

Comparing the Effects of Traditional Media and Social Media Use on General Trust in China During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Although previous studies have indicated a generally positive association between social media use and general trust, the differential impacts of traditional media and social media on general trust and their underlying mechanisms have yet to be fully elaborated. Drawing on the three-dimensional definition of social capital (i.e., personal networks, social norms, and interpersonal trust) as its theoretical framework, this study comparatively examines the impacts of traditional media and social media on general trust, focusing on the mediating role of social capital. Analyses of survey data from China ($N = 1,519$) during the first stage of COVID-19 demonstrate that social media has a positive relationship with general trust. In addition, social media has two opposing indirect effects on general trust through increased interpersonal trust and personal networks. In contrast, traditional media use has no positive relationship with general trust, either directly or indirectly, although it has a positive relationship with social norms. The differential consequences of using traditional media and social media on general trust are discussed from the perspective of social capital.

Keywords: general trust, traditional media, social media, social capital, COVID-19

Research has suggested that factors relevant to disease, disgust, and contagion predict negative attitudes, including prejudice, negative moral emotions, racism and intergroup conflict, violence, and conspiracy theories, toward members of the outgroup (Hult Khazaie & Khan, 2020; Jolley & Paterson, 2020;

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Meleady, Hodson, & Earle, 2021; Van Assche, Politi, Van Dessel, & Phalet, 2020). Among these negative outcomes, a change in general trust was expected during the COVID-19 pandemic through altered social capital from consuming media content. This calls for an articulation of the mechanisms between media use and general trust through a theoretical lens.

General trust is a key concept in complex modern society, not only because it boosts economic prosperity by reducing transaction costs and expanding business opportunities (Fukuyama, 1995) but also because it facilitates horizontal interpersonal cooperation and mutually beneficial civic engagement, which ultimately improve the functioning of democracy (Putnam, 2000). General trust plays an even more important role in a highly digitalized society, where people can easily form new social relationships beyond the conventional boundaries of social networks. Initiating and maintaining connections with various contacts online provide more access to instrumental and socioemotional resources embedded in personal networks, while they increase the opportunity cost of confining oneself to small, densely knit core groups. To reduce this opportunity cost by extending networks of mutually beneficial relationships through mediated communication, it is necessary to overcome the inherent uncertainty in connecting with new people. Trust in others is essential because it serves as “a ‘booster rocket’ providing necessary ‘thrust’ for the ‘takeoff’ from commitment relationships” (Yamagishi, 2011, p. 55).

Social media are particularly pertinent to general trust because the unprecedentedly wide scope of social interactions potentially includes not only familiar friends but also less familiar others (Ellison & Vitak, 2015; Hampton, Lee, & Her, 2011). In addition, there is general agreement that social media use is primarily to connect familiar friends who are existing relationships, whereby bridging the less familiar others is the distal outcome. In fact, most empirical research has documented a positive relationship between social media use and general trust (e.g., Erickson, 2011; Li, Lee, & Li, 2016; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009), with only a few works reporting a null relationship (Håkansson & Witmer, 2015). For example, Li et al. (2016) found that public affairs communication via social media was positively related to general trust. Nevertheless, little has been known about the potential mechanism underlying this relationship (for two exceptional works, see Bouchillon, 2014, 2019), especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. To fill this research gap, drawing on the three-dimensional definition of social capital (i.e., personal networks, social norms, and interpersonal trust: See Putnam, 1993, 2000) as the theoretical framework, this study aims to identify the mechanism that bridges social media use and general trust by comparing the impact of traditional media use.

General Trust, Social Capital, and Social Media

General trust is “a belief in the benevolence of human nature in general and thus is not limited to particular objects” (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994, p. 139); this definition refers to “default expectations of people’s trustworthiness” (Yamagishi, 2001, p. 143). This means that the object of general trust typically refers to abstract others (or “most people”) in a given society rather than a specific group of people, though general trust itself is essentially an individual’s perception (Newton & Zmerli, 2011; Uslaner, 2011). It should be noted that general trust does not equal blind trust in others. Instead, it is underpinned by social intelligence, and those who have high general trust are “sensitive to information suggesting

untrustworthiness" and "able to use such information to detect trustworthy from untrustworthy people successfully" (Yamagishi, 2011, p. 125).

