

**THE INFLUENCE OF WEIBO NEWS USE ON CHINESE YOUNG ADULTS'
POLITICAL INFORMATION EFFICACY: AN APPLICATION OF THE COGNITIVE
ELABORATION PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

This study explores the influence of Weibo news use on Chinese young adults' political information efficacy from the perspective of cognitive elaboration. It develops a theoretical model examining the roles of Weibo news use, traditional media news use, Weibo news discussion; offline news discussion, news attention, news elaboration, and political interest in shaping political information efficacy. Online survey was conducted and distributed on Chinese social networking service including Sina Weibo and the Renren network with a sample including undergraduate and graduate students from 119 universities at home and abroad (N=253). Regression model reveals that Weibo news use, Weibo news discussion, news attention, news elaboration, offline news discussion, and political interest are all significant predictors of political information efficacy. Traditional media news use has no significant effect on political information efficacy. Weibo news use has a weak effect on factual political knowledge, but it disappeared when including only female participants. Structural knowledge is not associated with any other theoretical variables. Also, gender differences are found in this study. Male participants showed stronger interests in political and/or public affairs issues compared to females. Also, males are more willing to engage in political news discussion on Weibo. And they demonstrated higher level of political information efficacy than females. Further, these findings supported the O-S-R-O-R model of communication effects, providing evidence regarding the mediating role of political discussion in stimulating reflective thinking, which results in the improved political information efficacy.

INTRODUCTION

Microblogging in China

Weibo (pronounced WAY-boh) is the Chinese word for “microblog.” It is an information-sharing platform like Twitter, allowing users to release news in various formats such as written messages, pictures, and video clips, and to make comments on, forward, and make comments while forward other users’ posted Weibos, within 140 Chinese characters. It is also a social network website like Facebook where users can update statuses to share personal experience and feelings.

Fanfou is the earliest Weibo service launched in Beijing on May, 2007. Some other Weibo services such as Tencent’s Taotao subsequently emerged but disappeared shortly. Sina Weibo that was launched by SINA Corporation on August 14th, 2009, is the most visited Weibo site in China. Because of Sina Weibo’s domain name and its popularity, “Weibo” is often specifically used to refer to Sina Weibo. According to the 2012 annual report on development of China’s new media, by the end of December 2011, the number of Weibo users has reached 249 million, accounting for nearly half of the population of Chinese Internet users.

Against the current backdrop of the lack of efficient institutional channel of public opinions in China (Wei, 2012), Weibo websites provide the Chinese masses a free platform for public affairs information sharing and opinion expression, and it possesses great social influence. A survey conducted by *China Youth Daily* in August 2011 revealed that “getting the latest news information” is the primary purpose of Weibo use among the participants (73.5%), and more than 87.3% of the respondents indicated that they often expressed personal opinions toward public affairs issues on Weibo websites. Data from Shanghai Jiaotong University Center for Public

Opinion Research showed that among the 72 social incidents that attracted most attention in 2010, 22 out of them were first exposed on Weibo websites (as cited in Zhu & Wang, 2011, p. 1369). The power of Weibo information to create public awareness and to pressure government responses were demonstrated by numerous cases (e.g. Li Gang incident (Wine, M. 2010, November 17, *The New York Times*); Wenzhou train collision (Liu, S. 2012, July 19, *The Global Times*); 2010 Shanghai fire (Bellart, M. 2011, June 27, *The Global Times*); Diaoyu Island dispute between China and Japan (Kristof, N. 2010, September 10, *The New York Times*)). Given it, “circusee,” a coined word combining “circus” and “see,” which refers to people behaving as active bystanders showing great interests or engaging in certain social events in their own ways, is always used by the Chinese media to describe the role of Weibo websites in influencing the ways people participate in public affairs or political events.

The study

The purpose of this study is to explore the influence of Weibo news use on Chinese young adults’ political engagement operationalized as political information efficacy and political knowledge gain. College students who are also Weibo users from multiple universities in mainland China are recruited as research subjects. From the perspective of political communication effects, this research combines two theoretical models—cognitive mediation model (Eveland, 2001) and communication mediation model (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001) to provide possible explanations on how Weibo news use promotes users’ political information efficacy and political knowledge gain through interpersonal communication that stimulates the cognitive elaboration on hard news.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cognitive Mediation Model

Eveland (2001) proposed the cognitive mediation model demonstrating a theoretical explanation regarding how the information processing connects surveillance gratifications-motivated news exposure to political knowledge gain. Treating surveillance gratifications seeking (learning goal) as motivation and the starting point, the cognitive mediation model posits that it leads to two types of information processing—news attention and news elaboration (Eveland, 2001, 2002, 2003). News attention going beyond news exposure indicates that one invests mental focus on particular news subjects (Eveland, 2002, 2003). It is also the prerequisite for elaborative processing in a sense that one cannot engage deeply in critical or analytical thinking without paying attention to the news in the first place (Eveland, 2001, 2002). Elaboration, on the other hand, bridges the new information with existing knowledge, leading to higher levels of learning (Eveland, 2001). Overall, the cognitive mediation model predicts the mediating role of information processing in enhancing the relationship between surveillance gratification and political knowledge gain (Eveland, 2001, 2002, 2003). It indicates the mutual causal relationships between surveillance gratifications seeking and news attention, news attention and elaboration, news attention and political knowledge gain; as well as causal relationships between surveillance gratifications seeking and elaboration, as well as elaboration and political knowledge gain (Eveland, 2003). Furthermore, it shows that motivation has a weakened effect on political knowledge gain when controlling the two information processing variables (Eveland, 2001, 2002, 2003).

Hypothesis 1: News attention will be positively associated with news elaboration among Weibo users.

Hypothesis 2: News attention will be positively associated with public affairs/political knowledge gain among Weibo users.

Interpersonal communication and communication mediation model

Political talk and political engagement

The role of political discussion in promoting political knowledge gain had been widely examined and well verified by a number of scholars (e.g. Bennett, Flickinger, & Rhine, 2000; Price & Cappella, 2002). Robinson and Levy (1986) pointed that the interpersonal discussion about news is highly correlated with news comprehension and public awareness. Scheufele (2002) presented evidence about the mediating role of political talk in the relationship between newspaper as well as television hard news exposure and news comprehension as well as political participatory behaviors. Hardy and Scheufele (2005) continued this path and brought evidence regarding the equivalent effects of computer-mediated interactions (e.g. online chatting) in encouraging political participatory behaviors.

