Communication, Society and Media
ISSN 2576-5388 (Print) ISSN 2576-5396 (Online)
Vol. 9, No. 1, 2026
www.scholink.org/ojs/index.php/csm

Original Paper

The Impact of Internet Censorship on National Identity in China

Long Yanru[1*]

[1] School of Culture and Creativity, Beijing Normal-Hong Kong Baptist University, Zhuhai, China

[*] Long Yanru, School of Culture and Creativity, Beijing Normal-Hong Kong Baptist University, Zhuhai, China

Received: October 16, 2026 Accepted: October 28, 2026 Online Published: November 8, 2026

doi:10.22158/csm.v9n1p215 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/csm.v9n1p215

Abstract

This paper looks at the effect of internet censorship on Chinese people's sense of national identity by exploring the links between citizens' level of awareness of censorship, their experience of it and their level of support for it and their sense of national identity. Drawing on social identity theory, the paper tests five hypotheses using an online questionnaire of 199 respondents. All five hypotheses are supported: greater awareness of and greater exposure to censorship are both associated with lower levels of support for censorship and lower levels of national identity, whereas support for censorship is positively related to national identity. The results demonstrate the complexity of the relationship between the stated aims of internet censorship and the way it is actually perceived by citizens. From a bottom-up perspective, the paper goes beyond existing research on the regulatory effects of censorship to look at its potential impact on national identity. Finally, this paper suggests that policy makers should take into account the actual experiences and attitudes of citizens when designing and implementing internet censorship policies.

Keywords

internet censorship, national identity, social identity theory, public opinion, China

1. Introduction

In China, the strict Internet censorship system is a significant tool for governing society and maintaining stability in today's era of rapid and widespread information dissemination. In a broad sense, China's Internet censorship includes three levels of laws and regulations, social pressure, and technology, among which technology is the most efficient and pervasive component (Palfrey et al., 2009; Wang & Gloria, 2015). Therefore, this paper mainly discusses the technological level, which restricts users to access, publish, and exchange information related to pornography, violence, or potentially politically sensitive content, through technical means such as IP blocking, content censoring,

and keyword filtering (Xu & Albert, 2014; Wang & Gloria, 2015).

Some scholars have investigated the technological means of China's Internet censorship (Palfrey et al., 2009; Xu & Albert, 2014; Wang & Gloria, 2015), while others have analyzed its role in maintaining social stability and shaping mainstream ideology (Xu & Albert, 2014; Kou, Semaan & Nardi, 2017; Rodrigues & Xu, 2020). However, most studies focus too much on the top-down control effect of the system, ignoring citizens' autonomy and subjective feelings. Even the articles that examine individuals' perceptions and attitudes towards the censorship do not discuss their further impacts. Accordingly, this paper will explore the influence of Internet censorship in China from citizens' points of view on their national identity, so as to fill the above research gap and help the practitioners to polish relevant policies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 National Identity

National identity covers political, social, cultural, and various other perspectives, and scholars from different disciplines have established diverse sub-themes based on their respective research backgrounds. As this paper aims to investigate citizens' national identity within the whole group of Chinese, social identity theory, which examines identity from a group perspective (Verkyuten, 2021), will be employed as the theoretical framework. According to this theory, individuals categorize themselves and others into different groups based on multiple criteria to construct their social identity, with nationality serving as a significant criterion (Tajfel, 1978; Brown, 2000; Hecht et al., 2005).

Based on social identity theory, national identity is defined as a subjective and internalized sense of belonging to a nation (Huddy, 2001, 2003). This sense of belonging is affected by political factors connected to the country's political authority, institutions, and policies, and cultural factors including language, customs, and shared values and memories (Smith, 2010; Zhan & Wang, 2014). The cultural and political factors of a nation are intertwined and inseparable, ultimately internalized by individuals as their national identity. This identity binds the nation into a distinctive whole and is essential for maintaining social unity and stability in modern countries (Zhou & Li, 2016; Yang, 2023). Considering the growing impact of globalization on nation-states, it is more important than ever to explore the concept of national identity and the factors that influence it (Yang, 2023).

2.2 Studies on Internet Censorship in China

Studies point out that the technological mechanism of Internet censorship can effectively safeguard public security and social order. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese government significantly prevented the spread of fake news and rumors by controlling the Internet, combating the epidemic more effectively (Rodrigues & Xu, 2020). Other scholars stated that the purpose of this system is to present a positive national image to citizens, to guide ideology, and to avoid

confrontation between people and authority (Xu & Albert, 2014; Kou, Semaan & Nardi, 2017).