To date, only a handful of empirical studies have been devoted to tapping into the mechanism behind the link between social media and general trust, which has generated confusing results. Bouchillon (2014) once found a significant mediating role of bonding social capital (but not bridging social capital) in the relationship between Facebook use and general trust. Conceptually, bonding social capital refers to the value or resources stemming from homogeneous networks among people sharing strong ties, such as families and close friends, whereas bridging social capital usually denotes the value derived from heterogeneous networks among people sharing weak ties, such as acquaintances (Putnam, 2000). The above finding was construed to provide partial support for the conflict theory that individuals "surrounded by strong, homogeneous ties" are inclined to "perceive of the world as not so different, not so diverse, allowing trust to generalize beyond those who [they] interact with at present" (Bouchillon, 2014, p. 518). However, in his recent study, Bouchillon (2019) found that Facebook group sociability is positively linked with general trust through the mediation of bridging social capital. Without referring to the disparity with his early finding, Bouchillon (2019) interpreted this result following the logic of the strength of weak ties (Glanville, Andersson, & Paxton, 2013; Granovetter, 1973) that interacting with diverse others, along with the dividends it pays, would make people feel more optimistic about the trustworthiness of the average person.

Apart from the difference in the survey samples of the two studies (the early study used a convenience sample of American undergraduates, while the latter study used a national sample of U.S. adults), the above inconsistent findings may also result from the problematic operationalizations of bonding and bridging social capital used by those studies (i.e., the Internet Social Capital Scales; Williams, 2006). Recent empirical evidence (Appel et al., 2014) demonstrates that the Internet Social Capital Scales and their derivatives conflate social capital with other constructs, such as social support and attachment, which are related to civic engagement and general trust, thus likely generating unstable results. This issue further revealed that although heavily inspired by Granovetter's (1973) work on the strength of social ties, bonding and bridging social capital did not capture the structural or relational elements of social capital.

To address these limitations, this study utilized Putnam's (1993, 2000) three-dimensional definition of social capital (i.e., personal networks, social norms, and interpersonal trust) to scrutinize the mechanism behind the link between media use and general trust. Specifically, personal networks reflect the relational component of social capital, which denotes "the objective quantity of social relationships and activities" (Park, Han, & Kaid, 2013, p. 1080). Focusing on the context of the COVID-19 crisis, we further operationalize this dimension by looking at interpersonal communication between different contacts regarding the pandemic. In essence, it is interpersonal exchange that helps build and sustain one's social networks from which the individual can draw different resources (Bourdieu, 1986). By identifying personal networks as one dimension of social capital, this definition avoids the aforementioned conceptual and operational issues that haunt bonding and bridging social capital. Past studies have illustrated that positive interactions with diverse contacts help cultivate a sense that people are trustworthy and even extend this feeling to general (unknown) others (Glanville, 2016; Miyata, Ikeda, & Kobayashi, 2008).

Social norms and interpersonal trust reflect the cognitive components of social capital, which are people's perceptions of their social relationships (Harpham, Grant, & Thomas, 2002; Park et al., 2013). During the pandemic, being prepared for and/or complying with preventive behaviors against COVID-19 (e.g., wearing masks in public spaces, keeping social distance, and taking vaccines) emerged as a new social norm (Liu et al., 2022; Sinclair & Agerström, 2023). It contained mutual and reciprocal elements, as adherence to preventive behaviors protected the health and well-being of the actor and people around by reducing viral transmission. The operationalization of social norms in this context mainly targets the injunctive aspect of norms that regards one's perceptions of whether significant others approve or disapprove of a specific behavior (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990; Sinclair & Agerström, 2023). Social norms are contended to undergird trust in general. In his seminal work on local communities in Italy, Putnam (1993) asserted that general trust can arise from social norms (particularly norms of reciprocity) "because they lower transaction costs and facilitate cooperation" (p. 172). Some scholars also argued that people adhering to universalistic moral principles were more likely to conduct volunteering and giving (Wu, Zhao, Zhang, & Liu, 2018), which are closely linked with general trust (Cheung, Lo, & Liu, 2016).

The dimension of interpersonal trust concentrates on the perceived trustworthiness of people whom the trustors already know, such as their families and friends. This concept coincides with the "knowledge-based trust" labeled by Yamagishi and Yamagishi (1994, p. 139) and the "particularized trust" called by Freitag and Traunmüller (2009) and Glanville and Shi (2020). Interpersonal trust, in this sense, distinguishes itself from general trust, which centers on the perceived trustworthiness of others (mostly unknown people). An increasing body of research has demonstrated that trust in specific people can extend to more abstract others (Freitag & Traunmüller, 2009; Glanville & Paxton, 2007; Glanville et al., 2013; Paxton & Glanville, 2015). In their recent review of the literature, Newton and colleagues summarized that "particular trust lays the foundation of an imaginary pyramid of social trust, with trust in the general other at the top" (Newton, Stolle, & Zmerli, 2018, p. 51).