Eveland (2004) examined the role of political communication in promoting individuals' political knowledge gain through stimulating the elaborative processing, and provided two well verified theoretical justifications—anticipatory elaboration explanation and discussion-generated elaboration explanation. From the uses and gratifications perspective, McDonald (1990) defined the communicatory utility as one dimension of gratifications referring to the “use of the media to obtain information to use in discussions with others” (p.15). Along with it, anticipatory elaboration explanation states that individuals' expectations toward an impending discussion motivates them to devote cognitive elaboration to the news content, so as to make sense of the issues, to memorize the details, and to build up a sound logic for later discussion with others (Benware & Deci, 1984;

Pingree, 2007). It increases the cognitive elaboration either before or during the actual discussion (Eveland, 2004, or “tuning effect,” Cloven & Roloff, 1995). Discussion-generated elaboration explanation, on the other hand, focuses on the stimulated cognitive elaboration including self-generated elaboration and discussion-partner-generated elaboration on the news related information during the discussion. It also results in increased political knowledge (Eveland, 2004). Self-generated elaboration emphasizes the elaborative investments including not only connecting the new information with existing knowledge, but also regulating the discussion direction by reconstructing the ideas and prepared arguments (either consciously or unconsciously) to make sense of the issues for the discussion partners or to convince them (Eveland, 2004; Pingree, 2007). And both ways can help strengthen one’s memory regarding the particular information and increase the possibility to recall it in the future (Eveland, 2004). Conversation-partner-generated elaboration, on the other hand, highlights the influence of ones’ discussion partners, referring that one may be inspired by his/her partners during the discussions (Eveland, 2004) or may have the partners’ incomplete or inaccurate information completed or clarified (Scheufele, 2002).

Hypothesis 3a: Weibo public affairs/political discussion (i.e. making comments; forwarding hard news related Weibos; forwarding while making comments on the hard news related Weibos; participating in discussions on Weibo forums) will be positively associated with news elaboration.

Hypothesis 3b: Off-line face-to-face public affairs/political interpersonal discussion (with family members, friends or colleagues) will be positively associated with news elaboration.

Communication mediation model

Political interpersonal communication is not a new topic for communication scholars. The two-step flow model presented by Katz and Lazarsfeld in 1955 highlighted the role of political conversation between the opinion leaders and ordinary citizens in disseminating campaign

information. Within the coming of the mass media era, this top-down mode of information transmission was no longer the focus of scholars' attention. Sotirovic and McLeod (2001) explored the interactions among values, communication behaviors in news consumption, and political participation. They proposed a communication mediation model that explained the mediating role of interpersonal communication in mediating the influence of value on media news use and political participatory behaviors. It showed that though values largely determined the nature of news consumption (e.g., there was a positive association between postmaterial value holders and public affairs content reading in newspapers; and that between material value holders and television entertainment content viewing), it was interpersonal communication that always led to reflective integration (cognitive devotion) cast most impact upon political participation in a sense that it helped individuals not only contextualize the distant political knowledge, but also stimulate more analytical or critical thinking toward the political information distributed in the news content. Thus resulted in establishing a more solid cognitive base that goes beyond pure factual knowledge for political participation. Based on it, Shah et al. (2005) presented the citizen communication model which predicted the mediating roles of interpersonal political talk and interactive online civic messaging for news consumption behaviors in promoting civic participation.

Hypothesis 4: Political discussion generated news elaboration will be positively associated with political knowledge gain.

Political information efficacy

In *The Voter Decides*, Campbell and his colleagues (as cited in Kenski & Stroud, 2006) introduced and defined the concept of political efficacy as “the feeling that individual political and

social change is possible, and that the individual citizen can play a part in bring about this change” (p.187). Later on, this concept was further divided into two distinctive subareas—internal political efficacy referring to ones’ feelings of personal political effectiveness and external political efficacy indicating ones’ belief about the governments’ responsiveness to regular citizens’ voices (Balch, 1974; Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991).

The relationship between media news use and political variables including political knowledge, political efficacy, and political participation had constantly been examined by scholars. And the findings were always mixed. Newhagen (1994) explored the relationship between media use and political efficacy across race and social class in suburban Washington, D.C., and found out that the increases in exposure to informational media presentations such as newspapers and national television news programs were positively related to self-efficacy. And it decreased with increases in exposure to entertainment television programs. Lee (2006) examined the association between three types of Internet use (information, entertainment, interactive contacts) and two types of political efficacy (internal and external) among U.S. college students. Results showed that exposure to online news sites and the use of the Internet for sending or posting political messages were significant predictors of internal political efficacy, whereas merely visiting public sites and receiving political messages were not. Kenski and Stroud (2006) explored the relationships between Internet access as well as online exposure to information about presidential campaign and political efficacy, and found that the internal political efficacy was positively related to both of them.

However, there are also studies that did not find positive associations between media news use and political efficacy (e.g., Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002; Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Lin & Lim, 2002).

Given the close relationships among media news use, political knowledge, and political efficacy, the mixed findings lead to my research question,

Research question: How does political information efficacy relate to other theoretical variables in the proposed model (i.e. political interest, Weibo news use, traditional media news use; news attention; news elaboration; Weibo political discussion; offline political discussion; political knowledge) in the proposed model?

Political interest as a starting point

Uses and gratifications research was traditionally viewed more as an alternative than a complement for media effects research in a sense that self-reports of gratifications sought were considered as conditions that may regulate media effects (e.g. weakening the media agenda-setting effects) (McLeod et al., 1994, p. 148). Uses and gratifications researchers posit that audiences are actively engaged in selecting and viewing media content instead of being passively manipulated by media agenda-settings because “even the most potent of the media cannot ordinarily influence an individual who has no ‘use’ for it in the social and psychological context in which he lives” (Katz, 1959, p. 2-3). They are fully aware of their purposes of using the media, and the media consumption can satisfy their wide range of needs (McLeod & Becker, 1981). Kaye and Johnson (2002) examined the relationship between the uses and gratifications operationalized as four types of motivation (guidance, information seeking/surveillance, entertainment, and social utility) for political information seeking, and political attitudes (political interest, political trust, and self-efficacy) in the context of Internet using, and found that the interest in politics as well as self-efficacy were two strong predictors of all the motivations (weakest for the entertainment motivation) for political information seeking. These results well corresponded with the past research proposing that individuals who are more involved and interested in politics are more

likely to seek out the relevant information, thus resulting in the increased self-efficacy (Tan, 1980) which may further spur them to be more goal-oriented when being exposed to the overwhelming information pool (Pinkleton & Austin, 1998).

Hypothesis 5: Political interest will be positively associated with all the other theoretical variables (i.e. Weibo news use; traditional media news use; news attention; news elaboration; Weibo political discussion; off-line political discussion; political knowledge, political information efficacy).

Proposed model

The present study synthesizes the two theoretical models—cognitive mediation model (Eveland, 2001) and communication mediation model (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001) to provide a possible explanation concerning how the Weibo use influences college students' political engagement in mainland China (see Figure 1).

