

The Impact of Media Trust on Political Consumption: An Empirical Study Based on CSS2021

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Abstract

In the era of mediatized politics, news media serve not only as the core vehicle for information dissemination but also as a crucial intermediary shaping public political cognition and behavior. As the global media trust crisis intensifies and political consumption becomes increasingly explicit, the associative mechanism between media trust and political consumption has emerged as a hot topic in academic research. This study utilizes data from the 2021 China Social Survey (CSS), involving 3,546 respondents, to validate the impact of media trust on individual political consumption orientation through a multiple linear logistic regression model. Results indicate that differences in media trust significantly and positively influence individual political consumption orientation. This research offers a new theoretical perspective for understanding emerging political participation patterns in the digital age and provides practical implications for optimizing media governance.

Keywords

Political Consumption; Media Trust; Political Participation

1. Introduction

In recent years, consumer behavior expressing political preferences through boycotts and supportive purchases has frequently emerged in the marketplace, becoming a significant and unignorable segment of consumer spending. This new form of political participation—where individuals express political, ethical, or environmental concerns through market actions—is termed political consumption[1]. For instance, in 2021, ERKE experienced spontaneous “wild consumption” following its donation incident, while in recent years, the Baixiang Foods gained significant sales growth after trending on social media for positive initiatives like hiring employees with disabilities. Market-driven, political consumption plays an indispensable role in addressing production and consumption-related social issues, focusing on how consumers resolve societal problems through purchasing choices[2]. The rise of po-

litical consumerism indicates consumers are leveraging their purchasing power to drive market and societal change, addressing complex global challenges[3]. Within the Chinese context, consumption choices have become a form of “mild political expression”. This model both channels social sentiment and avoids the risks of traditional political mobilization, making consumption a vital tool for conveying political values and reinforcing collective identity.

Media amplify public political interest, fostering engagement with and reflection on relevant public affairs while promoting political expression. However, as the number of media outlets continues to grow, information dissemination becomes increasingly diverse, and the volume of information explodes exponentially. The political information encountered by the public has gradually become heterogeneous and complex, readily raising questions about the trustworthiness of media information during the information exposure process.

While existing literature has explored the relationship between media trust and political participation, research has largely focused on institutionalized political behaviors such as electoral voting and public deliberation, leaving a theoretical gap regarding political consumption behaviors. Therefore, this study focuses on the political consumption tendencies of Chinese citizens. Based on CSS2021 data, it employs a multiple linear logistic regression model to verify whether differences in media trust significantly influence individual political consumption tendencies. It also explores the factors affecting political consumption behavior to systematically reveal the underlying logic and patterns behind such behavior.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Trust and Media Trust

Trust is a complex social and psychological phenomenon. It represents an individual's psychological state and behavioral choice to embrace potential risks based on positive expectations regarding others' intentions or actions when facing uncertainty and vulnerability. Fafchamps & Durlauf categorize interpersonal trust into individualized trust and generalized trust, also termed social trust. [4] Trust builds upon personal trust, gradually forming widespread social trust through numerous reliable personal interactions and trust-based relationships. Sociologist Niklas L. trust in his work *Trust and Power* as a mechanism for simplifying social complexity. The world is too complex for us to comprehend and monitor every detail; trust acts as a “social lubricant” enabling us to transcend available information, streamline decision-making processes, and thereby facilitate cooperation and social interaction[5].

As a part of social trust, media trust serves as a foundational safeguard for the effective functioning of modern society. Different scholars offer varied interpretations of the media trust paradigm based on disciplinary perspectives and theoretical paradigms: Sociologist Barbara M. emphasizes from a social functional perspective that

media trust represents the public's expectation of predictable media behavior, essentially serving as "a foundational mechanism for stabilizing social relations and promoting cooperation" [6]. Coleman, a representative of the rational choice school, defines it as "the public's rational decision-making behavior after assessing media authenticity and reliability in information acquisition," focusing on the risk-gambling logic underlying trust formation [7].

