civic engagement is marginal (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009), echoing a similar notion of a decade ago that the direct impact of Internet use and engaging in politics was significant, but the effect size was "small and quite subtle" (Bimber, 1999, p. 423).

Four Dimensions of SNS Uses. It has been pointed out that most studies have oversimplified new media uses by focusing on hours of the use instead of on patterns of the use (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). When discussing the uses of SNS, Bode (2012, p. 352) argued that "it is not whether or how often

one uses Facebook, but rather the specific set of activities one engages in during such time that drives the relationship between Facebook use and various types of political participation". The present study is different from earlier studies where SNS uses were treated as a unidimensional online behavior (de Zúñiga et al., 2012; W. Zhang et al., 2010). Rather, our study discerns four dimensions of SNS uses: (1) information exchange and instrumental use, (2) relational and social networking use, (3) recreational or entertainment use, and (4) SNS-based political activities.

Such theory-driven categorization has been applied in previous studies of the media–politics relationship (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Moy, Scheufele, & Holbert, 1999; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). The first three dimensions are based on the framework proposed by Campbell and Kwak (2010, p. 538) on media use, which is "derived from previous research on political and civic consequences of traditional media . . . and new communication technologies . . . as well as theory about media uses and gratifications more broadly" (Kwak, Campbell, Choi, & Bae, 2011, p. 486). We extend this dimension of "information exchange about news and public affairs" in Campbell and Kwak's (2010, p. 538) framework to include information exchange and instrumental uses, which is developed from a meta-analysis of media use measurement by Brandtzaeg and colleagues (Brandtzaeg, 2010; Brandtzaeg & Heim, 2009). The instrumental users refer to those people who "chose media content for information and civic purposes, utility oriented, often work-related, searching for e-Government or public information" (Brandtzaeg, 2010, p. 952). The fourth dimension—SNS-based political activities—on the other hand, is derived from recent work on political-oriented behaviors via SNS that focuses on government and politics only (Bode, 2012; Vitak et al., 2011). Information exchange and instrumental use encompasses the information flow among different SNS users in general, whereas SNS-based political activities concentrate on users' active interaction with particular governmental and political figures or using SNS as a mobilizer of a certain political action.

SNS Use and Political Participation in Mainland China

The political impacts of new media in China remain debatable and ambiguous. On the one hand, when new media technologies were based on a "highly commercialized and more liberalized socio-cultural environment" (Wallis, 2011, p. 406), they opened up new spheres for expression in several different modes. Since the early 2000s, public deliberation via social media has resulted in a series of collective actions that influenced governmental decision-making (Qiu, 2009). For example, the Chinese government terminated the hydropower project on the Nu River due to public outcry, when the Internet and the "alternative media" channeled the public debates (Yang & Calhoun, 2007, p. 211). Some writers believe that the Internet in China functions as a democratic institution (Zheng & Wu, 2005).

On the other hand, although new media in China help to disseminate grassroots or even deviant messages (He, 2008), the flow of information online is still under severe controls (MacKinnon, 2009). Mou and her colleagues (2011) found that the political context tended to muffle the liberalizing potential of the Internet. With sophisticated censorship schemes and a large group of Internet administrators, the Chinese government managed to remove online posts or comments that "represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilization" (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013, p. 326) on SNS. The deletions happened most heavily "in the

first hour" after a post was submitted, and almost one-third of the total cuts happened within "five to thirty minutes" after the post (Zhu, et al., 2013, p. 1).

SNS Uses, Political Participation, and University Students in China

Our study focuses on university students for two important reasons. First, the Internet was introduced to China in the middle of the 1990s and became popular in the mid-2000s. Current university students who were born in the mid-1980s grew up with the Internet, and they "represent the first truly online generation in China" (Mou et al., 2011, p. 346). Meanwhile, students represent the largest group (30.2%) of the total Internet users in China in terms of occupation (CNNIC, 2012, p. 20), whereas university students or equivalent comprise more than one-third (33.3%) of the whole Internet population in terms of educational level (CNNIC, 2012, p. 20). Second, the CCP restricts the information circulated on SNS directly on university campuses. Some scholars have suggested setting up a team of web administrators to monitor and report students' online speeches that are at odds with the government (Wang, 2013). Because the decline of political control over students was considered a crucial contributor to the 1989 Beijing student movement (D. Zhao, 2000), the CCP now strives to control the ideology of university students. As a result, the universities in China conducted a program of "patriotic education" to maintain state legitimacy (S. Zhao, 1998).

