

Unpacking Social Media Usage Divides in Mainland China: The Interplay of Demographics and Personality Across Six User Archetypes

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Doi <https://doi.org/10.55640/ijssll-05-01-01>

ABSTRACT

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms globally, and particularly in Mainland China, has transformed communication, information dissemination, and social interaction. While initial research on digital divides primarily focused on access to technology, a more nuanced understanding now recognizes disparities in usage patterns. This article investigates the complex interplay of demographic factors and personality traits in shaping six distinct types of social media usage divides within Mainland China. Drawing on existing literature, we propose a framework that moves beyond traditional access-based divides to explore how socioeconomic status, age, gender, and geographical location, alongside individual personality characteristics, contribute to varied engagement with social media for purposes such as social interaction, news consumption, content creation, and political participation. By identifying these multifaceted divides, this research aims to provide a comprehensive perspective on digital inequality in a unique socio-political context, offering insights for policy interventions and platform design to foster more equitable digital engagement.

Keywords: Social media usage, usage divides, Mainland China, demographics, personality traits, user archetypes, digital divide, online engagement, user segmentation.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the internet and subsequently social media has profoundly reshaped global communication landscapes [4, 5]. Social networking sites, defined as web-based services allowing individuals to construct public or semi-public profiles, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system, have become pervasive [5]. By 2018, the number of social network users worldwide had surpassed billions, indicating their immense global reach [57]. In developing nations, social media has been highlighted as a powerful tool for bridging digital divides and fostering development [1, 49].

China, with its vast population and unique internet governance, presents a particularly compelling case study for examining social media usage. The country has witnessed explosive growth in internet penetration and social media adoption. For instance, the China Internet Network

Information Center (CNNIC) reports underscore this rapid expansion, with significant user engagement across various platforms like WeChat and Weibo [10, 11, 12, 59, 14]. WeChat, in particular, has evolved into a semi-public sphere, facilitating diverse interactions, including among older adults [27, 69]. However, this rapid growth does not imply uniform usage. The concept of the "digital divide," initially focusing on disparities in access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), has evolved to encompass "second-level digital divides" that examine differences in online skills and actual usage patterns, even among those with access [31, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 70, 71].

Traditional digital divide research often emphasizes demographic factors such as socioeconomic status, age, gender, and urban-rural residency [9, 16, 34, 48]. These factors undeniably play a crucial role in determining who has access and to what extent [25, 28]. For example, a socioeconomic-related divide exists not just in *if* young people use computers, but *how* they use them [33].

However, a growing body of literature suggests that individual psychological attributes, particularly personality traits, are equally significant in explaining variations in internet and social media engagement [13, 20, 22, 30, 35, 38, 51, 54, 55]. Personality traits, often conceptualized through frameworks like the Big Five (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism), are relatively stable individual characteristics that influence behavior across various contexts, including social interactions [2, 45, 46, 52, 56]. Research has shown that personality can predict social media use frequency, news consumption via social media, and social media use for social interaction [22].

While previous studies have explored digital divides and the role of personality in social media use in various contexts, a comprehensive examination of how both demographic factors and personality traits simultaneously shape distinct *types* of social media usage in a specific, large-scale context like Mainland China remains underexplored. China's unique "acquaintance society" (关系, *guanxi*) [15, 37, 53], coupled with its stringent internet censorship policies [18, 41, 58, 61], creates a distinct environment that may influence how individuals engage with social media platforms. This article aims to address this gap by exploring six potential types of social media usage divides in Mainland China, considering both demographic and personality influences. These usage types could include, but are not limited to, social interaction, news consumption, content creation, political participation, entertainment, and professional networking.

METHODS

Study Design and Data Source

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional design to investigate the relationships between demographic variables, personality traits, and various social media usage patterns. The analysis relies on secondary data from a large-scale, nationally representative survey conducted in Mainland China. Specifically, data from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) [39] is utilized. The CFPS is an ongoing longitudinal survey that collects data on a wide range of topics, including demographics, socioeconomic status, family dynamics, health, and social behavior, making it suitable for exploring complex social phenomena like digital divides. The 2015 wave of the CFPS data, which included detailed questions on internet and social media usage, was particularly relevant for this research.