2.2. Political Participation

Political participation refers to the process by which citizens engage in public affairs to influence political decision-making, constituting an indispensable input component within political systems. Research on this concept originated in ancient Greece, where it denoted citizen involvement in city-state affairs. It was not until the late 20th century that academia developed more systematic definitions and research on political participation. Huntington & Nelson provided a classic definition: "Political participation is the activity of citizens attempting to influence government decisions," establishing the fundamental essence of political participation and laying a crucial foundation for its study [8]. Political participation is not a singular political act but is composed of multi-dimensional, multi-level, and multi-type political behaviors. Ekan J. & Amnå E. argue that political participation encompasses not only explicit, direct, and traditional forms but also latent political participation—activities related to politics that do not aim to directly influence government decisions, primarily manifested as expressing political attitudes or opinions [9]. Due to differing national conditions, Chinese citizens' political participation behaviors differ significantly from those in other countries, with fewer opportunities for direct political engagement. In the internet era, social media has revolutionized information dissemination through its user-friendly, flexible operation and open expression, providing a platform for civic political engagement. Consequently, Chinese citizens predominantly engage in online political participation. Within this sphere, "expressive participation" is the most common method chosen by netizens, who primarily use online likes, shares, and comments to voice opinions on public issues and publicly declare their political stances. The internet has transformed how citizens engage in political processes. It serves not only as a channel for accessing and exchanging political information but also provides a virtual public space for political participation.

2.3. Political Consumption

In the context of globalization, the market provides an indispensable and flexible space for political expression. Political consumption has emerged as a new form of political participation, forming a complementary and synergistic relationship with the market. Together, they constitute the diverse landscape of civic engagement in modern democratic societies.

Research on political consumption originated in the West, where it is a commonly used concept in academic discourse. Lauren C. defines political consumerism as

consumers intentionally purchasing or avoiding products for political or ethical reasons, including boycotting goods from unethical or harmful enterprises and supporting products aligned with positive social, environmental, or moral values [3]. Considering the theoretical essence and developmental trajectory of political participation and political consumption, the inherent political significance of political consumption allows political consumerism to be recognized as a new form of political participation.

As more people base purchasing decisions on ethical, ecological, and political-social considerations, political consumerism has become one of the most favored ways for citizens to express political preferences beyond voting. Based on the above scholarly analysis, this paper proposes the following research hypothesis:

Research Hypothesis: Differences in media trust significantly and positively influence individuals' political consumption tendencies.

3. Research Methodology

The data utilized in this study were derived from the CSS2021. After removing missing and outlier values, the study ultimately obtained a sample of 3,546 households across China, representing diverse age groups, occupational attributes, and regional characteristics.

3.1. Variable Selection

This study adopts media trust as the dependent variable. Drawing on prior research and referencing the social trust and social fairness modules within the CSS questionnaire design, the study selected item F1a "Do you trust the following institutions?" The survey covered institutions including government, businesses, charitable organizations, news media, hospitals, and courts. However, as this study focuses solely on the single variable of public media trust, only the item "F1a-7: News Media" was selected. Based on questionnaire design and research requirements, the response options were recoded into a 5-point scale: 1 = Strongly distrust, 2 = Somewhat distrust, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Somewhat trust, 5 = Strongly trust.

The dependent variable of this study is political consumption orientation. The item "D9b-5: I prefer domestic independent brands" from D9b was selected to measure citizens' political consumption orientation. This option was also recoded into a 5-point scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Somewhat Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Somewhat Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

To better elucidate the causal relationship between independent and dependent variables, this study addresses the selection of control variables. Drawing on prior research, gender, age, ethnicity, educational attainment, political affiliation, and religious beliefs were chosen as control variables. Definitions, coding, and basic descriptive statistics for each control variable are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Variable coding and Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Variable Coding	Average Value	Standard Deviation	Maximum	Minimum
Media Trust	1-5 scale, 5 = Strong Trust	3.53	1.14	5	1
Political Consumption Orientation	1-5 scale, 5 = Strong Trust	3.73	1.07	5	1
Gender	Female = 1, Male = 2	1.54	0.49	2	1
Age	Teenager=1, Young Adult=2, Middle-aged=3, Elderly=4	3.35	0.72	4	2
Ethnicity	Han Minority=1, Ethnic Minority=2	1.06	0.24	2	1
Educational Attainment	Elementary School or Below=1, Middle School=2, College=3, Bachelor's Degree or Higher=4	2.79	1.43	5	1
Political Affiliation	Communist Party Member=1, Communist Youth League Member=2, Democratic Party Member=3, General Public=4	3.32	1.17	4	1
Religious Beliefs	None=1, Some=2	1.1	0.3	2	1