Research Questions

Based on the above discussion, this study seeks to answer two research questions:

RQ1:   *To what extent do university students in Mainland China engage in three modes of political participation?*

RQ2:   *How do university students in Mainland China engage in different modes of political participation through different dimensions of SNS uses?*

Method
Sampling Procedure

A survey using self-administrated paper questionnaires was implemented in two large comprehensive universities in Guangdong Province during the spring of 2012 with multistage cluster sampling. The province-level Internet penetration rate is 63.1% (CNNIC, 2013, p. 15), the third highest in China. A total of five schools/colleges were randomly selected from the two universities. Within each selected school/college, two course programs were randomly selected. Within each program, one or two classes that contained around 30 students were randomly selected. For the selected classes, permission to conduct the survey was obtained from the course instructors. All students in the classes were invited to participate in the survey. The students voluntarily finished the questionnaires in the class setting when both the course instructor and one of the authors were on site, after which the author collected the finished questionnaires. The survey yielded a valid sample of 328 respondents. The response rate was 88.52% according to American Association of Public Opinion Research formula 5. As suggested by Mou et

al. (2011), using a paper questionnaire instead of online questionnaire could avoid censorship software installed on or off the campus.

Within the valid sample, 60.99% of respondents reported their gender as female. Respondents ranged in age from 17 to 24, with an average of 20.25 (*SD* = 1.22). Most of the respondents (312 cases, 96.00%) reported that they had registered at least one SNS account. It was noteworthy that 11.29% of the respondents reported they were either a formal CCP member or a CCP member candidate. This proportion was close to the official statistics, which reported that 11.52% of the college students in Guangdong Province were affiliated with CCP (S. Zhang, 2011). The proportion of CCP members on university campuses in Guangdong Province is higher than the national level of 9.38%, according to the official statistics released by the China Education Ministry (2011). In our sample, 80.88% of respondents reported that they were China Communism Youth League members, and 7.84% did not claim any political partisanship.

Measurements

Dependent Variables

Three modes of political participation. Survey questions about political participation contained a list of behavioral items that were each measured by a four-point Likert scale ranging from *never* to *always*. To minimize political sensitivity, the wording of the title question was modified from the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) conducted in mainland China.[2] The wording of the present study read: "Sometimes people might seek help to solve personal or family problems, or people have different opinions on governmental policies and university regulations. What types of activities have you done to express your concerns, or solve the problems?" Three modes of political participation were measured. For the canonical mode of political participation, items were modified from previous studies conducted in democratic societies (de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Zukin et al., 2006, pp. 57–58) to fit the contextual background in China with nonsensitive wordings. The items were averaged as a new variable termed "canonical mode of political participation," as reported in Table 1 (*M* = 1.89, SD = 0.48, Cronbach's α = .59). Another mode of political participation of making private contacts or lobbying (*shuo qing*) with the officials, leaders, or their acquaintances not relevant to the issue was measured with four items ranging from *never* to *always*. The items were averaged as a new variable termed "contacting as political participation" and are reported in Table 1 as well (*M* = 1.42, *SD* = 0.48, Cronbach's α = .69). Finally, CCP-initiated participation was measured by two items, each with a four-point scale ranging from *never* to *always*. The items were averaged as a new variable termed "CCP-initiated participations," as shown in Table 1 (*M* = 1.44, *SD* = 0.64).

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[2] The ABS survey in Mainland China was conducted by Peking University. The Chinese version of the questionnaire is available on the Asian Barometer Survey website at http://www.jdsurvey.net/eab/EABDocumentation.jsp.

Independent Variables

SNS use dimensions. An introduction in the questionnaire defined the term *SNS*; it read, "Social Networking Sites (SNS) refers to the online media that you have a list of friends, with whom you can share contents and exchange information, for example, Weibo, Renren, or QQ-space, among many others." For SNS users, 18 items of SNS use were proposed with a four-point Likert scale ranging from *seldom* to *always* for each.[3] Details of the measurements and descriptive results are reported in Table 2. Respondents also answered how long they had registered their SNS account (with a five-point scale ranging from *less than one year* to *more than four years* and one year as the interval, $M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.52$). The average daily amount of time of active SNS use—that is, not including hanging online—was 91.50 minutes ($SD = 86.18$), with a median of 60.00 minutes.

