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Baohua Zhou

School of Journalism, Fudan University, Shanghai, China

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New media use and subjective social status

Baohua Zhou*

School of Journalism, Fudan University, Shanghai, China

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Inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's class theory and other related theoretical resources, this paper conceptualizes new media as a form of capital and resource to be utilized for perceiving reality. Guided by this conception, this paper explores the relationship between new media use and subjective social status. Analyzing data from the Shanghai Survey, this study shows that new media adoption and use pattern each has an independent influence on individuals' sense of their social positions in a stratified society, especially for its cultural dimension. Based on the findings, this paper argues that the expansion of new media resources is not only embedded with the social stratification, but also has the potential to reproduce and perpetuate the systemic logic of social stratification.

Keywords: new media capital; subjective social status; Pierre Bourdieu; social inequality

How is the rise of new media enabling a reconstruction of our society? Scholars are exploring this question from different angles. Castells (1996) argues that new media has brought diversification of communicative channels and the segmentation of audience, which is transforming a ‘mass society’ into a ‘segmented society’. This argument can be examined empirically. Continuing the exemplar of investigating the inequality in the distributions of media resources (e.g., Olien, Donohue, & Tichenor, 1983), scholars have studied the structural inequality of Internet penetration with the notion of ‘digital divide’ (e.g., Warschauer, 2004). These studies showed that the expansion of new media, including the Internet and mobile phone, has been embedded with the social stratification rooted in the economic opportunities in the market arena, the political hierarchy, and technological proficiency. That is, the adoption and usage of new media is largely a result of individuals’ objective social position (e.g., Zhu & He, 2002). But another question which has been rarely studied is: what is the relationship between new media use and subjective social status? Does new media use have the potential to reproduce and perpetuate the systemic logic of social stratification?

This paper is aimed to address these questions. In addition to advancing a theoretical explication of the relationship between new media and social stratification, addressing these questions is especially important for understanding the changes in China. China was once depicted as a ‘classless society’ in official propaganda despite ‘a rigid status hierarchy’ actually existing in the first three decades of communist rule. Since the economic reform began in 1978, China’s state-prescribed redistributive

*Email: zhoubaohua@yeah.net
inequalities in the pre-reform era have been tangled with the patterns of individuals and groups succeeding in the market, resulting in alarming widening of social inequalities and differentiations (e.g. Bian, 2002; Li, 2005; Lu, 2002). Another significant change in China is that new media penetration has been amazingly rapid. By the end of 2009, Internet users and mobile phone users have accounted for 28.9% (China Internet Network Information Center, 2010) and 56.3% (China’s Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, 2010) of the population, respectively, with such rates much higher in urban and coastal areas. These intertwined changes provide a macro basis for us to examine the interaction between social stratification and new media development. For example, will the new media adopters perceive themselves as having a higher social status? Will different new media use patterns produce various social strata identity? These questions concern the effects of new media on individuals’ perception of a rapidly changing social structure and their own relative position in it. Although many studies have been conducted on the patterns and trajectories of social stratification in post-reform China by focusing on objective social status in China (e.g., Bian, 2002; Li, 2005; Lu, 2002), few have explored individuals’ ‘subjective’ stratum consciousness and its formation. The limited number of studies (Li, Zhang, Zhao, & Liang, 2005; Liu, 2001, 2002) that did describe the distribution of subjective social status and ascertain evidence of status inconsistency across the two domains all neglected the media factor, which, this paper argues, is important to influence people’s sense of their status in a stratified and stratifying society.

Subjective social status, media capital, and media information

The concept of subjective social status and its significance

Subjective social status, by its definition, refers to ‘the individual’s perception of his/her position in the status hierarchy’ (Jackman & Jackman, 1973). It is conceived as a core dimension of social strata consciousness, conceptualized as individuals’ lay knowledge about the whole picture of social stratification based on their lay interpretations of their own life experiences. It was once a key topic for investigation in social stratification research, especially the aspect of the topic concerning the relationship between individuals’ objectively assessed status and their subjective status identification (e.g., Baer, Eitzen, Duprey, Thompson, & Cole, 1976; Jackman & Jackman, 1973; Kluegel, Singleton Jr., & Starnes, 1977). Even though some played the ‘requiem’ of this line of research more than 30 years ago (e.g., Blocker & Riedesel, 1978), many others, inspired by the Marxian notion of ‘class consciousness’ and Weberian idea of subjective interpretation of one’s social positions (e.g., Fantasia, 1995; Marsh, 2003; Wright, 1989), continued their research. More recently, inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s class theory, which differentiates forms of capital and interprets everyday practices of class distinctions, some have started formulating theories on class-based processes in which media production is embodied, and solidifies the class structure of a society (e.g., Anheier, Gerhards, & Romo, 1995; Couldry, 2003).