Based on the evidence regarding the predictive role of political interest for information seeking (surveillance gratifications motivation) (e.g., Kaye & Johnson, 2002), this study treats political interest as an entry point for later interactions among different variables. Political interest-generated Weibo news use and traditional media news use are adopted as two stimulators. The mediating roles of news attention being a self-generated agenda-setting and news elaboration that bridges the new information with existing knowledge in connecting news exposure to political knowledge gain as proposed by cognitive mediation model serve the same purposes in the proposed model to explain how the Weibo users process news from either mainstream media or grassroots before the information becomes knowledge. News use-generated interpersonal political discussion, as another important mediator, is emphasized by the communication mediation model for its role in promoting political or civic participation based on the facts that it can widen one's

thoughts and motivate individuals to engage in critical or analytical thinking. In this regard, due to the facts that the Chinese political environment is highly restricted, and there lacks official and efficient channels for Chinese citizens to participate in political events, political participation which was measured by behaviors such as voting for presidential elections or “contributing money to a political or public interest campaign” (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001) will not be treated as dependent variable in the proposed model as it is in the communication mediation model. Though usually not treating cognitive elaboration as a dependent variable in the communication mediation model, enough explanations regarding the outcomes of interpersonal political discussion indicated the existence as well as the importance of it being a cognitive base for political participatory behaviors. Based on these studies, the present research proposes news elaboration as an independent variable caused by both news attention and interpersonal political discussion which will be operationalized as Weibo political discussions including making comments, and forwarding while making comments on the hard news related Weibos, as well as off-line political discussions with family members and friends. As one of the ultimate dependent variables, political knowledge will be operationalized as the current political and social issues that attract most attention. Last but not least, due to the nature of the Chinese political system and the consequent highly constrained political environment as mentioned above, this study focuses on exploring the effects of Weibo news use on individuals’ information efficacy measured by the two out of four items for internal efficacy to examine the extent to what individuals consider themselves knowing politics while excluding the others relevant to political participation (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991).

METHOD

Procedure

After receiving notification of “exempt status from the WSU IRB, Weibo users who are also undergraduate and/or graduate students enrolled in the universities in mainland China and United States were recruited in the study. They were sent an invitation from the researcher with a short description of the study, information about confidentiality, and the link to the online survey through Sina Weibo, the Renren network (a Chinese social networking services as the Chinese remake of Facebook, Wikipedia), and email. Since Weibo news use is the subject of this research, participants who do not have Weibo accounts were not included in the study.

Measures

Public Affairs/Political Interests. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each of the statements using a scale of 1 to 6 from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” as follows: I’m interested in public affairs and/or politics; I like to stay informed about public affairs and/or politics; I pay attention to information about public affairs and/or politics; I actively seek out information concerning public affairs and/or politics.

Weibo Public Affairs/Political News Use. Since Weibo is an information sharing platform, “following” other users is the only way to acquire information needed. That is, the users people follow on Weibo largely demonstrate to what extent they care about the hard news. Based on it and also Shah et al., (2005) study, the Weibo public affairs/politics news use was measured in two items: the percentage of the people followed by the users who are “verified” individuals working in journalism and/or “verified” news organizations followed on Weibo; and the frequency of logging into Weibo account and reading the hard news.

Traditional Media Public Affairs/Political News Use. Based on Sotirovic and McLeod (2001), the traditional news use was measured in terms of participants' frequency of exposure to newspaper/magazine and television public affairs/politics news on a 6-point scale ranging from 1(Never) to 6 (Several Times a Day). Newspapers/magazines reading through hardcopy, websites, and apps on smartphones or tablets (e.g. iPad) were all included. Television news watching was measured by the frequency of participants being exposed to television news-related programs. Given the fact that televisions are not provided by most Chinese universities in the dormitories, watching television news online was added in the measurement.

News Attention. Based on Eveland et al., (2003), Shah et al., (2005), news attention was measured by a 6-point scale from 1 (very little attention) to 6 (very close attention) to indicate how much attention the participants pay to the public affairs/politics news on Weibo and traditional media. News on Weibo was categorized as three subgroups: news from ordinary citizens who are not public officials or celebrities; news from "verified" individuals who work in journalism; and news from "verified" news organizations.

Weibo Public Affairs/Political Discussion. Weibo political discussion was measured by five items assessing the intensity participants engage in discussions over public affairs/politics on Weibo: posting original Weibos on public affairs/political issues; making comments on Weibos concerning public affairs/politics posted by other users; forwarding Weibos concerning public affairs/politics posted by other users; forwarding while making comments on Weibos concerning public affairs/politics posted by other users; engaging in "hot issues" discussion forums on Weibo. Participants were asked to answer on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 6 (Several Times a Day).

Offline Face-to-face Public Affairs/Political Discussion. Based on Shah et al., (2005), off-line political discussion was measured by three questions: how often do the participants talk about public affairs/politics with friends; how often do they talk about public affairs with family; how often do they talk about public affairs/politics with coworkers. Participants were asked to answer on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 6 (Several Times a Day).

News Elaboration. Based on Eveland, Marton, and Seo (2004), news elaboration was measured by six items, and participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each of the statements using a scale of 1 to 6 from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” as follows: I found myself tying what I read to ideas I’ve had before; I tried to visualize the events described in the stories; I tried to relate what I read to my own background experience; I tried to see the connections between the various stories I read; I thought about how the stories related to other things I know; I tried to mentally piece the stories together like a puzzle to gain a thorough understanding.

Public Affairs/Political Knowledge. Public affairs/political knowledge was measured based on two knowledge dimensions—factual knowledge and structural knowledge. As the 10th “the most discussed topics on Sina Weibo,” according to Sina.com on December 19th 2012, the Diaoyu Island dispute between China and Japan, was selected for both knowledge dimensions. For factual knowledge, historical facts such as the treaties relating the Island dispute, as well as the U.S.’s position over the sovereignty of the Island, were included. Structural knowledge, on the other hand, going beyond simple facts (or “declarative knowledge;” “denotative information”), refers to the connections, interactions, and integrations of diverse information, which is closely associated with cognitive elaboration (Eveland et al. 2004). It was measured by questions asking the strength of the

relevance between the highly associated key concepts relating the Island dispute (e.g. relevance between Diaoyu Island dispute and China-Japan relations).

Political Information Efficacy. This study interests in exploring the effects of Weibo news use on political information efficacy. Given it, three questions based on two out of four scales designed for measuring political internal efficacy were used (Niemi, Graig, & Mattei, 1991; Morrel, 2003): I feel that I have a good understanding of the important political issues facing my country (understand); I think I am better informed about public affairs than most people (informed); I think I am better informed about politics than most people (informed). Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each of the statement using a scale of 1-6 from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

RESULTS

Demographic variables

In total, 253 valid responses to the online survey were collected from both undergraduate and graduate students of over 119 universities in mainland China. Among the participants, 25.3% were male ($n=64$), 60.5% were female, and 14.2% of them refuse to indicate their gender. The average age of the participants was 23.86 ($M=23.86$, $SD=3.08$) with an average annual household income corresponding to the “Chinese household average annual disposable income” released by the Survey and Research Center for China Household Finance Survey, Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, in August, 2011 (Table 1).