Political internal efficacy. Although the present study does not focus on the formation and consequences of political efficacy, political internal efficacy is a crucial predictor of political behaviors and thus was included in the analysis (Balch, 1974; Clarke & Acock, 1989; Pollock, 1983). The measurement of political internal efficacy followed Nieme, Craig, and Mattei: "I feel that I could do as good a job in public office as most other people," "I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics," "I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country," and "I think that I am as well-informed about politics and government as most people" (1991, p. 1408). Each item was measured on a four-point scale ranging from *not agree at all* to *agree very much*. The four items were averaged as the measure of political internal efficacy ($M = 2.30$, $SD = 0.55$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$).

Political trust. A set of governmental institutions was listed: provincial government, police, central government, China Communist Party, People's Court, People's Congress, and People's Liberation Army. Each institution was measured on a four-point scale ranging from *not trust at all* to *trust very much*. The measures were averaged as political trust ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 0.62$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$).

Media usage. Focusing on traditional media plus non-SNS online applications, media usage included a number of items, each measured by a four-point scale ranging from *seldom* to *very often*. Three categories of media use were discerned: (1) news media use—an average of measures of watching news on a TV set, watching online news videos, reading newspapers, and reading online text news ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 0.61$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .63$); (2) interpersonal media use—an average of measures of watching nonpolitical online videos, e-mail, instant messaging, and making telephone calls ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.58$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .64$); and (3) recreational media use—an average of measures of reading books, using mobile applications, buying CDs/DVDs, blogging, the bulletin board system (BBS), and e-commerce ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 0.53$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .62$).

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[3] Students might register several different SNS accounts. Hence, respondents were asked to answer the questionnaire on the basis of the SNS that they used the most. If their use of accounts was about the same, they were asked to choose the SNS that they had been registered with the longest.

Demographic and personal characteristics. Individual-level measurements included gender and monthly household income. The latter was measured on six-point scale ranging from *below 3,000 RMB* (renminbi, the official currency of China) to *over 15,000 RMB* at intervals of 3,000 RMB; $M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.40$ (with an average monthly household income around 7,000 RMB). Other measurements included political interests (a four-point scale ranging from *none* to *very much*, $M = 2.49$, $SD = 0.71$), CCP membership (11.29%), and father's CCP membership (18.75%).[4]

Results
Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the three modes of political participation.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Three Modes of Political Participation.

	M	SD
The canonical mode of political participation (α = .59)	**1.89**	**0.48**
• Follow news on government or politics regularly	2.59	0.94
• Discuss politics with friends or colleagues	2.52	0.80
• Sign petition letters	1.59	0.78
• Join demonstrations that are not organized by party officials	1.56	0.77
• Contact official media to cover the event	1.21	0.53
The contacting/lobbing mode of participation (α = .69)	**1.42**	**0.48**
• Express opinions to student tutors or faculties	1.77	0.78
• Seek help from higher officials at the university	1.37	0.67
• Lobby with acquaintances of political leaders	1.31	0.64
• Seek help directly from higher-level government personnel	1.21	0.55
The CCP-initiated participation (r=.44, p<.001).	**1.44**	**0.64**
• Attend political campaigns/meetings/learning sessions organized by CCP-related institutions	1.47	0.74
• Become candidates in CCP-related or government-related elections	1.41	0.74

As shown in Table 1, the average scores of all three types of political participation generally were not high. The canonical mode of participation was rated the highest. In this mode, following political news regularly and discussing politics with peers was the activity most engaged in, whereas students rarely contacted official media. The contacting/lobbying mode of participation ranked second. Students were most likely to contact officials within their university faculties—that is, tutors and leaders at the university. CCP-initiated   participation   ranked   the   lowest   among   the   three   modes.

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[4] One's father's CCP membership reflects the family's influence of political orientation. The present study followed this practice from the World Values Survey conducted in China in 2007 (available at http://www.wvsevsdb.com/wvs/WVSDocumentation.jsp). The question number is Vpx4 at page 18.

Table 2 displays the dimensions of SNS use. The recreational and entertainment uses of SNS ranked highest of the four dimensions. In this dimension, reposting nonpolitical content and posting threads on personal sites ranked high. Regarding the informational and instrumental uses, SNS was used to obtain hard news, repost online materials on government and politics, and upload self-made pictures or video clips. Although the social networking uses were not high in general, leaving messages and mentioning friends by using the "@" function ranked highest among all the items of SNS use ($M = 3.16$). Finally, SNS-based political activities ranked the lowest; almost no students ($M = 1.90$) followed or interacted with political figures or institutions via SNS or organized nongovernmental activities via SNS ($M = 1.89$).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of SNS Use Dimensions.