Different from Marx’s emphasis on economic dimension of class, Weber and Bourdieu both pointed out that social class/strata could be treated as a multi-dimensional concept. In a transitional society such as China where individuals face bewildering dislocation in a rapidly changing social structure, individuals may
encounter drastic disparities in their possession of different forms of capital (e.g., an unemployed manual laborer with a college degree in Chinese literature, a business executive with upbringing in a remote mountainous village and less than middle school education) and experience unsettling anxieties over how to find their position in the society. Such a situation makes it not only significant to study subjective social status, but also necessary to differentiate economic as well as cultural dimensions of individuals’ subjective social status.

A recent effort along these lines (Li et al., 2005) involved examining the distribution of subjective social status in China with survey data from a random sample collected in 2002. The researchers found a significant tendency of ‘downward shift.’ That is, compared with the distributional patterns of objective measures, the proportion of people perceiving themselves in the ‘middle stratum’ was significantly lower while the proportion of people perceiving themselves as in their ‘low stratum’ was especially higher. An earlier study (Liu, 2001) based on the survey data from a major mid-sized Chinese metropolis shows that this ‘downward shift’ might be limited to the dimensions of economic and power status; on social prestige, there was an opposite ‘upward shift.’ Since both empirical studies were conducted at least five years ago, we will examine the data that employed multiple measures of perceived status to address the following research question:

RQ1: What is the current distribution of subjective social status (including economic and cultural dimensions) among people in Shanghai?

New media adoption and subjective social status

An individual’s sense of social stratum belonging is not only a result of his/her objective social position but also influenced by the discursive construction by intellectuals and via mass media (Liu, 2002). Bourdieu’s (1986, 1989) class theory helps us to tie these two strains together. In Bourdieu’s view, the resources enabling individuals’ competition for social positions in the fields, the social space configured by patterned relations among structural positions, were known as capital. It is differentiable in forms, including economic (assets and income), social (relationship network), cultural (education, cultural heritage, dispositions, and taste), and symbolic (as the representations of legitimacy and prestige). In the fields, the daily practices of individual actors are either constrained by social structural configuration or produced by their practices guided by their habitus. Habitus is defined as the ‘common schemes of perception, conception and action’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 60), which is formed in the process of socialization within the social structure. Utilizing these concepts, Bourdieu argued that individuals’ social positions depend on the overall volume of capital that they possess, the relative weights of the different species of capital, and the transitional trajectory of capital (Bourdieu, 1989).

Following this logic, we can conceive new media as a form of capital that may be used in shaping individuals’ subjective social status. First, new media adoption requires the ownership of media resources such as equipment and connections, which are parts of individuals’ objective economic capital. Connection to new media also requires technical competence and cultural taste acquired via education; it also, as Rogers (1995) suggested, functions as a status symbol. Such a positive relationship between fashionable lifestyle and new media adoption has been supported by
empirical studies conducted in the Chinese context (e.g., Jin, 2002; Wei, 2006). New media thus can be a part of economic capital and its adoption requires and serves as cultural and symbolic capital.

Second, new media can be regarded as a form of capital because of their potentials in being transformed into other forms of capital, such as financial capital and social capital, upon their adoption and utilization. As a basic resource for people to perceive and participate in the social world, media feed the audience with conversational materials for developing their interpersonal network. Theoretical resources for this postulate include the ‘uses and gratifications’ tradition (McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972) and more recent research on how media may play a role the production of individuals’ social capital (e.g. Putnam, 2000; Shah, Kawak, & Holbert, 2001; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001).