Recent evidence has illustrated the utility of this multidimensional definition of social capital in revealing the social implications of media use (Lee & Sohn, 2016; Park & Han, 2018) and in explaining how information and communication technologies can help individuals respond to the COVID-19 pandemic (Wang, Zhang, Xu, Ruan, & Tang, 2021).

Contrasting the Nature of Traditional Media and Social Media

During COVID-19, Internet and social media use reached unprecedented peaks (Marzouki, Aldossari, & Veltri, 2021). Research found that users consumed more information about COVID-19 and followed recent information via social media, showing a shift toward digital media (Kaya, 2020). Reviews also indicated that social media use as a tool for professional communication and education in healthcare has been increasing (Wong, Ho, Olusanya, Antonini, & Lyness, 2021). Previous studies have mainly classified media forms into traditional media and new media (Dewan & Ramaprasad, 2014). As a form of new media, social media has two-way interaction and social networking characteristics that distinguish it from traditional media (Carr & Hayes, 2015). In addition, most of the content of previous new media, such as the Internet, was obtained from traditional media. However, social media features user-generated

content and already has a broad audience base today (dos Santos, 2021). Therefore, the comparison of traditional media and social media forms would advance our understanding of the relationship between media use and general trust.

Social media are Web-based platforms that allow users to communicate messages with others; post, edit, and sort text and files linked to themselves or others; and view the messages, connections, text, and files communicated (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013). However, traditional media is a one-directional mass communication form that usually infers newspapers, magazines, television, and broadcasting (Meraz, 2011). Given the different natures of traditional media and social media, they may exert distinct effects on general trust through the mediation role of social capital. Previous literature has predominantly examined the mediation effect of personal networks (i.e., the most basic subscale of social capital) on social media and its positive effect on general trust. However, few comparative studies jointly examine the effects of traditional media and social media use on general trust. Furthermore, while personal networks have been well documented in the literature, the other subscales of social capital (i.e., social norms and interpersonal trust) await investigation to advance the understanding of the role of social capital.

In contrast to traditional media use, social media use is expected to positively affect general trust through social capital. Research has found that location-based social network services could contribute to the accumulation of all aspects of social capital, including trust, reciprocity, and network resources (Park & Han, 2018). Prior studies have also indicated that social media can impact social capital by facilitating new *online* connections (Tang & Lee, 2013; Yang & DeHart, 2016) and altering *offline* connections formed in traditional social settings, such as religious groups and voluntary associations (Hampton et al., 2011). On the contrary, traditional media, mainly providing news and information to audiences, lacks social interaction dynamics like social media, thus hindering interpersonal trust in this platform. As a form of one-way communication, traditional media cannot establish social network connections with two-way social interactions. In addition, traditional media in China mainly plays a propaganda role for the government to reach more coherent communication (Zou, 2023). However, the opinions of audiences are more polarized, as shown on social media (Lu, Ray, Ha, & Chen, 2020).

Therefore, their impact on social capital can vary across different media because of their distinct social natures. For instance, several scholars have suggested that Facebook use positively impacts the diversity of personal networks, as it markedly reduces the costs of maintaining existing weak ties and creating new connections (Ellison & Vitak, 2015; Hampton et al., 2011). Other scholars argued that there was "no relationship to diversity because they primarily afford interaction with a small number of close-knit ties" (Hampton et al., 2011, p. 1036). These arguments strongly suggest that the impact of social media use on social capital hinges on the social affordances offered by a range of media.

Generally speaking, social media use facilitates connections with people from all walks of life because of the social affordances that the media provides. First, social media, by default, provides high information visibility, which is defined as "whether a piece of information can be located, as well as the relative ease with which it can be located" (Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2017, p. 42). It allows users to search and browse other users' profiles, posts, comments, preferences (e.g., "likes"), and friend lists (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). High information visibility makes it easier for users to encounter strangers from their