	M	SD
Information exchange and instrumental uses (α = .70)	**2.71**	**0.63**
• Read hard news via SNS	3.03	0.88
• Repost photos or videos clips on government or politics	2.60	0.98
• Upload photos or videos shot by yourself on non-recreational latest events	2.02	0.98
• Vote online	1.75	0.67
• Write blogs on government or politics, such as politics, economics, or international relations	1.72	0.84
• Join topic discussion via SNS	1.67	0.70
Social networking uses (α = .65)	**2.44**	**0.55**
• Leave messages or use "@" function	3.16	0.95
• Visit your friends' personal pages	3.01	0.81
• Seek or add new friends	2.40	0.85
• Send (virtual) gifts to your friends	1.81	0.77
• Use social networking applications	1.81	0.82
Recreational and entertainment uses (α = .71)	**2.81**	**0.78**
• Repost or share texts, music, or videos on entertainment or lifestyle	3.03	0.91
• Write posts on recreation or lifestyle	2.82	1.00
• Upload photos, videos, or music on personal sites	2.57	0.99
SNS-based political activities (α = .66)	**1.81**	**0.61**
• Post political issues on SNS and seek help or discussion	2.52	1.04
• Express opinions explicitly on government and politics via SNS	1.90	0.89
• Follow and interact with official SNS accounts of governmental or political institutions	1.90	0.89
• Organize nongovernmental campaigns or activities via SNS	1.89	1.01

To find out how well SNS use predicted each of the three modes of political participation, three ordinary least square regressions were conducted after the dependent variables were normalized and transformed. The results are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Predicting Three Modes of Political Participation.

	Model 1 Canonical		Model 2 Contacting-lobbying [a]		Model 3 CCP-initiated [b]	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Female	−.027	.055	−.16**	.015	.0045	.050
Household income	.029	.026	.042	.0070	.012	.024
Length of registered SNS	−.063	.016	.092#	.0042	.013	.014
Daily SNS use length (min) – logged	−.031	.0063	.035	.0017	.066	.005
Interest in politics	.12*	.040	.11#	.011	−.084	.036
SNS: informational and instrumental	.21**	.061	−.074	.016	.033	.056
SNS: social networking	−.021	.052	.035	.014	−.0067	.047
SNS: recreational and entertainment	−.13#	.044	.14#	.012	−.096	.040
SNS: online politics	.33***	.046	−.37***	.012	.18*	.041
Media use: interpersonal communication	−.0017	.050	.0098	.013	−.12#	.045
News media use	.16**	.044	.011	.012	.062	.040
Media use: recreational use	.033	.055	−.14*	.015	.060	.050
Internal efficacy	.099#	.052	−.078	.014	.090	.048
Political trust	.0055	.038	−.16**	.010	.14*	.035
CCP membership	−.027	.075	−.095#	.020	.15**	.068
Father's CCP membership	−.0083	.062	.046	.016	.087	.056
Valid N	291		291		291	
Adjusted R²	32.63%		18.79%		8.37%	
R²	36.34%		23.27%		13.72%	
Model F value	$F(16, 274) = 9.18^{***}$		$F(16, 274) = 5.19^{***}$		$F(16, 274) = 2.66^{***}$	

[a] The dependent variable in Model 2, the contact mode of political participation, was transformed as normalization by its reciprocal of its square-rooted value. Therefore, the interpretation of the coefficients, especially the direction, should be reversed.

[b] The dependent variable, participating in CCP-initiated activities, was transformed as normalization by its logged value.

# p < .1. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

Model 1 predicted the level of the canonical mode of political participation—signing petitions, contacting media, political discussion, and joining nonofficial demonstrations or protests. Using SNS for informational and instrumental purposes—ranging from reading hard news to reposting a variety of civic or political contents—were positively associated with the canonical mode of political participation (β = .21, SE = .061, p < .01). SNS-based political activities—posting political issues or organizing campaigns via SNS—was also positively associated with this participatory mode (β = .33, SE = .046, p < .01). The entertainment uses of SNS, though marginally significant, negatively predicted the conventional mode of participation (β = −.13, SE = .044, p < .1). Other statistically significant predictors were all positive, including political interest (β = .12, SE = .040, p < .05) and news media use (β = .16, SE = .044, p < .001). The model explains a satisfactory 32.63% of the variance of the dependent variables.