And third, as Couldry (2003) postulates, media could be a form of ‘meta-capital’. Explicating this notion, he argues that media may exercise power over other forms of power by affecting the social space through legitimization of influential representations of and for understanding the social world. That is, media capital is a new ‘fundamental species of capital’ that works as a ‘trump card’ in all fields based on its high degree of exchangeability or liquidity (Couldry, 2003, pp. 670–671). Compared with traditional media, new media could supply its users with richer practical information and other types of resources, augmenting individuals’ structurally shaped chances to understand and participate in society. As Qiu (2009) has found in his empirical study of the working class in urban China, new media devices such as the Internet and mobile phone have played a big role in helping people of the lower strata in their education, job-hunting, and network building. In other words, the new media is helping these people to accumulate economic as well as social capital.

Thus, we argue that new media adoption can be treated as the first-level usage (i.e., a threshold to pass for developing different patterns of usage) of the media capital in shaping individuals’ subjective social status. Specifically, we hypothesize:

H1: Individuals’ adoption of new media (Internet and mobile phone) is positively related to their subjective social status.

New media use patterns and subjective social status

In the context of new media use, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus can be understood as a structured orientation in how individuals link a new communication technology to specific goals, tastes, attitudes, or expectations. Due to inequality of economic and cultural capital, as well as lasting experiences of socialization in stratified social structures, members of different social strata face unequal opportunities and possess unequal abilities to incorporate the new media resources into their everyday life. For example, some Internet users may always do one thing online such as playing cards or listening to music, while others can actively express themselves by posting on bbs or updating their own blogs. These two types of Internet usage have roots in the users’ different life trajectories and capitals in hand; they reflect and may perpetuate different senses of social strata belonging among the users. As Tajfel and Turner’s (1986) social identity theory (SIT) and Hecht’s (1993) communicative theory of identity suggest, one tends to define his or her identity through actual or symbolic affiliation with others who are perceived to share similar experiences, perceptions,
and values. From this point of view, similar media usage patterns can be regarded as an important source for people to experience such a sense of affiliation, and form social categorization and group distinctiveness, which all contribute to the formation of subjective social status. Therefore, we need to go beyond the first-level use of the new media and to capture more fully people’s new media use as it is embedded in their everyday life. We characterize such usage patterns beyond the threshold of usage as the second-level utilization of new media capital.

The conception of the first- and second-level new media usage also has its roots in the recent theoretical and empirical works on individual-technology relationships in the context of larger social structure. For example, Shah, McLeod, and Yoon (2001) argue that to fully understand the Internet’s impact on individuals’ daily life, it is necessary to know where, how, and what a person does with the Internet beyond the access and the amount of time spent online. Similarly, Howard, Rainie, and Jones (2001) point out that, as a fast-evolving technology, the Internet is not ‘monochromatic’ (p. 385); rather, it is a medium characterized by its diversity in usage purpose, time, site, and device. They also stress the importance of the history of Internet use. From a different entry point, Jung and his colleagues (Jung, Qiu, & Kim, 2001) adopt the ‘communication infrastructure’ framework (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei, 2001) to argue that the Internet should be treated as a part of the much larger communication action context that is constructed, maintained, and changed by actors’ communicative activities and the environments that enable or constrain the actors’ communicative actions. They developed a comprehensive measurement named ‘Internet Connectedness Index’ (ICI), which included computer use history, task scope, site scope, goal scope, and activity scope, among others, and found that the index was a stronger indicator of social strata classification than simple time of usage measure. Similarly, Peng and Zhu (2008) also suggest expanding the previous one-dimensional time measurement of the Internet use and propose a reflective model ‘Sophistication of Internet Use’ (SIU), in which they especially emphasize the importance of contextual diversity of Internet use.

Along these lines, we differentiate four dimensions of new media use patterns that may each have a unique influence on individuals’ sense of their social positions. The first is the history of Internet use, which can be regarded as a component of the new media capital since it captures not only the depth of experiences in converting other capitals into new media usage but also the accumulation of experiences and opportunities for developing more sophisticated usage. The second is participatory Internet use. The Internet as a new medium differs from traditional media in that it can serve as an open platform for ordinary users to express themselves. Those who actively contribute content online via electronic bulletin boards (bbs), online forums, blogs, SNS, and video websites usually have more online skills, more online experiences, more digital resources, and higher efficacy for online participation as well as offline social participation (Fuchs, 2007). The third is outdoor and mobile Internet use. This type of usage signifies users’ possession of mobile devices such as a mobile phone, PDA, and notebook computer with wireless connection, which are symbols of higher economic capital. It further signifies users’ more fashionable lifestyle that is made possible by their possession of such devices anywhere and anytime, which also empowers users with more opportunities for information access, self-promotion, and social participation. The fourth dimension of new media usage patterns is the diversity of mobile phone activities. Similar to the above logic, more
diverse mobile phone functions: (1) mean more expensive mobile phones, (2) are related to a more fashionable lifestyle, and (3) enable users to convert the new media resources into convenience and opportunities in their work and life.