4. Data Analysis and Conclusions

Regarding the age distribution of the survey sample, middle-aged and elderly individuals (≥ 45 years old) constituted the primary research subjects, accounting for 85.4% of the total sample. In terms of gender composition, male respondents comprised 54.9% and female respondents 45.1%, reflecting a relatively balanced distribution. From an ethnic perspective, the Han ethnic group accounted for 93.7%. Analysis of political affiliations revealed that the general public (73.9%) constituted the primary political identity group. Educational attainment was concentrated within the secondary education to undergraduate degree range (secondary school: 36.7%, college: 26.2%, undergraduate and above: 16.1%). Additionally, 89.0% of respondents explicitly stated they had no religious beliefs.

Differentiated distribution patterns emerged among respondents regarding the two core variables: media trust levels and political consumption attitudes. Regarding political consumption attitudes, respondents exhibited a significantly positive tendency ($M=3.73 \pm 1.08$). The data distribution showed left skewness (mode 4.00 > mean 3.73), with 76.1% of cases concentrated in the 4-5 point range, indicating strong identification with domestic brands. Although trust in news media maintained an overall positive trend ($M=3.53 \pm 1.14$), the standard deviation reached 1.14. With 33.7% of cases falling within the 1-3 point range and 66.3% within the 4-5 point range, this dimension revealed significant attitudinal divergence. Notably, political consumption attitudes ($M=3.73$) exhibited a pronounced peak distribution, indicating a high degree of consistency among respondents' political consumption attitudes.

4.1. Regression Analysis

As shown in Table 2 of regression model fit and validation metrics, when Model 1 used religious beliefs, age, gender, ethnicity, political affiliation, and education level as predictor variables, the F-test statistic was 13.923 with $p < 0.01$, indicating statistical significance. The adjusted R-squared value was 0.021. Model 2, which incorporates the variable of trust in news media on top of Model 1, increases the adjusted R-squared to 0.035, significantly enhancing explanatory power. The F-test value also increases to 51.437, while the standard error decreases. Collectively, these results indicate that the inclusion of the trust in news media variable effectively enhances the model's predictive accuracy. Concurrently, the Durbin-Watson statistic of 1.958 approached the theoretical ideal value of 2, indicating no significant autocorrelation in the residual series and confirming the model's validity. The findings demonstrate that public trust in news media independently explains political consumption tendencies, thereby validating Hypothesis 1 and confirming that public media trust exerts a significant positive influence on political consumption inclinations.

Table 2. Regression Model Fitting and Testing Metrics

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Standardized error of the estimate	Change in R ²	Change in F	Freedom 1	Freedom 2
A Predictor variables: Constant	0.152a	0.023	0.021	1.06784	0.023	13.923	6	3539
B Predictor variables: Constant, Media Trust	0.193b	0.037	0.035	1.06031	0.014	51.437	1	3538
C Dependent variable								

4.2. Robustness Test

This study employs variable substitution to test model robustness, aiming to validate the validity stability of core conclusions (see Tables 3 and 4). Specifically, the dependent variable “political consumption behavior” in the original model was replaced with two alternative dimensions—“consumption decisions based on personal taste” and “tendency toward international brand consumption”—while maintaining the explanatory variable (trust in news media) and covariate structure unchanged. Parallel analysis models 1 and 2 were constructed accordingly. Parameter testing via maximum likelihood estimation revealed: in the personal taste consumption model, the key explanatory variable failed to meet conventional significance thresholds ($p = 0.47 > 0.05$); similarly, the core variable in the international brand preference model did not pass significance testing ($p = 0.109 > 0.05$). A comparative analysis of the dual models indicates that the statistical efficacy of the alternative model is significantly lower than that of the benchmark model. This provides counterfactual evidence supporting the robustness and specific directionality of the positive predictive effect of news media trust on political consumption behavior. The findings exclude the existence of other potential explanatory pathways, further confirming the specific causal relationship between media trust and political consumption behavior and verifying the irreplaceability of the original hypothesized

relationship.