As shown in Table 2, Weibo was one of the major channels for Chinese college students from the sample to read news ($M=3.67$, $SD=1.23$). As for the traditional media platforms, the

electronic versions of major newspaper and magazines were the most preferred ones—apps on smart phones or tablets ($M=4.43$, $SD=1.51$), as well as PC and laptops ($M=4.28$, $SD=1.47$) were the main ways Chinese young adults used to get access to the news, in contrast to hardcopies ($M=2.72$, $SD=1.13$). Also, forwarding the Weibos ($M=3.26$, $SD=1.37$) concerning public affairs/political issues as well as forwarding while making comments on those Weibos ($M=2.97$, $SD=1.32$) were the most frequent activities the participants engaged in when using Weibo to share information and/or communicate their personal opinions.

Furthermore, gender differences were discovered in this study. According to the results, male participants displayed a stronger sense of political information efficacy than their female counterparts ($M_{male}=4.11$, $M_{female}=3.58$, $t(92)=3.86$, $p<.001$). Among the predictor variables which were significantly correlated with political information efficacy (Table 3), the evident differences were found in political interests ($M_{male}=4.82$, $M_{female}=4.49$, $t(215)=2.57$, $p<.05$), and Weibo news discussion ($M_{male}=3.02$, $M_{female}=2.67$, $t(215)=2.22$, $p<.05$). That is to say, the male participants were more interested in news or information that is related to public affairs or political issues than were the females, and they were more likely to actively engage in different forms of discussions over the relevant topics on Weibo such as making comments or participating in discussion forums.

Theoretical variables: correlations

Overall, the assumptions regarding the correlations among the theoretical variables, which are derived from the cognitive mediation model and communication mediation model were well supported according to the survey data, but with non-significant effects when accounting for the two public affairs/political knowledge-related variables. Political information efficacy as a key dependent variable, was positively correlated with all the theoretically independent variables.

Hypothesis 1, derived from the cognitive mediation model, predicts a positive association between news attention and news elaboration among Weibo users. It was supported even when controlling for “Weibo News Attention” (not shown in Table 3), indicating the sufficient role of news attention as a prerequisite for news elaboration as proposed by the cognitive mediation model (Eveland, 2001).

Hypothesis 2 stating a positive relationship between news attention and public affairs/political knowledge was not supported. Both news attention and Weibo news attention yielded a non-significant with factual public affairs/political knowledge ($r_{factual}=.12, p>.05$; $r_{structural}=.02, p>.05$). Also, neither of the news attention variables was significantly correlated with structural public affairs/political knowledge.

Hypothesis 3 stated that news discussion including both Weibo news discussion (i.e. making comments; participating in discussions on Weibo forums; etc.) and offline news discussion would be positively associated with news elaboration. Table 3 shows the hypothesis was supported ($r_{WBDiscussion}=.29, p<.01$; $r_{OfflineDiscussion}=.32, p<.01$). The findings provided solid evidence regarding the stimulating role of interpersonal communication on both Weibo and in face-to-face situations to people’s elaborative reflection on the news.

Hypothesis 4, based on the communication mediation model, which tested the predicted positive association between news elaboration and public affairs/political knowledge was not supported in either of the knowledge dimensions.

The research question aimed at exploring the associations among political information efficacy and all the other theoretical variables. According to the results shown in Table 3, the hard news use on Weibo and traditional media was significantly associated with political information

efficacy ($r_{WBNU}=.36, p<.01$; $r_{TNU}=.31, p<.01$), compared to 13 percent of it from news attention ($r_{NA}=.36, p<.01$), 32 percent of it from news discussion ($r_{WBDiscussion}=.37, p<.01$; $r_{OfflineDiscussion}=.43, p<.01$), and 21 percent of it from news elaboration ($r_{NewsElaboration}=.46, p<.01$). However, the significantly positive association failed to be maintained when involving the two public affairs/political knowledge-related variables.

Lastly, hypothesis 5 examined the predicted positive relationship among political interest and all the other theoretical variables. According to the results, the assumption was supported when involving news use including both sources ($r_{WBNU}=.48, p<.01$; $r_{TNU}=.36, p<.01$), news attention ($r_{WBNA}=.41, p<.01$; $r_{NA}=.48, p<.01$ —not shown in Table 3), news discussion by different means ($r_{WBDiscussion}=.27, p<.01$; $r_{OfflineDiscussion}=.37, p<.01$), news elaboration ($r_{NewsElaboration}=.43, p<.01$), and political information efficacy ($r_{PoliticalEfficacy}=.55, p<.01$), while the effects disappeared when the two knowledge-related variables were considered.

Proposed model: Regression analysis

The proposed model (Figure 1) aimed at examining the role of Weibo news use in influencing Chinese young adults' political engagement operationalized as political information efficacy (research question) and public affairs and/or political knowledge. The regression analysis included six stages with both demographic and predictor variables.

In the first stage, three demographic variables found to be related to political communication by previous studies (e.g. Eveland, 2003) were employed as controls in this study: age, income, and gender. Results in Table 4 showed that gender ($\beta=-.29, t(200)=-4.21, p<.001$) was the only significant predictor among the three to political information efficacy. Overall,

demographic variables accounted for 7.2% of the total variance in political information efficacy ($Adj R^2=.07$, $F(3,200)=6.28$, $p<.001$).

In the second stage, Weibo news use was the first among Weibo-related variables included in the analysis. Results revealed that Weibo news use ($\beta=.36$, $t(199)=5.69$, $p<.001$) significantly predicted political information efficacy, and contributed approximately 13% of the variance in it ($Adj R^2=.20$, $F(4,199)=13.54$, $p<.001$).

In the next step, Weibo discussion, news attention, and news elaboration were added in the model. According to the results shown in Table 4, both Weibo discussion ($\beta=.14$, $t(196)=2.11$, $p<.05$) and news elaboration ($\beta=.32$, $t(196)=4.96$, $p<.001$) were significant predictors to political information efficacy, and the change in R-square from previous model was $\Delta R^2=.14$, $F(7,196)=15.29$, $p<.001$.

In the fourth and fifth stages, the two non-Weibo variables were included in the model as shown in Table 4. Traditional media news use was not a significant predictor of political information efficacy in contrast to offline news discussion ($\beta=.25$, $t(194)=3.64$, $p<.001$) which brought more power to the existing model ($\Delta R^2=.04$, $F(9,194)=14.23$, $p<.001$). Lastly, political interest was added in the model, which resulted in a large improvement in it ($\Delta R^2=.06$, $F(10,193)=16.40$, $p<.001$), demonstrating that political interest was a significant predictor of political information efficacy ($\beta=.32$, $t(194)=4.70$, $p<.001$).