Based on these arguments, we hypothesize:

H2: Individuals’ new media use patterns are related to their subjective social status such that

H2.1: their history of Internet use is positively related to their subjective social status;
H2.2: their participatory Internet use is positively related to their subjective social status;
H2.3: their mobile and outdoor Internet use is positively related to their subjective social status; and
H2.4: the diversity of their mobile phone activities is positively related to their subjective social status.

Using new media as an information source for perceiving reality

Besides the media capital concept, we may also follow the tradition of conceiving the media as a conduit of information and representation that may be necessary for individuals to form their perceptions of reality about social stratification. From Lippmann’s (1922) notion of ‘pseudo-environment’ to the media’s role in agenda setting (e.g., McCombs & Reynolds, 2002; McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and cultivation effects (e.g., Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002), theoretical formulations along this line all point to the important role of the media in people’s building their imaginations about the outside world. Following this logic, new media can also function as a source for individuals to form a picture of social stratification as well as the lives of their ‘reference groups’ (Merton, 1957), which will then influence people’s subjective social status by providing cues for a sense of ‘relative deprivation’ or ‘relative superiority.’ Following this logic, we included news consumption via different media as factors that influence individuals’ status perceptions.

However, two important factors prevent us from setting directional hypotheses. First, consuming Internet news regardless of content could be a form of cultural or symbolic capital for certain individuals to utilize, resulting in their sense of higher subjective social status; its possible consequence is to augment the potential effects of the reality-depiction content in the news. Second, the lack of systematic content analysis of the news on social stratification leaves open a question as to whether Internet news produces ‘relative deprivation’ or ‘relative superiority’ for those who use online news frequently. The same can be said about the impact of traditional media news. Therefore, we will examine the data to explore the following research question:

RQ2: What is the relationship between individuals’ news consumption (including Internet news, newspaper, television, and radio news) and their subjective social status?

In addition, either as a element of the media capital or as a source of information on social reality, the overseas media (including overseas satellite television and overseas radio) may have their distinct influence on individuals’ subjective social status.
through their usage. Similarly, using the overseas media may indicate a higher cultural status as well as a fashionable lifestyle, but there is a lack of systematic content analysis of overseas reports on social stratification in China. As a result, we do not have an adequate foundation to form any hypothesis on overseas media use and subjective social status. Instead, we propose the following research question:

**RQ3:** What is the relationship between individuals’ overseas media use (including overseas satellite television and overseas radio) and their subjective social status?

**Methods**

**Data**

The data analyzed came from the merged sample from both Form A and B of the Shanghai Survey \( n = 2910 \). The results about the effects of new media use patterns on the subjective social status were based on those who had access to Internet \( n = 1410 \) or owned mobile phones \( n = 2280 \).

**Measures**

**Subjective social status**

A set of nine questions was used to assess how respondents rank themselves in the stratified society on a 7-point scale ranging from the lowest stratum to the highest stratum. The nine areas covered by these questions were financial income, power, occupation, social prestige, social circle, educational level, consumption level, cultural taste, and life distinction. Factor analysis of nine items resulted in two factors: *subjective economic status* (including income, power, occupation, social prestige, and social circle) and *subjective cultural status* (including the other remaining four items). Two indices were created by averaging the scores of the items loaded on each of the two factors \( \alpha = .89 \) for subjective economic status and \( \alpha = .90 \) for cultural status). Since the two indices were highly correlated \( r = .68, p < .001 \), respondents’ scores on all nine items were also averaged into a single index of overall subjective social status \( \alpha = .92 \).