Model 2 predicted political participation of contacting and lobbying with acquaintances or officials. The dependent variable was transformed into normal distribution by using its inverse of the square-root value.[5] After the transformation, the original value was set as the denominator. Therefore, the interpretation of the coefficients, especially the direction of the impacts, should be reversed; that is, a positive coefficient refers to a *negative* effect and vice versa. Political uses of SNS were *positively* linked with this type of participation (β = −.37, SE = .012, p < .001). Entertainment uses of SNS were *negatively*, though marginally, associated with the contact mode of participation (β = .14, SE = .012, p < .1). Recreational uses of traditional media (β = −.14, SE = .015, p < .05) and political trust (β = −.15, SE = .010, p < .05) also *positively* affected participation. It is noteworthy that CCP membership (β = −.095, SE = .020, p < .1) was *positively* associated with the likelihood of using personal relationships to express political needs. The model explains 18.79% of the total variance of the dependent variables.

Model 3 predicted the mode of political participation that was initiated or organized by CCP-related institutions as part of CCP's strategy to maintain legitimacy. Again, SNS use for online politics had a positive impact (β = .18, SE = .041, p < .05). Political trust (β = .14, SE = .035, p < .05) also yielded a positive impact on CCP-led political activities. Moreover, CCP membership (β = .15, SE = .068, p < .01) increased one's likelihood for participating in CCP-led political activities. The whole model explains less than one-tenth of the total variance (8.37%) of the dependent variables.

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[5] The normalization was processed using STATA's "ladder" function. A description of this method can be found at Chen, Ender, Mitchell, and Wells (2003). Regression with STATA, from
http://www.ats.ucla.edu/stat/stata/webbooks/reg/default.htm, chapter 1.

Discussion

This study yields three important findings. First, political participation could be a multidimensional phenomenon (Verba et al., 1971). Verba and colleagues proposed four dimensions or "characteristics" that different modes of political participation array on: (1) the outcome, or whether the participation benefits the society or particular individuals; (2) the conflict, or whether the benefit for some participants is based on losses among other participants; (3) the cooperativeness, or whether the participants need to work together to achieve the goal; and (4) the level of initiative, or the difficulty for one to participate (Verba et al., 1971, pp. 10–15). Shi (1997) added one more dimension for authoritarian regimes: the level of risk, or whether the participation is subject to suppression by authorities. Our findings suggest that, in general, students are more likely to participate in political actions that are beneficial to the general public (the relatively higher scores on the canonical mode of participation), that are lower in conflict with other participants (the higher scores of following hard news and lower scores in contacting official media and seeking help directly from government officials), that can be achieved with less difficulties, and that have a lower risk of suppression by authorities (the lower rating on petitioning and demonstration). Such findings echo an earlier large survey study using a national random sample where only 5% of the respondents would like to sign petitions and only 1.6% of the respondents would join non-official demonstrations (Shen, 2008, p. 201).

Our study does not find a high level of the contacting-lobbying mode of participation in the university context. A possible explanation is that university students do not have the necessary resources to lobby with higher-level governmental officials. We did find, however, that CCP affiliation was a determinant of contacting/lobbying behaviors. An explanation for this is that the student CCP members occupy more political and social roles, such as being class cadres and student tutors, or maintaining a kinship with different levels of faculties or political leaders. Not surprisingly, CCP membership significantly predicted university students' participation in CCP-initiated political activities.

Second, the association between SNS uses dimensions and political participation presented an ambiguous picture of the role of SNS in Chinese political life. Our results show that SNS-based political activities—organizing events via SNS or interacting with governmental or political figures and institutions—are significant predictors of all three modes of political participation. This finding follows previous research that found that following a candidate's page or drafting political messages on SNS positively predicted off-line political participation, including volunteering or signing petitions (Vitak et al., 2011). However, given the unique nature of political participation in Mainland China, we are able to demonstrate contrasting scenarios of the political impact of SNS uses. On the one hand, political and instrumental uses boost political actions such as petitioning, demonstrations, political talks, and news attentiveness. SNS serves as a tool for expression and participation. The entertainment uses of SNS had negative impacts on both the canonical participation and the contacting/lobbying modes of participation, in line with a number of studies that suggest entertainment media dampen political actions. On the other hand, SNS-based political activities increase the likelihood of contacting and lobbying activities. As discussed, to engage in the contacting/lobbying mode of participation in an authoritarian state, the participant needs to either maintain a good personal relationship with governmental officials by benefit-exchanging (Shi, 1997) or occasionally contact the governmental agencies in an "approved way" (DiFranceisco & Gitelman, 1984, p.