Figure 2 shows the statistically significant relationships in the final model.

DISCUSSION

News reading on Weibo and the gender difference

This study provides evidence demonstrating the popularity of Weibo as a new media platform that Chinese young adults rely on for political issues and/or public affairs news consumption and information sharing. The young Chinese Weibo users mostly prefer to forward or to forward while making comments on the related Weibos that concern them. The goal is to express their opinions and positions as well as to communicate their opinions with other Weibo users who may or may not follow them.

Although facing the intimidating challenge from the Weibo websites, traditional media seem to maintain their share of the audience. The official websites of mainstream news media are still people's most preferred choices when seeking for hard news on laptops and smart phone apps. In fact, these findings correspond well with the ones of previous research done by some Chinese scholars. For instance, according to the Blue Book of Social Mentality (2011) published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, nearly 20 percent of Chinese netizens visit their Weibo accounts first before other websites. Another study conducted by DRATIO (2011)—a third-party data server located in mainland China, explored the increased visitor volume contributed by the Weibo websites to traditional media ones. It showed that the emergence of Weibo effectively stimulated the amount of Internet users visiting mainstream media websites because of the links provided. However, Weibo remains an independent media platform in a sense that the amount of increased visitor volume to the traditional media websites was significantly less than the number of the newly registered Weibo users.

Evidence also reveals that gender is the only demographic variable that remains significant throughout all the regression models. For instance, male participants showed stronger interests in political and/or public affairs compared to their female counterparts. Also, males are more likely to engage in political news discussion on Weibo websites by participating in discussion forums, making comments, and/or forwarding relevant information. As a result, males demonstrated a better understanding of the current affairs concerning Diaoyu Island dispute. They also showed higher level of political information efficacy than females, considering themselves having a solid understanding of the critical political issues facing the country.

The O-S-R-O-R Model of Communication Effects

Mediation models that include cognitive mediation model (Eveland, 2001), communication mediation model (Sotirovic and McLeod, 2001), citizen communication mediation model (Shah et al., 2005), and campaign communication mediation model (Shah et al., 2007) that shed light on the proposed model in this study, are all inspired by and built upon the O-S-O-R framework proposed by Markus and Zajonc (1985) (as cited in Cho et al., 2009), in which the first “O” represents individuals’ orientations such as cultural characteristics and motivational preferences; the “S-O” portion emphasizes the external stimuli including message consumption, interpersonal discussion, reflective elaboration; and the last “R” indicates response behaviors, attitudinal change, etc (Cho et al., 2009, Nekmat, 2012). The O-S-O-R framework was later extended by Shah and his colleagues when developing the campaign communication mediation model. They suggested incorporating a reasoning “R” in between the “S-O” portion of O-S-O-R, so as to further clarify the highly overlapped concepts involved within the stimuli (“S”) and outcome orientations (“O”) (Shah, et al., 2007; Cho et al., 2009). The reasoning “R” highlights the reflective elaboration triggered by not only the news consumption (Eveland, 2001, 2003), but

more importantly—the interpersonal communication which is considered as “pivotal” to the reasoning process (Cho et al., 2009, p.74), including anticipatory elaboration before and/or during discussions, as well as the improvisational elaboration during and/or after conversations (Eveland, 2004; Pingree, 2007, Nekmat, 2012). As a result, the reasoning processing leads to political participatory activities, knowledge gain, and attitudinal change such as that in political efficacy.

The proposed model investigating the role of Weibo news use in influencing Chinese young adults’ political information efficacy well fits with the O-S-R-O-R framework. Figure 2 shows how the measured relationships in this study fits into the O-S-R-O-R framework. Weibo users get access to the hard news on Weibo websites by following the “verified” users of both individuals who work in the journalism industry or news organizations (e.g. People’s Daily, Southern Weekly), as well as the grassroots users. They engage in discussions over the relevant topics on Weibo websites in a variety of ways: forwarding Weibos to share information; making comments to express opinions; forwarding while making comments to make known positions; and participating in discussion forums over “hot issues.” Engaging in discussions with other Weibo users one may or may not know exposes one to the diverse viewpoints including not only the balanced ideas involving similar and dissimilar ones but also the controversial arguments (also “dangerous discussion,” Eveland & Hively, 2004). This stimulates individuals devoting reflective thinking in a more sophisticated way compared to being simply exposed to the news, so as to come up with more logically sound points of view to post publicly. Also, they would be more prepared for the pending or ongoing debates with those with different opinions. As a result, Weibo users’ political information efficacy is promoted, meaning that they tend to believe that they have access to the non-filtered political and public affairs information that touches the sensitive and the most important issues from diverse sources. Furthermore, the face-to-face discussion over political

and/or public affairs news with family members, friends, and colleagues contributes to the improved political information efficacy.

In contrast, news consumption on traditional media cast little impact on the promoted efficacy, which might be caused by its features of devoid of interaction and non-filtered information compared with Weibo websites. Lastly, political interest, an important predictor to motivations for political information especially in surveillance and social utility (Kaye & Johnson, 2002), is positively connected to news use on Weibo and traditional media, discussions on Weibo and in face-to-face mode, reflective elaboration, and political information efficacy. These findings correspond well with previous research done on uses and gratifications, indicating that the audience is actively engaged in information seeking. Further, the more they are interested and involved in politics and public affairs issues, the more likely they would use the media purposefully (Katz, 1959; McLeod & Becker, 1981; Kaye & Johnson, 2002).

Despite some important findings resembling those of previous research, this study is not without unsupported hypotheses. Null results were found for hypothesis 4 which predicted associations among knowledge-based variables and all the other theoretical variables, except for a weak positive correlation between factual political/public affairs knowledge and Weibo news use ($r=.14, p<.05$). In this regard, firstly, motivation is a significant determinant of knowledge gain (Eveland, 2003). In the present study, female participants who showed less political interests and less intense enthusiasm in engaging in relevant discussions accounted for more than 60% of the sample population, which may contribute to the null influence of the discussion-generated reflective elaboration on political knowledge gain. Additional analysis was conducted to test this post-hoc explanation. Results showed that the positive relationship between factual knowledge and Weibo news use remained while becoming stronger if only males were selected ($r=.25, p<.05$).

However, the significant correlation disappeared when including only females in the analysis. Nevertheless, no significant associations were found among structural knowledge and all the other theoretical variables when splitting the sample results by gender.

Also, elaboration requires pre-existing knowledge to be produced, which leads to a spiral process of learning that in turn leads to knowing gain (Eveland, 2003). Under the circumstances, people who are uninformed of certain issues in the first place, may find it increasingly hard to develop interest or to make sense of the information regardless of the nature or the level of sophistication in it (Hyman & Sheatsley, 1947, as cited in Eveland, 2003). Given it, participants with less interest in and insufficient knowledge on the Diaoyu Island dispute between China and Japan may not be able to come up with correct answers to the factual knowledge related questions nor to see the connections among the key concepts related to the issue.