**New media adoption and use**

Those who used the Internet at least one day a week were operated as Internet adopters \( n = 1410, 48\% \). For the Internet users, we calculated their history of Internet use based on the beginning year of using the Internet. The resulting measure showed the history of Internet use varied from less than a year to 15 years \( M = 5.74, SD = 3.18 \). Two questions asked about how often (1 = rarely, 5 = very often) the users used the Internet in public places and in mobile states (such as walking or taking public transportations). They were averaged into an index of *mobile and outdoor Internet use* \( \alpha = .76 \). The index of participatory Internet use was based on average scores of four items on frequencies (1 = never and 5 = often) of engaging in online activities for the purpose of self-expression or online interactivity. These items were: browsing bbs postings and blogs, participating in discussions on bbs, updating one’s blogs, and using one’s social network accounts \( \alpha = .78 \).
The sample has 78.4% \((n = 2280)\) mobile phone users. They were asked the questions concerning the frequency \((1 = \text{never} \text{ and} \ 5 = \text{often})\) of engaging in each of 11 different types of mobile phone use activities, including making calls, sending SMS, using the Internet, reading mobile-phone newspapers, listening to radio, playing games, taking photos, etc. Responses to each question were coded 1 for ‘yes’ and 0 for ‘never.’ By adding all the 11 items, the variable of diversity of mobile phone activities was created \((M = 4.43, \ SD = 2.70)\).

**News consumption and overseas media use**

For newspapers, TV, and radio, three questions were asked about how often \((1 = \text{rarely}, \ 5 = \text{very often})\) respondents used each for local, national, and international news. For each medium, the three news consumption measures were averaged into an index of news use \((\alpha = .71 \text{ for newspaper news use, } \alpha = .74 \text{ for TV news use, and } \alpha = .81 \text{ for radio news use})\). Internet news use was measured by asking the Internet users how often \((1 = \text{never}, \ 5 = \text{very often})\) they browsed news pages of popular portals. Overseas media use was measured by two questions about frequencies \((1 = \text{rarely}, \ 5 = \text{often})\) of watching overseas TV and listening to overseas radio.

**Socio-demographic variables**

This study utilized ten socio-demographic questions as controlled variables, including age, sex, educational level (years of formal schooling), marital status (never married vs. others), Communist Party membership, having an official cadre status on the state hierarchy or not, currently working or not, monthly individual income (log transformed), occupational prestige (SEI score), and home size (squared meters).

**Results**

**The distributions of subjective social status**

We start our analyses by examining the distributions of all the subjective social status items and the indices created. The results (Table 1) show that most respondents perceived themselves at and below the mid-point of the status hierarchy. One-sample \(t\)-test shows that the mean scores of all nine subjective social status items were significantly below the midpoint of the 7-point scale, which echoes the ‘downward shift’ characteristic presented in the literature (Li et al., 2005; Liu, 2001). Among them the lowest was power \((M = 2.41)\) and the highest one was cultural taste \((M = 3.49)\).

By averaging the scores of the five items from income to social circle, and the four items from educational level to life class, indices of subjective economic status and cultural status were created. Paired sample \(t\)-test on the mean scores of these two indices shows that the respondents perceived their cultural status significantly higher than their economic status \((M = 3.36 \text{ vs. } M = 2.87, \ t = 26.03, \ p < .001)\), proving the value of differentiating these two dimensions of subjective social status for the subsequent analyses. Since the two indices were highly correlated \((r = .68, \ p < .001)\),
New media adoption and subjective social status

Before conducting multiple regressions, we first examined if the new media adopters and non-adopters would differ significantly in status perceptions. The independent-sample t-test results showed that compared to non-users, Internet users did perceive themselves as having a higher ($p < .001$) economic status (3.05 vs. 2.68), cultural status (3.78 vs. 2.96), as well as overall subjective social status (3.36 vs. 3.20). At the same time, the mobile phone users also perceived themselves as having a higher economic (2.95 vs. 2.49), cultural (3.52 vs. 2.76), and overall social status (3.20 vs. 2.60).

Since new media adoption closely related to real social status, we then estimated a series of linear OLS regressions to determine if new media adoption would have unique impact on subjective social status beyond the socio-demographic variables. Table 2 shows the result. First, we observe that socio-demographic variables contributed a lot to the formation of subjective social status. Among them, individual income was the strongest predictor of economic as well as overall subjective social status. Education had a most powerful impact on subjective cultural status, also a significant positive effect on overall subjective social status, but no significant impact on subjective economic status. Females had a sense of higher status than males, and singles perceived themselves as having higher status than the married. Being a cadre was positively related to a sense of higher economic, cultural, and overall social status.