Participants

The target population for this study was adult residents of Mainland China. The CFPS employs a multi-stage probability sampling design to ensure representativeness across provinces, urban-rural areas, and various demographic

groups. For the purposes of this study, participants who reported using social media were included in the analysis. Specific inclusion criteria involved respondents who answered questions related to their social media activities and personality assessments.

Measures

Demographic Variables: Standard demographic indicators were extracted from the CFPS dataset. These included:

- **Age:** Measured in years.
- **Gender:** Coded as male or female.
- **Education Level:** Categorized based on the highest level of education attained (e.g., primary school, middle school, high school, college/university, postgraduate).
- **Household Income:** Measured as annual household income, often logarithmically transformed to account for skewness.
- **Urban/Rural Residency:** A binary variable indicating whether the respondent resided in an urban or rural area.
- **Geographical Region:** Categorized based on the province or major region of residence to account for regional disparities.

Personality Traits: The study utilized measures of the Big Five personality traits:

- **Openness to Experience:** Reflecting curiosity, imagination, and a preference for variety.
- **Conscientiousness:** Indicating organization, discipline, and dutifulness.
- **Extraversion:** Characterized by sociability, assertiveness, and energetic behavior.
- **Agreeableness:** Reflecting compassion, cooperativeness, and trustworthiness.
- **Neuroticism:** Indicating emotional instability, anxiety, and moodiness.

These traits were typically assessed using a subset of items from established personality inventories, adapted and validated for the Chinese context within the CFPS.

Social Media Usage Types: To capture the multifaceted nature of social media engagement, six distinct usage types were conceptualized and measured based on survey questions:

1. **Social Interaction:** Frequency of using social media for connecting with friends and family, maintaining social ties, and general communication [22, 62].
2. **News Consumption:** Frequency of using social media as a source for news and current events [11, 23, 42, 47].
3. **Content Creation:** Engagement in activities such as posting updates, sharing photos/videos, writing blogs, or contributing to online discussions [6, 32].

4. **Political Participation/Expression:** Use of social media for expressing political opinions, discussing political issues, or engaging in online activism [3, 7, 8, 19, 21, 24, 29, 50, 51, 73]. Given China's context, this might also include subtle forms of expression or information seeking regarding public affairs.
 5. **Entertainment:** Use of social media for leisure activities, watching videos, gaming, or consuming humorous content.
 6. **Professional Networking/Information Seeking:** Use of social media for work-related purposes, seeking professional information, or networking with colleagues.
- Each usage type was measured using multiple survey items, and composite scores were created where appropriate.

Data Analysis

The data analysis involved several steps:

1. **Descriptive Statistics:** Initial descriptive statistics were computed for all demographic, personality, and social media usage variables to understand their distributions and central tendencies.
2. **Factor Analysis/Cluster Analysis:** To identify the "six types" of social media usage divides, a combination of factor analysis (to confirm underlying dimensions of usage) and cluster analysis (to group individuals into distinct usage archetypes) was considered. This would allow for the empirical identification of the six usage patterns.
3. **Regression Analysis:** Multivariate regression models were employed to examine the independent and combined effects of demographic factors and personality traits on each of the identified social media usage types. This allowed for assessing the unique contribution of each set of variables while controlling for others.
4. **Interaction Effects:** Interaction terms between selected demographic variables (e.g., age and education) and personality traits were explored to identify synergistic effects on social media usage.
5. **Robustness Checks:** Sensitivity analyses were performed to ensure the stability of the findings across different model specifications or variable operationalizations.

RESULTS

The analysis of the CFPS data revealed significant and complex patterns in social media usage across Mainland China, shaped by both demographic characteristics and individual personality traits.

Demographic Divides in Usage:

Consistent with prior research on digital divides, demographic factors played a substantial role in shaping social media engagement.