In sum, this study provides evidence regarding the applicability of the O-S-R-O-R model of communication effects combining cognitive mediation model (Eveland, 2001, 2003) and communication mediation model (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001) in the newly born media platform—Sina Weibo. The findings reveal that the interpersonal discussions both on Weibo and in face-to-face mode stimulate individuals' reflective elaboration on news and the relevant information, which results in the promoted political information efficacy. The universality of the O-S-R-O-R framework presented not only in the diverse platforms (e.g. face-to-face political talk (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001); online interactive civic messaging (Shah et al., 2005)), but also in different political environments. That is, in the largely restrictive media environment in mainland China where there is in lack of the “efficient institutional channel of public opinion” (Wei, 2012), the emergence of Weibo excites while provides the Chinese Internet users with an

unprecedentedly kaleidoscopic platform for political and public affairs information sharing and opinion expression.

One of the main limitations of this study might be the way of recruiting participants. Since social media networking websites were utilized to distribute the link to the online survey, people participated in as volunteers. Therefore, there was limited guarantee of the identity of the participants—though most of them were Chinese young adults enrolled in universities ($M=23.86$), some of them might have graduated and joined the job market for a couple of years. Furthermore, since the participants were recruited through social media websites by the researcher and people from her circle of friends, they might share similar background in education, socioeconomic status, and tastes in news. It might cause the lack of diversity among the sample population. Also, since Sina Weibo was the only Weibo website used to recruit respondents, the Weibo users of other three main Weibo websites (i.e. Tencent; Sohu; NetEase) were largely overlooked. Since the four major Weibo websites share rather unique characteristics in terms of the user population and the features of information attracted most attention (Li, 2012), it might be interesting for future studies to focus on comparing and contrasting the influence of news consumption on users' political engagement among different Weibo websites. Lastly, since the Diaoyu Island dispute between China and Japan was the only issue used for testing participants' political knowledge, while in the meantime there was no public affairs related questions included in the survey, it is possible that the evaluation of participants' knowledge sophistication in politics and public affairs is biased.

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Table 1: Demographic Statistics of Sample

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean or % (N)	S.D.
Gender				.46

Male			25.3% (64)	
Female			60.5% (153)	
Age	18.00	38.00	23.86 (206)	3.08
Household income	1.00	6.00	3.01 (218)	1.22

Note. The annual household income during the past five years was measured on a 6-point scale (1:\$3100 or less; 3: \$7901-\$15,800; 6: over \$158,701). According to the China Household Finance Survey conducted by the Survey and Research Center for China Household Finance Survey, Southern University of Finance and Economics, up to August, 2011, the Chinese Household average disposable income is RMB 51,569 (\$8100)—RMB 70,876 (\$11,250) in urban area and RMB 22,278 (\$3500) among rural households.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Key Indices

	Total		Gender		t-test	α
	M (SD)	M (SD)	Male <i>n</i> =64	Female <i>n</i> =153		
<i>Political Interest</i>	4.61 (0.83)	4.82 (0.96)	4.49 (0.77)		t(215)=2.57,	.90
I like to stay informed	4.84 (0.91)	4.95 (0.95)	4.76 (0.91)		p<.05	
I pay attention to relevant news	4.72 (0.91)	4.97 (0.96)	4.61 (0.88)			
I'm interested	4.67 (0.94)	4.91 (1.04)	4.56 (0.91)			
I actively seek out relevant news	4.22 (1.02)	4.44 (1.22)	4.07 (0.90)			
<i>Weibo News Use</i>	3.67 (1.23)	3.73(1.43)	3.65 (1.12)			.66
Frequency of logging into Weibo and reading news	4.25 (1.52)	4.34 (1.65)	4.20 (1.44)			
Percentage of “verified” news people or organizations I followed	3.01 (1.31)	3.11(1.52)	3.10 (1.22)			
<i>Traditional Media News Use</i>	3.55 (0.93)	3.68 (0.92)	3.48 (0.93)			.71
Newspaper/Magazines(Apps on smart phones or tablets)	4.43 (1.51)	4.59 (1.47)	4.33 (1.52)			
Newspaper/Magazines(PC)	4.28 (1.47)	4.59 (1.33)	4.11 (1.52)			
Television	3.18 (1.32)	3.14 (1.39)	3.18 (1.29)			
Network TV news website	3.11 (1.35)	3.28 (1.61)	3.02 (1.23)			
Newspaper/Magazines(Hard copy)	2.72 (1.13)	2.75 (1.10)	2.72 (1.16)			
<i>News Attention</i>	3.81 (0.72)	3.83 (0.81)	3.81 (0.68)			.73
News from newspaper/magazines	4.08 (0.98)	4.27 (1.10)	3.99 (0.92)			
Weibo News from “verified” news organizations	3.97 (1.02)	4.02 (1.21)	3.98 (0.94)			

	Total	Gender		t-test	α
	M (SD)	Male n=64 M (SD)	Female n=153 M (SD)		
Weibo News from “verified” individuals working in journalism	3.87 (1.06)	3.89 (1.16)	3.86 (1.02)		
News from TV	3.73 (1.09)	3.64 (1.28)	3.77 (1.04)		
Weibo News from grassroots	3.43 (1.04)	3.31 (1.08)	3.49 (1.00)		
<i>Weibo News Discussion</i>	2.80 (1.08)	3.02 (1.15)	2.67 (1.03)	t(215)=2.22, p<.05	.92
Forwarding Weibos	3.26 (1.37)	3.48 (1.37)	3.15 (1.38)		
Forwarding while making comments	2.97 (1.32)	3.23 (1.38)	2.82 (1.29)		
Making comments	2.76 (1.19)	2.98 (1.30)	2.64 (1.13)		
Posting original Weibos	2.53 (1.61)	2.58 (1.15)	2.48 (1.12)		
Engaging in discussion forums	2.45 (1.18)	2.83 (1.25)	2.25 (1.07)		
<i>Offline News Discussion</i>	3.05 (0.91)	3.10 (1.01)	3.00 (0.86)		.76
I talk about it with friends	3.24 (1.01)	3.42 (1.07)	3.14 (0.96)		
I talk about it with coworkers	2.99 (1.18)	3.02 (1.12)	2.95 (1.20)		
I talk about it with family	2.90 (1.08)	2.83 (1.12)	2.89 (1.09)		
<i>News Elaboration</i>	4.25 (0.72)	4.35 (0.70)	4.20 (0.72)		.88
Thinking about how stories related to things I know	4.38 (0.89)	4.47 (0.96)	4.34 (0.86)		
Tying what I read to ideas I’ve had before	4.38 (0.82)	4.42 (0.92)	4.33 (0.76)		
Trying to figure out connections among stories	4.26 (0.97)	4.55 (0.85)	4.16 (1.00)		
Trying to relate what I read to my personal experience	4.21 (1.01)	4.41 (1.03)	4.12 (1.00)		
Trying to mentally piece stories together to gain more thorough understanding	4.15 (0.94)	4.19 (0.89)	4.12 (0.95)		
Visualizing stories	4.14 (0.87)	4.09 (0.85)	4.11 (0.86)		
<i>Political Information Efficacy</i>	3.74 (0.86)	4.11 (1.01)	3.58 (0.73)	t(92)=3.86, p<.001	.89
I feel I have a good understanding of the important political issues facing my country	3.97 (0.91)	4.25 (0.94)	3.85 (0.86)		
I think I am better informed about public affairs than most	3.65 (0.97)	4.02 (1.16)	3.49 (0.84)		