The results show that after controlling for socio-demographic variables and other variables, Internet adopters still perceive themselves as having a higher cultural status ($\beta = .042$, $p < .05$), but such a difference was no longer significant concerning the economic or overall social status. At the same time, the adoption of mobile phones
had a powerful positive relationship with both dimensions of subjective social status (for economic status, $\beta = .056$, $p < .01$; for cultural status, $\beta = .082$, $p < .001$), making it also a strong predictor of overall subjective social status ($\beta = .074$, $p < .001$). These findings generally support H1. That is, new media adoption had independent effects on the formation of individuals’ subjective social status, while the influence patterns varied somewhat for Internet and mobile phone. In comparison, mobile phone adoption had a greater power in predicting individuals’ subjective social status, especially for cultural and overall status.

Results in Table 2 also provided some answers to RQ2 and RQ3 on the independent effects of news consumption and overseas media usage. Among traditional media news consumption variables, more newspaper news reading and radio news listening were related to a sense of higher cultural and overall status; TV

| Table 2. Predicting subjective social status (OLS regression model, whole sample). |
|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
|                    | Subjective economic status | Subjective cultural status | Overall subjective social status |
| **Socio-demographics** |                   |                      |                                 |
| Sex (female)       | .129***            | .127***             | .142***                          |
| Age                | .035               | .049                | .040                             |
| Levels of education| .027               | .360***             | .191***                          |
| Occupational prestige | .152***          | .073***             | .123***                          |
| Individual monthly income | .224***       | .125***             | .193***                          |
| Never married      | .078**             | .099***             | .081***                          |
| Having a job       | .063**             | -.047*              | .017                             |
| Party member       | .035               | .016                | .026                             |
| Cadre status       | .080***            | .056**              | .081***                          |
| Size of dwelling unit | .089***         | .061***             | .081***                          |
| $R^2$ (%)          | 17.2***            | 34.2***             | 26.1***                          |
| **New media adoption** |                   |                      |                                 |
| Internet user      | -.043              | .042*               | -.008                            |
| Mobile phone user  | .056**             | .082***             | .074***                          |
| $\Delta R^2$ (%)   | 0.3**              | 0.9***              | 0.5***                           |
| **News consumption** |                   |                      |                                 |
| Newspaper news use | .006               | .051**              | .042*                            |
| TV news use        | .012               | .023                | .014                             |
| Radio news use     | .034               | .052**              | .046*                            |
| $\Delta R^2$ (%)   | 0.1                | 0.6***              | 0.4**                            |
| **Overseas media use** |                 |                      |                                 |
| Overseas TV use    | .065**             | .054**              | .074***                          |
| Overseas radio use | .039               | .000                | .029                             |
| $\Delta R^2$ (%)   | 0.9***             | 0.4***              | 1.0***                           |
| **Total $R^2$ (%)** | 18.5               | 36.1                | 28.0                             |
| $N$                | 2424               | 2771                | 2390                             |

Note: Cell entries are standardized regression coefficients from the final equation. Cases with missing values were handled via listwise deletion.
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.
news use was not a predictor of subjective social status. Overseas TV watching was positively correlated with individuals’ sense of their own economic, cultural, and overall status; listening to overseas radio had no significant influence.

New media use patterns and subjective social status

Table 3 shows the relationship between new media use patterns and subjective social status among those who have passed the threshold of new media adoption. First, as observed in Table 2, socio-demographic variables were strong predictors of subjective social status, among which individual income and education were still the two most powerful predictors. Besides objective social status, new media use patterns had independent contributions to the formation of subjective social status. For Internet users, the longer they had used the Internet, the higher they felt their cultural ($\beta = .098, p < .001$) and overall status ($\beta = .070, p < .05$) in society to be, lending support to H2.1. In this block, participatory Internet use was the strongest predictor of subjective economic, cultural, and overall status among Internet users ($\beta$ at .114, .120, and .122, respectively, all significant at $p < .001$). H2.2 is thus fully supported. Outdoor and mobile Internet use was significantly related to the subjective cultural status of Internet users ($\beta = .052, p < .05$), partially supporting H2.3. For mobile phone users, the regression estimates show that the more diverse their mobile phone activities were, the higher they perceived their economic, cultural, and overall status to be ($\beta$ at .100, .122, and .107, respectively, all significant at $p < .001$). H2.4 is thus also strongly supported.