friends' social networks and learn about them by reviewing the abundant social cues created by their online activities. These features essentially help social media users convert *latent ties* into weak ties (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), leading to more diverse personal networks. Second, the semipublic nature of social networking sites allows collective communication among those who share common interests, which leads to more diverse networks. For instance, public figure pages and groups on Facebook attract users who share specific interests (e.g., hobbies), enabling "users to grow networks that can include friends, celebrities, news organizations, strangers, and other people of interest" (Ellison & Vitak, 2015, p. 7). Third, social media provides high content persistence (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Social media preserves records of previous communications among users so that they can be easily searched for, thus helping users find and connect with those who share interests and/or existing weak ties (e.g., remote acquaintances or old friends). For instance, boyd (2010) argued that content persistence on social media reduces the cost of interacting with remote others because it enables people to "connect to one another across great distances" by engaging with "asynchronously produced content over extended periods" (p. 53). These arguments all point to social media affordances helping to develop and maintain diverse social connections, leading us to predict a positive impact of social media use on general trust.

Although social media are also used to connect with those who share social attributes and attitudes (Ellison & Vitak, 2015), the selective nature of friending on social media can still lead to social capital. This is because each person actually possesses multiple social attributes, concerns, and interests, so making friends with people who share one of these can eventually lead to a more heterogeneous personal network in other respects. In fact, previous findings consistently show a positive association between social media use and social capital (Hampton et al., 2011; Yang & DeHart, 2016). As social capital has proven to be a significant antecedent of general trust (see the former section), to the extent that social media use leads to social capital, it is expected to be positively associated with general trust.

As in the literature mentioned above, we propose several hypotheses as follows (see Figure 1):

- H1: Traditional media use is positively associated with general trust.*
- H2: The positive association between traditional media use and general trust is mediated by increased (a) personal networks, (b) social norms, and (c) interpersonal trust.*
- H3: Social media use is positively associated with general trust.*
- H4: The positive association between social media use and general trust is mediated by increased (a) personal networks, (b) social norms, and (c) interpersonal trust.*

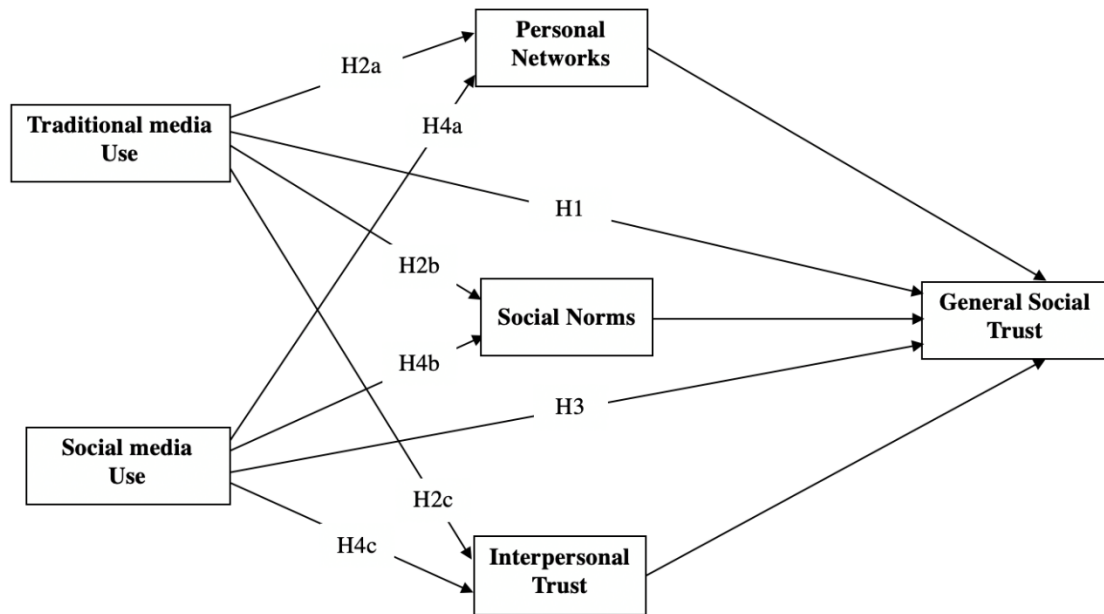


Figure 1. The conceptual framework of the present study.

Method

Data

Survey data were collected online by targeting people aged 17 years or above on the Chinese mainland ($N = 1,519$) in 2020 during the first stage of the COVID-19. The data were collected through Wenjuanxing, a leading online crowdsourcing service in mainland China (Han et al., 2020).