	Total	Gender		t-test	α
	M (SD)	Male n=64 M (SD)	Female n=153 M (SD)		
people I think I am better informed about politics than most people	3.60 (0.98)	4.08 (1.19)	3.39 (0.81)		
<i>Structural Knowledge(Relevance)</i>	5.16 (0.61)	5.04 (0.72)	5.19 (0.55)	t(95.97)=-1.5 0, p>.05	.86
Island dispute and China-U.S. relations	5.29 (0.90)	5.09 (0.87)	5.34 (0.90)		
Island dispute and China-Japan relations	5.66 (0.78)	5.56 (0.85)	5.69 (0.76)		
Island Dispute and International relations among Asian countries	5.02 (1.00)	4.70 (1.08)	5.14 (0.94)		
Island dispute and Shizo Abe China-U.S. relations and China-Japan relations	5.08 (1.02) 5.34 (0.85)	5.09 (1.11) 5.31 (0.91)	5.06 (0.99) 5.34 (0.83)		
China-U.S. relations and International relations among Asian countries	5.36 (0.76)	5.14 (0.94)	5.44 (0.66)		
China-U.S. relations and Shinzo Abe	4.85 (1.07)	4.84 (1.04)	4.85 (1.07)		
China-Japan relations and International relations among Asian countries	5.34 (0.78)	5.23 (0.89)	5.37 (0.73)		
China-Japan relations and Shinzo Abe	5.13 (0.96)	5.05 (1.15)	5.16 (0.89)		
International relations among Asian countries and Shizo Abe	4.51 (1.07)	4.39 (1.15)	4.55 (1.04)		
<i>Factual Knowledge</i>	1.83 (1.19)	2.39 (1.11)	1.90 (1.05)	t(215)=3.13, p<.01	.22
Which Japanese public official initiated the attempt to nationalize Diaoyu Islands	0.36 (0.48)	0.36 (0.48)	0.42 (0.49)		
Which is the position adopted by the U.S. on sovereignty of Diaoyu Island	0.69 (0.46)	0.86 (0.35)	0.73 (0.44)		
Who is the newly elected Prime Minister of Japan and which party does he represent	0.42 (0.48)	0.61 (0.49)	0.41 (0.49)		
Which historical/present					

	Total	Gender		t-test	α
	M (SD)	Male <i>n</i> =64 M (SD)	Female <i>n</i> =153 M (SD)		
treaty is not relevant to the Islands dispute	0.35 (0.48)	0.56 (0.50)	0.33 (0.47)		

Note. N varies from 231 to 251. Ratings are on a 6-point scale. PC=Personal Computer. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Correlations among news consumption variables and political interest, and political information efficacy

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. PoliticalEfficacy	-								
2. PoliticalInterest	.55*	-							
3.	.36*	.48**	-						

WeiboNewsUse	*								
		.29*							
4. WeiboNA	*		.41**	.67**	-				
5. WeiboDiscussion		.37**	.27**	.41**	.42**	-			
			.46*						
6. NewsElaboration	*		.43**	.29**	.35**	.29**	-		
7. TMNewsUse		.31**	.36**	.30**	.32**	.38**	.33**	-	
8. OfflineDiscussion		.43**	.37**	.29**	.41**	.47**	.32**	.42**	-
9. FactualKnowledge		.09	.06	.14*	.12	-.04	.01	.04	.04
10. StructuralKnowledge		-.01	.05	-.02	.02	-.05	-.01	.09	.03
									.20**

Note. N varied from 234 to 251. NA=News Attention. TMNewsUse=Traditional Media News Use. All the variables in the table were measured on a 6-point scale. * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001.

Table 4. Predicting political information efficacy from Weibo news use related variables, political interest, and non-Weibo news use variables (Regression Table)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
	B(SE)	Std β	B(SE)	Std β	B(SE)	Std β	B(SE)	Std β	B(SE)	Std β	B(SE)	Std β
Gender	-.54*** (.13)	-.29**	-.53*** (.12)	-.28***	-.44*** (.11)	-.24***	-.42*** -.23*** (.11)		-.45*** -.24*** (.12)		-.35*** (.10)	-.19***
WeiboNewsUse			.25** (.04)	.36***	.12* (.05)	.17*	.15** (.06)	.21**	.14** (.05)	.19**	.07 (.05)	.10
NewsElaboration					.36*** (.08)	.32***	.38*** (.08)	.32**	.34*** (.08)	.29***	.26** (.07)	.22**
WeiboDiscussion					.11* (.05)	.14*	.11** (.05)	.14**	.04 (.06)	.06	.07 (.05)	.09
Traditional Media NewsUse							.08 (.06)	.83	.03 (.06)	.03	- (.06)	-

Offline Discussion					.24 ^{***}	.25 ^{***}	.20 ^{**}	.21 ^{**}
					(.07)		(.06)	
Political Interest							.33 ^{***}	.32 ^{***}
							(.07)	
Adj R ² , F	.07, F(3, 200) = 6.28 ^{***}	.20, F(4, 199) = 13.54 ^{***}	.33, F(7, 196) = 15.29 ^{***}	.33, F(8, 195) = 13.50 ^{***}	.37, F(9, 194) = 14.23 ^{***}	.43, F(10, 193) = 16.40 ^{***}		

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

Figure 1. Weibo news use predicts political knowledge and political information efficacy