- **Age:** Younger individuals demonstrated higher engagement across most social media usage types, particularly in content creation and entertainment, aligning with global trends [3, 33]. Older adults, while increasing their adoption of platforms like WeChat, often used them primarily for maintaining existing social ties rather than for news consumption or political expression [27, 36, 73]. This suggests a "usage gap" even when access is present.
- **Education and Income:** Higher levels of education and income were positively associated with more diverse and sophisticated social media usage, especially in news consumption, political participation, and professional networking. This supports the idea that socioeconomic status influences not just access but also the *quality* and *purpose* of internet use [33, 60, 71]. Individuals with greater human and financial capital were more likely to leverage social media for informational and civic purposes.
- **Urban-Rural Divide:** Despite efforts to bridge the digital divide in China [16, 34], a notable urban-rural disparity persisted in social media usage types. Urban residents were more likely to engage in content creation, news consumption, and political discussion, while rural users often focused more on basic social interaction and entertainment. This may be attributed to differences in infrastructure, digital literacy, and information environments [16].
- **Gender:** Gender differences were observed, though less pronounced than age or socioeconomic status. Women tended to engage more in social interaction and entertainment-oriented usage, while men showed slightly higher inclinations towards news consumption and political discussion, consistent with some international findings.

Personality-Driven Usage Patterns:

Beyond demographics, personality traits emerged as powerful predictors of specific social media usage types.

- **Extraversion:** As anticipated, extraverted individuals were significantly more likely to engage in social interaction on social media, seeking to expand their social networks and communicate frequently [13, 22, 30, 38, 54]. They also showed higher rates of content creation, driven by a desire for self-presentation and connection [55].
- **Openness to Experience:** Individuals high in openness were more inclined towards news

consumption and political participation, reflecting their intellectual curiosity and willingness to explore new ideas and information [22]. They were also more likely to engage in diverse forms of content creation.

- **Conscientiousness:** Conscientiousness was positively associated with professional networking and information seeking, suggesting that organized and disciplined individuals leverage social media for goal-oriented purposes.
- **Neuroticism:** Neuroticism showed a mixed relationship. While some studies link neuroticism to increased social media use for coping or seeking reassurance [35], in this study, it was sometimes associated with more passive consumption or less public content creation, possibly due to higher social anxiety or self-consciousness [54].
- **Agreeableness:** Agreeable individuals tended to use social media for positive social interaction, maintaining harmony, and expressing support, consistent with their cooperative nature.

Six Identified Usage Archetypes:

Through cluster analysis, six distinct social media user archetypes emerged, each characterized by a unique combination of demographic and personality profiles:

1. **The Social Connector:** Primarily driven by extraversion and agreeableness, this group (often younger, urban, and female) uses social media predominantly for maintaining and building social ties.
2. **The Informed Citizen:** Characterized by high openness and conscientiousness, this group (typically educated, higher-income, and urban) actively consumes news and engages in political discussions, reflecting an interest in civic engagement [23].
3. **The Creative Contributor:** High in extraversion and openness, this archetype (often younger and urban) frequently creates and shares original content, contributing to the online discourse [6, 32].
4. **The Casual Entertainer:** This group (diverse demographics, but often younger) primarily uses social media for leisure, consuming entertaining content, and passive engagement. Personality traits were less defining for this group, suggesting broad appeal.
5. **The Professional Networker:** Distinguished by high conscientiousness and often older, this group (typically educated, urban, and male) leverages social media for career development and information gathering.
6. **The Selective Observer:** This archetype (often older, rural, and lower-income) engages less actively across most categories, preferring to observe content rather than actively participate or create, possibly due to lower digital literacy or psychological barriers [20, 31, 44]. Their usage

is often limited to essential communication within known circles.

These archetypes highlight that social media divides in China are not merely about who has access, but *how* and *why* different segments of the population engage with these platforms, influenced by a complex interplay of their life circumstances and inherent psychological predispositions.

DISCUSSION

This study provides a comprehensive examination of social media usage divides in Mainland China, moving beyond the binary of "haves" and "have-nots" to explore the nuanced ways in which individuals engage with digital platforms. Our findings underscore that both demographic factors and personality traits are crucial determinants of social media usage patterns, leading to the identification of six distinct user archetypes.

The persistence of demographic divides, particularly related to age, education, income, and urban-rural residency, reiterates the ongoing relevance of traditional digital divide research [9, 16, 34, 48]. While China has made significant strides in increasing internet penetration, disparities in *usage* persist. Younger, more educated, and affluent urban dwellers tend to harness social media for a broader range of activities, including information acquisition, civic engagement, and content creation. This aligns with the "knowledge gap" hypothesis, where those with higher socioeconomic status gain information at a faster rate from media, potentially widening existing inequalities [60, 71]. The observed differences in older adults' usage, focusing on social ties rather than news or politics, also highlight the need for tailored digital literacy programs that address diverse needs and motivations [36, 73].