The quality of data collected through online crowdsourcing platforms merits special attention. Although previous studies have confirmed the validity of data drawn from online crowdsourcing platforms (e.g., Clifford, Jewell, & Waggoner, 2015), we carefully examined the quality of our data. Online samples may suffer from survey satisficing. We used a repeated instructional manipulation check (IMC; Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009) to measure the attentiveness of the respondents at the beginning of the surveys. As only a few strong satisficers (who failed the IMC twice in a row) were detected and thus excluded from the data, the substantial results did not change. When our study was conducted in 2020, the global pandemic was a salient topic in society. Therefore, the measures were mainly related to COVID-19, as this captured the participants' behaviors and perceptions more consistently. In summary, although some concerns over the quality of data deserve careful attention, our results are robust against sampling bias and survey satisficing.

Measurement

General Trust

General trust was measured by two items adapted from Zmerli and Newton (2008): "In daily life, if I am not careful, others will try to take advantage of me" and "Most of the time, most people only care about their own interests," with a 5-point response scale ranging from 1 (*totally agree*) to 5 (*totally disagree*). The responses to the two items were averaged (Pearson's $r = .30$, $M = 3.20$, $SD = .72$).

Social Capital

Social capital was measured in three subscales adapted from Putnam's (2000) definition. The subscales were (a) personal networks: "In the past week, how often have you communicated with these people about COVID-19?" including relatives, friends, and colleagues/classmates (1 = not at all, 5 = very often). The scores of the three items were averaged (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$, $M = 3.49$, $SD = .93$). (b) Social norms related to COVID-19 was measured by items such as, "To what extent do family or friends around you think you should be prepared for an emergency like COVID-19?" (1 = not at all, 5 = very much). The scores of the four items were averaged (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$, $M = 3.55$, $SD = .70$). (c) Interpersonal trust was measured by the question, "To what extent do you believe the following people are telling the truth when you ask them about their recent whereabouts and physical health?" including families, relatives, and friends (1 = totally distrust, 5 = totally trust). The scores of the three items were averaged (Cronbach's $\alpha = .65$, $M = 4.06$, $SD = .59$).

Traditional Media and Social Media Use

We measured traditional media and social media use, as adapted from Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela (2012). Two 2-item measures were used to gauge the frequency of traditional media and social media use: "In the past week, how often did you get information about COVID-19 from the following sources?" including newspaper/magazines and television (traditional media, range: 1–5), and WeChat/Weibo and Douyin (social media, range: 1–5). The measured social media platforms were the most popular in mainland China (Wei & Gao, 2017). The scores for the two items were averaged ($M = 2.95$, $SD = .92$; $M = 3.91$, $SD = .82$, respectively). Principal component analysis varimax rotation showed that two distinct factors explained 62.50% of the total variance, with Factor 1 (traditional media use) and Factor 2 (social media use).

Control Variables

Gender, age, educational level, and monthly family income were measured as control variables. Educational level was measured with a 9-point scale (1 = never been to school, 9 = doctoral degree). Monthly family income was measured with a 10-point scale (1 = no income, 10 = above 50 thousand RMB). These control variables were found to predict social media use, social capital, and general trust, making them potential confounders (Glanville et al., 2013; Valenzuela, Arriagada, & Scherman, 2012).

Statistical Analysis

This study used SPSS 25.0 and AMOS 25.0 to process and analyze the data. Structural equation modeling combined factor analysis, variance analysis, and multiple regression. The advantage of this approach is that complex mediating mechanisms can be easily analyzed, and latent variables can be estimated to account for measurement errors. However, a disadvantage is that the SEM model is relatively complicated, with many parameters used to judge whether the model fits the data correctly. Herein, we employed multiple criteria (as reported in the following section) to assess the model fit. As our hypotheses concerned the effects of traditional media and social media use on general trust mediated by social capital, we employed path analysis with structural equation modeling (SEM) to efficiently estimate the direct, indirect, and total effects of traditional media and social media use (Klem, 2000). Literature suggested that Cronbach's α was a widely used method in computing the reliability of scales, whereby Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .60$ was acceptable (Di Riso et al., 2010). It was also recommended for calculating the reliability of a 2-item scale by the Pearson's correlation coefficient method (Eisinga, Grotenhuis, & Pelzer, 2013). The convergent and discriminant validity of our variables were acceptable (see Table 1; Cheung & Wang, 2017). In the covariance structure analysis, the maximum likelihood of estimation was used. As illustrated in Figure 1, paths were drawn from traditional media/social media use to social capital, from social capital to general trust, and finally, from both traditional media/social media use and social capital to general trust.