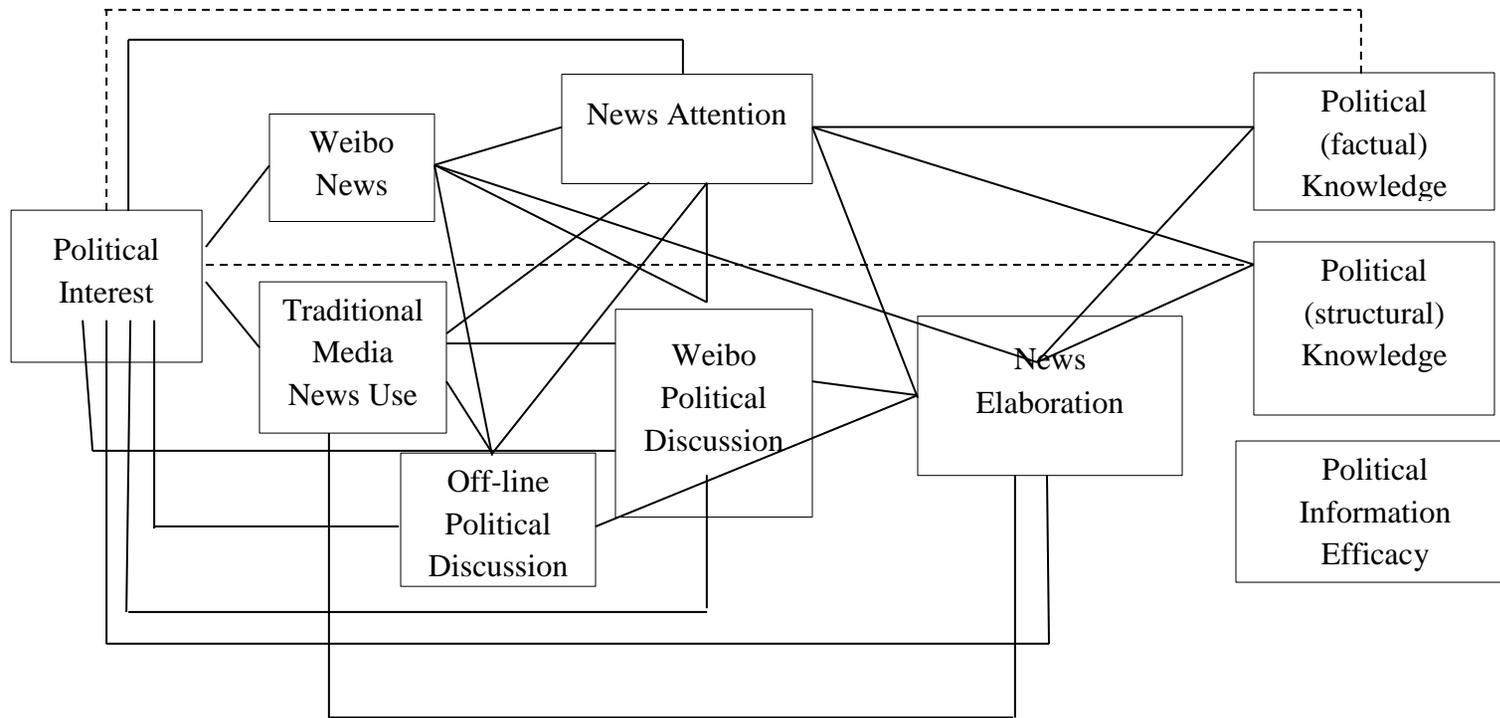
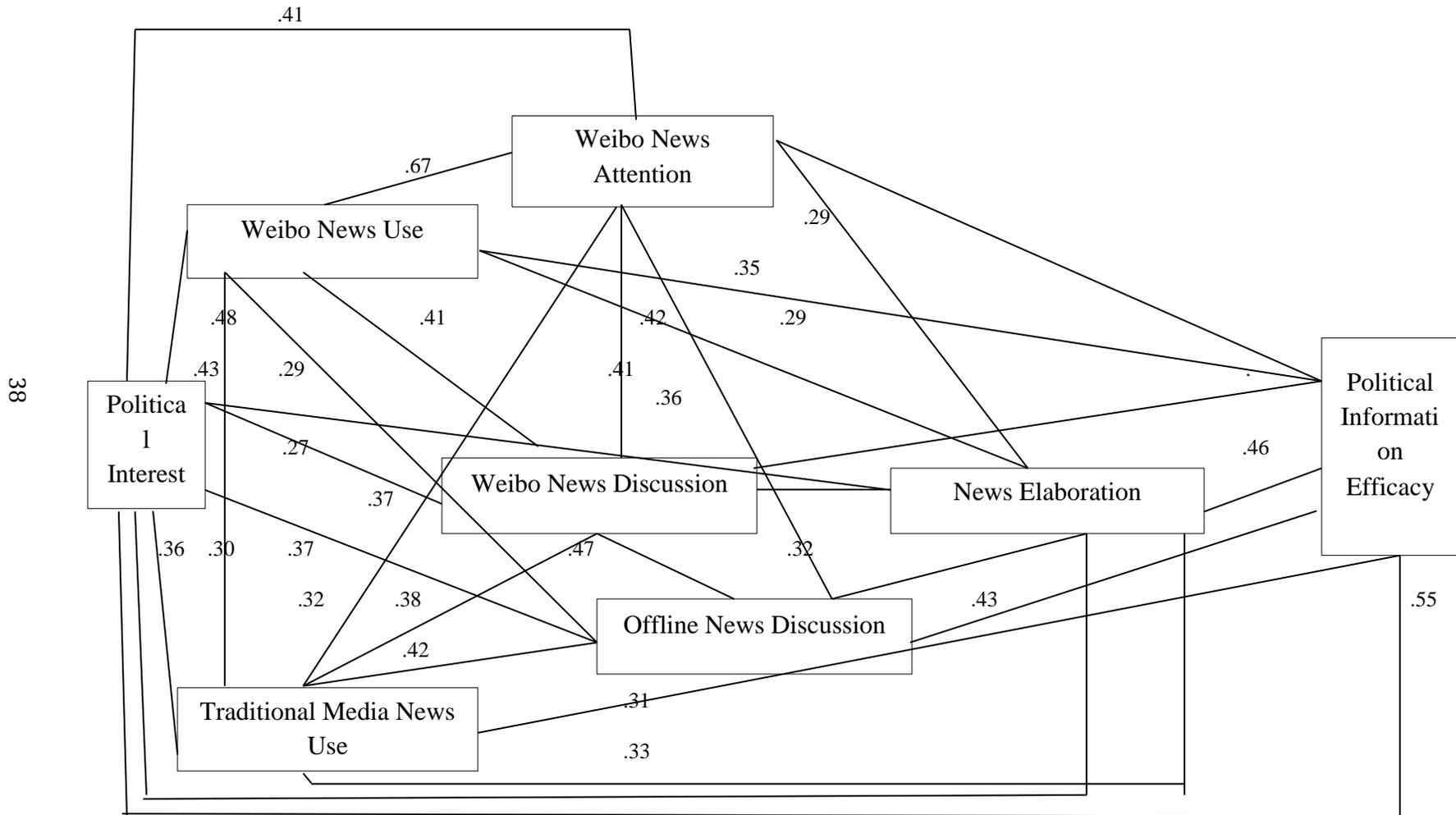


Figure 2. Proposed Model (Predicting Political Information Efficacy)



Note. Numbers are correlation coefficients; all correlation coefficients are statistically significant ($p < .01$).

Figure 3. A model of Weibo news use predicting political information efficacy