Internet news consumption was significantly correlated with the subjective cultural status for both Internet and mobile phone users, but it had no significant relationship with individuals’ sense of economic and overall status. Among traditional news use, newspaper news reading was still a strong predictor of subjective social status, while TV news watching and radio news listening had no significant influence on them. Once passing the threshold of new media adoption, watching overseas TV was related to perceiving a higher status across the three subjective status measures among mobile phone users; such effects were also present for economic and overall subjective status among Internet users.

Conclusion and discussion

This study aims to explore the relationship between new media use and subjective social status in post-reform China. As scholars have noted, strata differentiation is becoming a basic characteristic of transitional societies including China. Examining the ‘digital divide’ and structural distributions of ‘communicative potentials’ (Pan, Yan, Jing, & Zheng, 2011), scholars have emphasized that the distribution of new media resources is deeply embedded in the existing social structure and its pattern largely reproduces existing socio-economic inequalities. Nevertheless, few studies have discussed the influence of this kind of inequality on the formation of subjective strata consciousness, let alone with empirical data.

Our study owes its significance primarily to the fact that it examines the connection between new media use and subjective social status with data from a large-scale random sample survey. Addressing RQ1, it describes the current situation of individuals’ subjective social status by differentiating economic and cultural
Table 3. Predicting subjective social status (OLS regression model on new media users).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Internet users</th>
<th>Mobile phone users</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subjective economic status</td>
<td>Subjective cultural status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socio-demographics</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.117***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>.126*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Levels of education</td>
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<td>.030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual monthly income</td>
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<td>.105***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>.062</td>
<td>.115***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a job</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>-.062*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party member</td>
<td>.035</td>
<td>.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cadre status</td>
<td>.129***</td>
<td>.075**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of dwelling unit</td>
<td>.070**</td>
<td>.094***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R</strong>² (%)</td>
<td>21.4***</td>
<td>26.1***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New media use</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of internet use</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td>.098***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile and outdoor internet use</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td>.052*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory internet use</td>
<td>.114**</td>
<td>.120***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of mobile phone activities</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ΔR</strong>² (%)</td>
<td>1.8***</td>
<td>2.9***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>News consumption</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper news use</td>
<td>.087**</td>
<td>.069*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV news use</td>
<td>-.005</td>
<td>-.020</td>
</tr>
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Table 3 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Internet users</th>
<th>Mobile phone users</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subjective economic status</td>
<td>Subjective cultural status</td>
<td>Overall subjective social status</td>
<td>Subjective economic status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio news use</td>
<td>.014</td>
<td>.043</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet news use</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>.059*</td>
<td>.043</td>
<td>-.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2$ (%)</td>
<td>0.7*</td>
<td>0.9**</td>
<td>1.2***</td>
<td>0.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overseas media use</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overseas TV use</td>
<td>.070*</td>
<td>.047</td>
<td>.085**</td>
<td>.061**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overseas radio use</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>-.018</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.026</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2$ (%)</td>
<td>0.9**</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.8**</td>
<td>0.8***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total $R^2$ (%)</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1235</td>
<td>1359</td>
<td>1224</td>
<td>1971</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Note: Cell entries are standardized regression coefficients from the final equation. Cases with missing values were handled via listwise deletion. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.
dimensions. The results show that the ‘downward shift’ tendency revealed in the earlier sociological studies is clearly visible. Going beyond this point, this study also finds that the subjective economic status is usually perceived to be lower than the cultural dimension, rendering a clue for the possibility that the sense of ‘relative deprivation’ in the economic domain is stronger than in socio-cultural domains. The potential discrepancy between continued improvement of people’s actual standards of living and the tendency of ‘downward shift’ in their subjective social status calls for more systematic explorations of the reasons behind it, among them, media possession and usage could be an important factor.

Our results largely support H1, which states that the adoption of new media has independent impact on the formation of subjective social status. Mobile phone holding or not is a strong predictor for subjective social status as well as its two dimensions of perceived status. This suggests that in China nowadays, the mobile phone is a symbol of economic, cultural, and overall social status. The adoption of the Internet also has a similar effect on the subjective cultural status, but such an effect is not extended to the economic dimension or the overall status after controlling for objective social status variables. The results may reflect the fact that the measurement of Internet adoption is not directly related to the possession of computers or other devices for Internet connection since we only ask the respondents if they go online, making the Internet an element of media capital too strongly ingrained in one’s possession of socio-economic resources to be an independent influence factor; another possible explanation is that the sense of ‘relative deprivation’ aroused by not connecting to the Internet is not as strong as that taken by having no mobile phone, since the latter has higher penetration.