Table 1. Correlations and Convergent and Discriminant Validity Among All Variables in the Present Study.

	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	-	-									
2. Gender	-	.14	-								
3. Education	-	-.16	-.03	-							
4. Monthly family income	-	.27	.09	.32	-						
5. Traditional media use	.62	.12	-.00	-.08	.04	.77					
6. Social media use	.59	-.06	-.04	.01	-.06	.14	.74				
7. Personal networks	.69	.04	-.02	.16	.11	.19	.23	.87			
8. Social norms	.66	.02	.02	.08	.10	.20	.11	.11	.89		
9. Interpersonal trust	.59	.09	.04	.03	.09	.03	.10	.22	.08	.81	
10. General trust	.80	.05	-.04	.08	.07	.14	.09	.06	.03	.24	.67

Note. Numbers in bold are square roots of AVEs.

Results

Researchers indicated that a good SEM model should achieve the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) > .90, Incremental Fit Index (IFI) > .90, Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) < .06, and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) < .06 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The model had a satisfactory fit: $\chi^2 = 736.122$, $df = 145$, $p < .01$; RMSEA = .05 (90% CI = [.05, .06]); CFI = .912, IFI = .913; and SRMR = .04. The estimation results are summarized in Table 2 and Figure 2.

Table 2. Direct and Indirect Effects of Traditional Media Use and Social Media Use on General Trust.

Path	Effect
Direct effect	
Traditional media use → general trust	.05
Social media use → general trust	.29***
Traditional media → personal networks	-.06
Traditional media use → social norms	.15*
Traditional media use → interpersonal trust	-.04
Social media use → personal networks	.42***
Social media use → social norms	.26***
Social media use → interpersonal trust	.36***
Personal networks → general trust	-.10*
Social norms → general trust	.15
Interpersonal trust → general trust	.34***
Indirect effect	
Traditional media use → personal networks → general trust	.01
Traditional media use → social norms → general trust	.02
Traditional media use → interpersonal trust → general trust	-.01
Social media use → personal networks → general trust	-.04*
Social media use → social norms → general trust	.04
Social media use → interpersonal trust → general trust	.12***

Note. Covariates: demographic variables (gender, age, education, and income).

*** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$.

First, Hypothesis 1 predicted that traditional media use had a positive relationship with general trust. The direct effect of traditional media use on general trust was statistically insignificant ($B = .05$, $t = 1.54$, $p > .05$). Thus, H1 was rejected.

Next, Hypothesis 2 proposed a positive indirect effect of traditional media use on general trust mediated by increased (a) personal networks, (b) social norms, and (c) interpersonal trust. As shown in Figure 2, traditional media use was only positively related to social norms ($B = .15$, $t = 2.46$, $p < .05$), but not for personal networks ($B = -.06$, $t = 1.14$, $p > .05$) and interpersonal trust ($B = -.04$, $t = -.64$, $p > .05$). Besides, social norms were not statistically related to general trust ($B = .15$, $t = 1.49$, $p > .05$) as expected. In summary, H2 was rejected.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that social media use had a positive relationship with general trust. The direct effect of social media use on general trust was significant ($B = .29, t = 4.03, p < .05$). Thus, H3 was supported.

H4 posited that the positive association between social media use and general trust was mediated by increased (a) personal networks, (b) social norms, and (c) interpersonal trust. We found that social media use was positively related to personal networks ($B = .42, t = 5.69, p < .05$), social norms ($B = .26, t = 3.64, p < .05$), and interpersonal trust ($B = .36, t = 4.83, p < .05$). However, only interpersonal trust was positively related to general trust ($B = .34, t = 6.73, p < .05$). Social norms were not statistically related to general trust ($B = .15, t = 1.49, p > .05$), whereas personal networks were negatively related to general trust ($B = -.10, t = -2.18, p < .05$). Thus, H4 was partially supported.