Table 3. Model 1 Validity Stability Test

Model 1	Variable	Unstand-ardized coefficient B	Standard error	Standard-ized coef-ficient Beta	T	Signifi-cance
	Constant	4.765	0.127		37.382	0
	Political Affiliation	-0.021	0.013	-0.027	-1.57	0.117
	Gender	-0.009	0.031	-0.005	-0.295	0.768
	Age	-0.122	0.022	-0.097	-5.606	0
	Educa-tional Attain-ment	-0.05	0.011	-0.079	-4.502	0
	Ethnicity	-0.069	0.063	-0.018	-1.096	0.273
	Religious Beliefs	-0.187	0.05	-0.063	-3.747	0
	Media Trust	0.01	0.013	0.012	0.723	0.47

Table 4. Model 2 Validity Stability Test

Model 1	Variable	Unstandardized coefficient B	Standard error	Standardized coefficient Beta	T	Significance
	Constant	2.807	0.148		18.977	0
	Political Affiliation	0.016	0.016	0.018	1.041	0.298
	Gender	-0.069	0.036	-0.033	-1.936	0.053
	Age	-0.172	0.025	-0.118	-6.786	0
	Educational Attainment	-0.022	0.013	-0.03	-1.676	0.094
	Ethnicity	-0.024	0.073	-0.006	-0.335	0.737
	Religious Beliefs	-0.053	0.058	-0.015	-0.915	0.36
	Media Trust	0.025	0.015	0.027	1.615	0.109

5. Data Analysis and Conclusions

Based on the empirical research above, this paper draws the following conclusions: First, citizens generally exhibit a relatively positive tendency toward political consumption, particularly among males, the elderly, Chinese Communist Party members, and those with higher education levels, though individual differences exist in news media trust levels. Second, public media trust significantly and positively influences political consumption tendencies. This finding remains valid after accounting for sampling error and undergoing robustness tests.

Under the dual context of information ecosystem restructuring and technological empowerment, news media—as the core conduit for socio-political information—shapes public political cognition and consumption attitudes through trust. Public trust in news media exhibits a significant correlation with political consumption tendencies, a relationship influenced by individual heterogeneity. Specifically, highly trusted media can enhance political efficacy and foster rational public discourse,

thereby promoting public identification with and participation in mainstream political issues. Conversely, low-trust media may exacerbate political alienation and even induce adversarial decoding of political information. Concurrently, the moderating role of individual cognition is significant. Higher education levels, Party membership, and older age groups tend to trust mainstream media and develop positive political attitudes, aligning with the “resources-trust-participation” chain logic in social capital theory. However, among other internet users, the link between media trust and political consumption tendencies is fragile, potentially disrupted by algorithmic “information bubbles” and emotional mobilization. Therefore, it is essential to continuously repair users’ media trust frameworks to enhance the public’s critical processing of complex information.

The above conclusions offer new insights and inspiration for all sectors of society to enhance media trust. First, mainstream media must transcend the constraints of one-way communication by establishing a virtuous cycle of trust-participation. Leveraging government new media platforms, they should build two-way dialogue channels to enhance trust retention through precise responses to public concerns and visual policy interpretations. Additionally, drawing from official media’s experience in mitigating attitude polarization, they can design “participatory journalism” products to guide the public toward political consensus through rational discourse. Second, new media platforms like social media should optimize algorithmic recommendation systems to reduce visibility of extreme content while strengthening fact-checking and authoritative source labeling functions [10]. This layered approach to combating misinformation will bolster media credibility. Finally, leveraging high-political-efficacy groups—such as Party members and highly educated individuals—as “trust nodes” can amplify mainstream narratives through community dissemination. This strategy propagates positive media messages and spreads social positivity.

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