Going beyond the dichotomous measure of new media adoption, our results show that Internet use history (H2.1), mobile and outdoor use (H2.2), and participatory Internet use (H2.3) are all significantly related to Internet users’ subjective social status, particularly its cultural dimension. The range of mobile phone functions utilized (H2.4) is also a powerful predictor for subjective social status of mobile phone users. All four findings support the arguments that once past the threshold of new media adoption, the usage patterns or ‘how to use’ will continue to influence individuals’ sense of social status. These factors actually refer to the width and depth of new media usage, which means that the accumulation of experience, the usage of multiple functions especially those related to expression and participation, and the ability as well as opportunity to integrate new media resources into one’s daily life will make users perceive themselves as having higher status.

Addressing RQ2 and RQ3, this study finds Internet news consumption has a significant independent impact on individuals’ subjective cultural status. At the same time, more newspaper news reading and overseas TV watching are both related to the sense of a higher social status. As mentioned earlier, the mechanisms behind these specific findings beg more empirical studies. Systematic content analysis on how media represent social stratification is necessary; in contrast, ethnography and focus groups with individuals are also needed to trace paths of potential influences from media content exposure to the formation of subjective social status. Such evidence will help elaborate our findings based on exposure behavior measures only.

Together, these empirical findings show that the expansion of new media resources not only is a result of social stratification, as the theory of ‘digital divide’ or ‘communicative potentials’ has postulated, but also has the ability to reproduce
the strata structure by influencing individuals’ subjective social status. In a rapidly changing society such as China, how to perceive one’s own social status or the fitness in a particular class designation is part of the social formation process in which structural changes get congealed in individuals’ belief systems. Thus this study contributes to our understanding of the dynamic process of the mutual constitution between media diversification and social stratification. From this point of view, this study also sheds light on the possibility of empirically testing the argument in the tradition of political economy of communication that media is constituting and perpetuating class or social strata in China’s transitional context (e.g., Zhao, 2008).

This study also owes its significance to its potential contribution to new media effects research by conceptualizing new media as a form of capital. At the first level, new media adoption is intertwined with possession and utilization of economic, cultural, and symbolic capitals. At the second level, emanated from individuals’ habitus, new media use patterns are understood in a broad scope to reflect people’s multi-faceted relationship with information technologies in their everyday life. Along this line, the social effects of new media can be conceived as a result of distributional inequality of new media capital at the macro level as well as at the micro level of individuals’ habitus-based choices and utilizations. Since subjective social status has been empirically shown to have independent impact on the expressive behaviors at least in the Chinese context (Pan, Jing, Yan, & Zheng, 2010), the conception of new media capital should be helpful in studies about the influence of new media, not only on individuals’ social strata consciousness, but also on a variety of social attitude and behavior variables, such as opinion expression, social participation, as well as civic activism, among others.

Besides its theoretical implication, the findings on the relationship between new media use and the reproduction of social inequality also have important social implications at the present historical juncture when China continues to grow her economic power and increase her social diversity. It forces scholars, policy-makers, and all people who care about the problem of social stratification and its implications for social as well as political stability to seriously consider the reciprocal effects of social inequality and configuration of media infrastructure, and to devise distributions of new media resources that would more compatible with the values of justice and equality. Such social actions are needed at both the state policy level and at the levels of social practices that design and utilize the media. For example, the government, scholars, and NGOs should be encouraged to help the disadvantaged to empower themselves by not only making media resources more available and accessible but also developing competence and efficacy to utilize new media and resources; the news media, including news websites, should be encouraged to supply realistic depictions of the social stratification and the lives of different social strata in the contemporary society so that individuals understand the true extent and nature of social inequality in China’s change and can, potentially, act to mitigate such inequality.

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Notes on contributor
Baohua Zhou is an associate professor of the School of Journalism at Fudan University in Shanghai, PRC. He is also a research fellow of the Center for Information and Communication Studies and assistant director of the Public Opinion Survey Center at Fudan University.

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