However, research on China's Internet censorship primarily emphasizes its top-down control functions, ignoring citizens' autonomy. To fill this gap, this study will examine individuals' autonomy within the censorship, focusing on their perceptions and attitudes towards the system from a bottom-up perspective.

2.3 Internet Censorship from People's Perspective

2.3.1 People's Support of Internet Censorship

Studies have addressed people's support for China's Internet censorship. Some scholars claim that due to the worry about being negatively affected by harmful information on the Internet, most Chinese netizens may support Internet censorship (Fallows, 2008). Liang's (2007) survey provides evidence for this statement, with 85% of Chinese supporting the government's Internet control. However, Wang and Gloria (2015) argued that these statement and result are based on an untested premise—Chinese citizens are aware of the existence of Internet censorship, but in reality, those who know and those who do not know the system may have different attitudes towards it. Therefore, it is significant to explore people's awareness of the system.

2.3.2 People's Awareness and Experience of Internet Censorship

Wang and Gloria (2015) defined awareness of Internet censorship as 'Whether or not users are aware of the existence of Internet censorship in China' and reported that 69.5% of the respondents acknowledged the existence of it in China. However, another study shows that 89% of Chinese netizens believe that they can freely access all information on the websites, suggesting that these users might not be aware of the Internet censorship (GIUS, 2012, as cited in Wang & Gloria, 2015). Accordingly, the awareness of the censorship among Chinese is not a certain premise; it may vary depending on factors such as era, environment, and the methods used by the researchers. Furthermore, Wang and Gloria (2015) indicated that users may support the abstract idea of Internet regulation, but once they actually perceive it, they become less supportive of it. Therefore, it is still valuable to investigate Chinese netizens' awareness of Internet censorship and the relationship between this awareness and their support towards the system.

One qualitative research suggests that Internet users react differently when presented with the notion of Internet censorship and actually experiencing it (Shklovski & Kotamraju, 2011). Thus, users' direct experience of the censorship should be addressed separately from their awareness. Wang and Gloria (2015) calculated by questionnaire that 84.8% of the people who were aware of censorship had personally experienced censorship, and the more frequently they experienced censorship, the more likely they were to have negative views on it.

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Users' awareness of China's Internet censorship negatively affects their support of it.

H2: Users' frequency of experiencing China's Internet censorship negatively affects their support of it.

Nevertheless, although the above studies discuss citizens' perceptions of the censorship, they remain at the level of people's evaluation of the policy itself and do not further expand its impact on people's sense at the national level.

2.3.3 People's Support, Awareness, and Experience of Internet Censorship and National Identity

Easton's (1957) theory of the political system suggests that citizens' support for policies is a key factor in the overall stability of the political system, as this support can convert into a positive identity with the nation. However, there has been very little research on the relationship between citizens' attitudes towards the specific policy of China's Internet censorship and their national identity. As one of the important and nationally distinctive policies since China entered the Internet era, it is significant to explore the impact of people's support for Internet censorship on their national identity. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Users' support of China's Internet censorship positively affects their national identity.

There are virtually no articles that directly focus on the correlations between people's awareness and experience of Internet censorship, and national identity. However, some other studies have hinted at their relevance. An interviewee expressed that under the Internet censorship system, he could only see information deliberately manipulated by the government, leading him to regard mainland China as a cage (Kou, Semaan & Nardi, 2017). The existence of Internet censorship has caused him a negative opinion towards the government, and even of mainland China as a whole, which may have diminished his national identity. Wang and Gloria (2015) mentioned that Chinese people's experience of Internet censorship may influence their political views which is included in one of the dimensions of national identity.

Based on these studies, the last two hypotheses are listed.

H4: Users' awareness of China's Internet censorship negatively affects their national identity.

H5: Users' frequency of experiencing China's Internet censorship negatively affects their national identity.