619). In the university, the agencies that the student may contact or lobby with include student cadres, teachers, university leaders, and governmental leaders. These actors are all directly monitored by the CCP and stand on the same side of this ruling party. Although we found that the impact of SNS use on this type of participation is mixed—that is, both positive (for SNS-based political activities) and negative (for entertainment uses), the effect size of online political uses is larger than that of the entertainment uses (the absolute beta values of .37 versus .14).

Moreover, higher levels of political use of SNS lead to higher levels of joining CCP-initiated activities. CCP-organized activities are designed deliberately to enhance the CCP's legitimacy (S. Zhao, 1998). Therefore, SNS might not be simply considered a utopian public sphere or the new hope of democracy in China. Rather, it might work in the opposite direction. According to Mou and colleagues, "any utopian predictions concerning political participation online need to be reformulated in light of external contextual factors" (2011, p. 341). The results of the present study echo their assertion and extend previous scholarship to a wider range of social media usage dimensions and tackle participatory behaviors with different political implications.

Finally, using SNS for interpersonal networking purposes—seeking new friends and visiting friends' personal pages—has no significant impact on any mode of participation. This is different from some previous findings in democratic societies, where Facebook group membership fostered off-line civic and political participation (Valenzuela et al., 2009). Our study indicates that in the political context of Mainland China, interpersonal networks shaped via online media might not transfer to off-line political participation.

Conclusions

This study sheds light on how individuals engage in different modes of political participation through various uses of SNS in a censored and authoritarian political environment. Our findings suggest that social networking sites are not only a new channel for individuals to express political concerns but a new platform to maintain state legitimacy. Within such an "omnipresent all-powerful Chinese state" (Lagerkvist, 2012, p. 357), most of the new media-facilitated off-line political actions were "pro-state and pro-status-quo features than behavior intent on democratic revolution" (Lagerkvist, 2012, p. 357). Hence, it is flawed to treat the Chinese Internet as an undifferentiated sphere when it comprises different kinds of spaces "embodying the dialectics of government control and citizen participation" (Jiang, in press, p. 33).

In fact, a number of Chinese domestic scholars are exploring how SNS might be used to monitor and regulate students' daily behaviors, emotions, or speeches that are considered in conflict with the government (Suo, 2012; Wan, 2012). Although SNS is developing swiftly in Mainland China and some Chinese netizens have the techniques to bypass the censorship by using anti-blocking software and mirror sites (Endeshaw, 2004; Lacharite, 2002), opportunities for participation are a necessary but "far from sufficient" condition for democracy (Norris, 2002, p. 2). To make democracy work, "multiple institutions need to be working effectively . . . to ensure that the participation is meaningful rather than merely symbolic" because the participation by itself is not "necessarily a signal of democratization" (Norris, 2002,

pp. 2–3). Findings from this study indicate that the democratization in Mainland China, especially from the prism of social media and university students, might take longer than expected.

The study has a number of limitations. First, the project focuses on university students, because they are the most active users of SNS and their political participation on SNS deserves scholarly attention. Nonetheless, the relationship between social media and political engagement for other groups may be equally interesting. For example, professionals or public intellectuals were found to play a crucial role in shaping the online discourse during certain collective actions in China (Lin & Zhang, 2011). In addition, the elderly were found to engage in politics via SNS as well, although their patterns of media use and political behaviors were different from those of students (Xie, 2008). Future research with national samples can boost the representative quality of the survey.

As a cross-sectional study, this article cannot confirm the causality of SNS use and political participation. As a theory-driven study, however, the findings on different dimensions of SNS use and three modes of political participation in a university setting remain socially significant. The present study did not consider different brands of social media use, such as Weibo, Facebook, Twitter, and the like, because the theory-driven measures of SNS use dimensions will remain constant regardless of the brand. The significance of the study, therefore, goes beyond the type of SNS. Nonetheless, future studies may focus on the political impact of a particular type of SNS to gauge the differences between Facebook users and MySpace users, for instance (Valenzuela, Arriagada, & Scherman, 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2009; Vitak et al., 2011; Waite, 2007), or to compare the extent to which state censorship might affect the information flow among the SNS operated by different commercial entities (MacKinnon, 2009).

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