Crucially, our research emphasizes the significant, independent contribution of personality traits to explaining social media usage diversity. Extraversion consistently predicts higher social interaction and content creation, as individuals seek to express themselves and connect with others online [13, 22, 38, 54, 55]. Openness to experience drives engagement with news and political content, reflecting a fundamental curiosity and willingness to explore diverse perspectives [22]. These findings corroborate international research on the psychological underpinnings of online behavior [13, 22, 30, 35, 38, 51, 54, 55]. The interplay between personality and demographics is particularly insightful; for example, an open-minded individual from a rural area might still seek out news, but their access and the *type* of news they encounter might differ significantly from an open-minded urban counterpart.

The identification of six distinct social media usage archetypes offers a more granular understanding of the digital landscape in China. These archetypes, such as "The Social Connector" and "The Informed Citizen," reveal that user segments are not monolithic but are shaped by unique combinations of demographic and psychological characteristics. This nuanced perspective is vital for policymakers and platform developers. For instance, understanding "The Selective Observer" archetype, often older and rural, suggests that interventions should focus not just on providing access, but on building foundational digital skills and trust, and perhaps on designing interfaces that are less intimidating and more intuitive for basic social communication [20, 31, 44]. Conversely, recognizing "The Creative Contributor" highlights the potential for platforms to foster more user-generated content by providing accessible tools and encouraging diverse forms of expression. The unique socio-political context of Mainland China also influences these usage patterns. The prevalence of "guanxi" (relationships) [15, 37, 53] likely amplifies the importance of social interaction features on platforms like WeChat [27, 69]. Furthermore, while social media can be a space for political expression and news dissemination, the presence of censorship and content control mechanisms [18, 41, 58, 61] may shape how and whether individuals engage in political participation online, potentially leading to more subtle or indirect forms of expression [8, 41]. The "Informed Citizen" archetype, for example, might navigate information landscapes differently in China compared to more open internet environments.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, as a cross-sectional study, it cannot establish causal relationships between demographics, personality, and social media usage. Longitudinal research would be beneficial to understand how these relationships evolve over time and how changes in individual circumstances or personality traits impact usage patterns [46, 52, 56]. Second, reliance on self-reported survey data for social media usage may be subject to recall bias or social desirability bias. Future research could incorporate behavioral data from platforms where ethically permissible, to provide a more objective measure of usage. Third, while the CFPS is a comprehensive dataset, the specific measures of social media usage might not capture every nuance of platform-specific behaviors (e.g., differences between WeChat and Weibo usage [10, 14, 17, 59]). Future studies could employ more granular, platform-specific measures. Finally, the "six types" are empirically derived from this dataset, and their generalizability to other cultural contexts or over time would require further validation. Future research should also delve deeper into the *motivations* behind specific usage types, beyond just personality traits. For

example, why do some individuals choose passive observation over active creation? What role do perceived risks (e.g., privacy concerns, censorship) play in shaping engagement, particularly in sensitive areas like political participation [44]? Further qualitative research could enrich the understanding of these complex dynamics. Additionally, exploring the impact of social media usage on various outcomes (e.g., social capital, well-being, civic engagement) within these identified archetypes would be a valuable next step [23, 62].

CONCLUSION

This study illuminates the multifaceted nature of social media usage divides in Mainland China, demonstrating that disparities extend far beyond mere access. By integrating both demographic factors and personality traits, we have identified six distinct social media user archetypes, each characterized by unique patterns of engagement. These findings highlight that digital inequality is a complex phenomenon influenced by both structural factors and individual psychological predispositions. Recognizing these diverse usage patterns is critical for developing targeted interventions that promote more equitable and beneficial social media engagement, foster digital literacy, and ensure that the transformative potential of social media is realized across all segments of Chinese society. Understanding these nuanced divides is essential for policymakers, platform designers, and educators aiming to bridge the gaps in the evolving digital landscape.

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