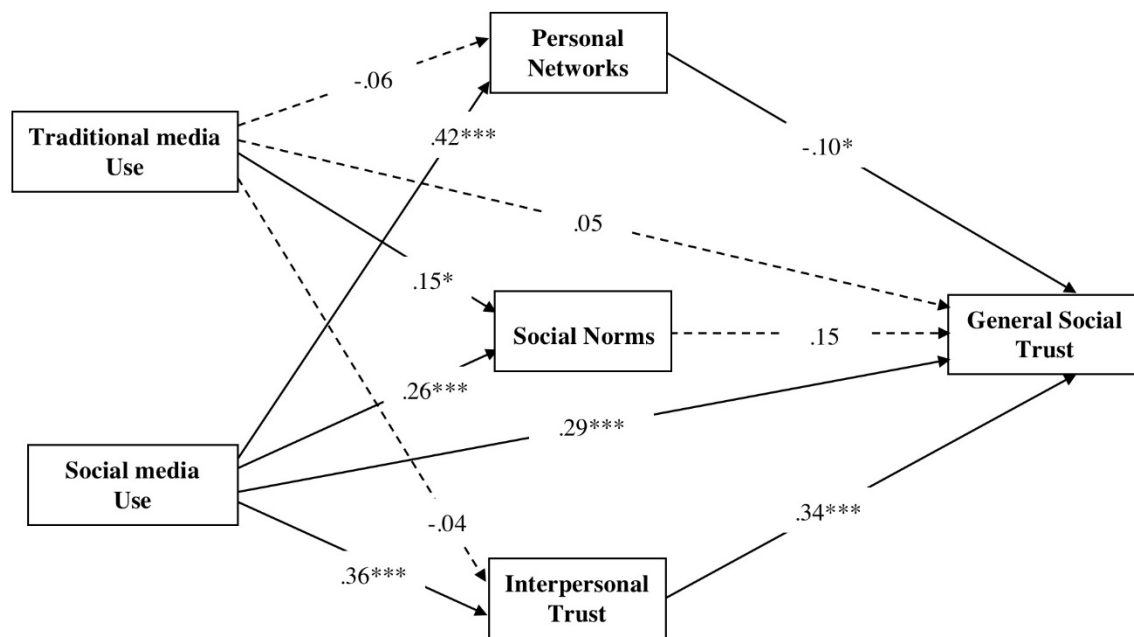


Figure 2. Mediation analysis (N = 1,519).

Note. Explained variance of criterion variables: personal networks ($R^2 = 24\%$), social norms ($R^2 = 14\%$), interpersonal trust ($R^2 = 14\%$), and general social trust ($R^2 = 35\%$). This theoretical model was bootstrapped based on standard errors with 5,000 iterations at a 95% confidence interval.

*** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$.

Discussion

Leveraging national survey data collected in mainland China during the COVID-19 context, the present study demonstrates the mechanism by which the use of traditional media and social media is linked to general trust. As expected, social media use showed a positive relationship with general trust (H3), although this relationship was also mediated by social capital (H4). More specifically, personal networks and interpersonal trust mediated the relationship between social media use and general trust in distinct directions. In contrast, traditional media use showed no positive relationship with general trust (H1).

Traditional media use also showed an unexpected, no-indirect effect through social capital (H2), although it had a positive relationship with social norms. Before discussing the implications of these findings, we provide potential explanations for the unexpected results.

First, both traditional and social media use can improve social norms, arguably because as a one-way communication, traditional mass media can have agenda-setting effects on the audience and lead to public opinion (Baum & Potter, 2008). Comparably, social media use has a stronger effect on social norms, likely because as interactive media, social media is more persuasive in promoting health knowledge, perception, and attitude (Hynes & Wilson, 2016). In the context of the present study, both of these media uses can improve the social norms regarding preventive behaviors against COVID-19 during the pandemic.

Second, social media use had a positive effect on personal networks and interpersonal trust. These findings correspond with the theorization that social affordances (e.g., high information visibility and content persistence) and the two-way communication facilitated by social media enable users to easily and smoothly interact with a wide range of contacts, including preexisting close ties and new ties (Ellison & Vitak, 2015; Evans et al., 2017). With the increasing embeddedness of social media in our daily lives, positive communications with known others (especially those with whom we are close) on social media platforms help cultivate more trust between those contacts. This role of social media was further enhanced during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many places in China implemented strict social distance policies or even lockdowns, and people had to rely on online communication channels to access novel information and other physical and psychological resources in their social networks. Additionally, as the previous study found, whether online social capital is qualitatively better or worse than offline social capital could be understood by the nuanced affordances of different technologies (Spottswood & Wohn, 2020). We also believe that the relationship between social media use and social capital may depend on different online communication platforms as well as different modalities of online communication.

Theoretical Implications

The present study provides several theoretical implications. First, the mechanisms of traditional media and social media use on general trust are indicated to be distinct. Social media use has both direct and indirect effects on general trust through personal networks and interpersonal trust, while traditional media use has no effect. These results warrant closer attention to the nuanced differences between traditional media and social media, especially when many previous studies on social media have drawn their conclusions based merely on findings from social media (e.g., Barnidge, 2015; Diehl, Weeks, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2016). Given the increasing popularity and shift of major social media platforms toward more private communication (Ortutay, 2019), elucidating the difference between traditional media and social media provides a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between social media use and social capital.

Second, the positive role of social media use in increasing social norms supports the effects of shaping social cohesion and social norms. Compared with social media, our findings suggest that the role of traditional media in guiding social values and norms is relatively weak in China. However, even though some traditional media outlets have opened official accounts on social media platforms, the latter enables more diverse subjects (stars, professionals, and grassroots Internet celebrities) to get their voices heard and

engage in public discourse on social norms, which somewhat attenuates the role of official discourse in shaping social norms. Furthermore, given that when encountering emergencies (including the COVID-19 crisis), people are more inclined to resort to their strong ties (such as families and friends) to access relevant resources and to make sense of the situation (Ling et al., 2018; Oktavianus & Lin, 2021), interpersonal communication on social media is expected to significantly shape people's perceptions about how to behave or respond during the crisis.

Third, this research contributes to social capital theory by showing the disparate mediating roles of personal networks and interpersonal trust in the relationship between social media use and general trust. As mentioned above, previous literature is inconsistent regarding the effects of social media on general trust (Erickson, 2011; Håkansson & Witmer, 2015; Li et al., 2016; Valenzuela et al., 2009). By conceptualizing social capital as a three-dimensional construct (i.e., personal networks, social norms, and interpersonal trust; see Putnam, 1993, 2000), this study articulates the complex mechanisms between social media use and general trust. More specifically, we found that while social media is positively related to all three dimensions of social capital, social media is negatively related to general trust through the mediation of personal networks and positively related to general trust through the mediation of interpersonal trust. One possible explanation for the negative relationship between personal networks and general trust could be that during a major crisis, where resources are rather limited, intensive interactions with strong ties (as discussed above) may strengthen one's in-group identity and intensify one's inclination to suspect others for his or her own safety, thus leading to less trust in general others. This tentative relationship is expected to be more significant, especially considering that we have controlled the positive effect of particularized trust on general trust in the model.

Fourth, our findings imply that social media use has individual and collective benefits. For individual users, a higher general trust promoted by social media use can serve as an adaptive advantage in modern society that "allows individuals to cope with greater social mobility and uncertainty," and thus makes it easier for them "to take advantage of outside opportunities" (Kobayashi & Boase, 2014, p. 683). Yet, this function may also widen the gap between those who are more skillful at using social media and those who are not in terms of access to social capital and the consequential benefit of general trust. At the collective level, the widespread use of social media helps to nourish general trust, which is a key element of a well-functioning democracy. Although the spread of misinformation and the selective nature of communication on social media cast doubts on its democratic virtue, its positive associations with general trust, whether direct or indirect, should not be overlooked. Our findings further imply that during the pandemic, social capital accumulated through social media use could advance the well-being of local communities and offer approaches to societal recovery.

Several important limitations remain to be addressed. First, this study utilized cross-sectional data to test the effect of media use on general trust through social capital. Thus, it cannot preclude reverse causality, whereby general trust leads to social capital, which in turn defines social media use. For instance, emerging evidence shows that trust can reduce perceived risks and uncertainties and thus positively influence behavioral intentions in using social media (Khan, Umer, Umer, & Naqvi, 2021; Spottswood & Wohn, 2020). Future studies should use panel data to identify the direction of causality. Second, though acceptable, the Cronbach's α values of some variables (i.e., personal network and interpersonal trust) are

not ideal. Future studies should re-examine our model by using alternative measures or by developing new measurement tools. Third, this study did not distinguish the subgenres of social media (e.g., social networking sites and instant messaging apps), whereby subtle differences between those subgenres could have been ignored. Lastly, given the growing body of evidence indicating cultural contingencies in social media's consequences (e.g., Chan & Guo, 2013; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2018; Vaterlaus, Barnett, Roche, & Young, 2016), our results do not indicate a general pattern regarding the relationships between social media, social capital, and general trust. Western countries are generally characterized by higher general trust and relational mobility than Eastern countries (Thomson et al., 2018; Yamagishi, 2011; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994), suggesting there may be a higher degree of particularized trust in Eastern countries. This may imply that the data generation process in this study is nationally or culturally contingent, and cross-national and cross-cultural studies are desirable to offer more insights into the theory of social and traditional media in relation to general trust and social capital.

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