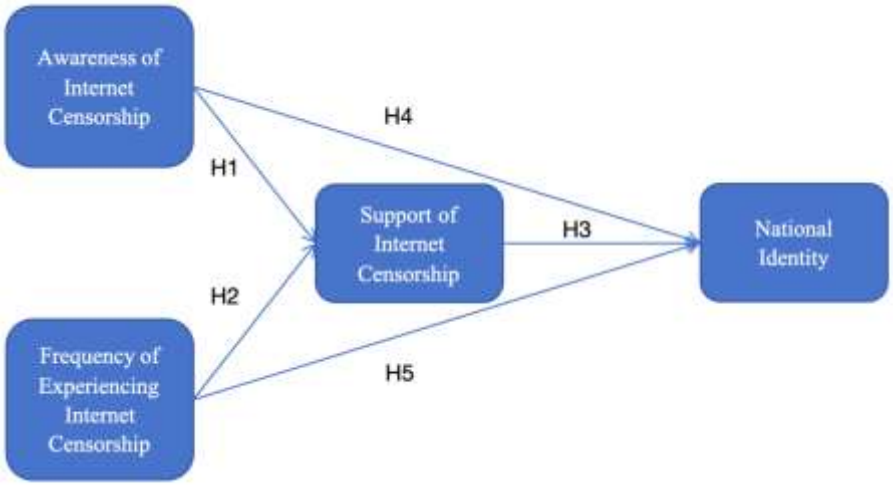


Figure 1. Model of Hypotheses

3. Method

3.1 Sampling

This study carried out a convenient sampling using an Internet survey through an online questionnaire to test the above hypotheses proposed, and the questionnaire was distributed on WeChat, a Chinese social media platform.

3.2 Measurement

The questionnaire was divided into variable and demographic measurement parts. All questions are based on the scales developed by other scholars which have already been tested for reliability and validity. For user's awareness, frequency of experiencing, and support of Internet censorship, single questions based on the description of the technological level of Internet Censorship will be asked respectively following Wang and Gloria's (2015) study, and the language of the questions was translated more in line with Chinese context. For national identity, Li and Liu's (2018) scale, of which the original language is Chinese, was adopted with only one reverse question being deleted to ensure reliability. The question about awareness is along with prepared answers of Yes or No, while all other questions used the form of a 5-level Likert Scale (See Table 1).

Table 1. Conceptualizations and Operationalizations of Measured Variables

Variables	Conceptualization	Operationalization
Awareness of Internet Censorship	Whether or not users are aware of the existence of Internet censorship in China (Wang & Gloria, 2015).	Are you aware that Internet censorship exists in China?

Frequency of Experiencing Internet Censorship	The frequency of users' experiencing the Internet censorship in China (Wang & Gloria, 2015).	How often do you experience Internet censorship personally?
Support of Internet Censorship	The degree of users' support of the Internet censorship in China (Wang & Gloria, 2015).	Generally speaking, I support China's Internet censorship.
National Identity	Based on social identity theory, national identity is defined as a subjective and internalized confirmation of membership in the political community of nation (Huddy, 2001, 2003).	当别人批评中国人的时候，我觉得像是在批评我自己。 我经常为国家取得的成就而感到自豪。 如果有下辈子，我还是愿意做中国人。 不管中国发生什么事情，即使有机会离开，我也会留在中国。

4. Result

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

	Full sample	
	n	%
Gender		
Male	76	38.2
Female	123	61.8
Age		
≤17	2	1.0
18-34	115	57.8
35-49	45	22.6
50-64	35	17.6
≥65	2	1.0

Note. N = 199

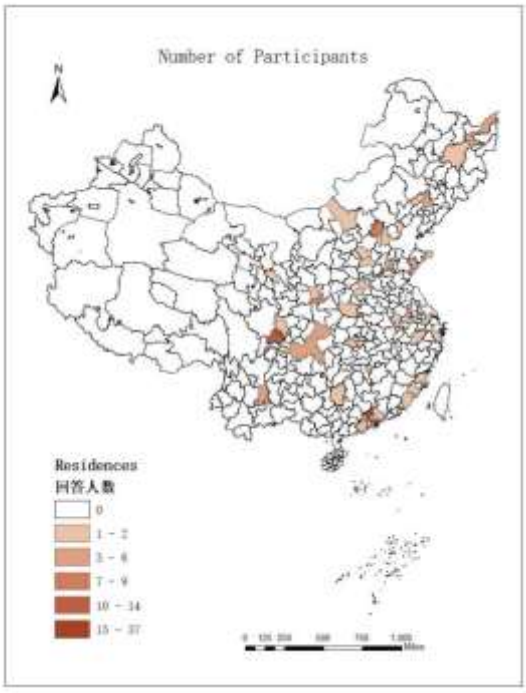


Figure 2. Number of Participants in Different Cities

Table 3. The Awareness of Internet Censorship

	Full sample	
	n	%
Answer		
Yes	164	82.4
No	35	17.6

Note. N = 199

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Other Three Variables

	M	SD
Frequency of Experiencing Internet Censorship	2.07	1.27
Support of Internet censorship	3.85	1.17
National Identity	4.16	.88

A total of 199 valid samples were obtained. According to the data analysis, the participants consist of 76 males and 123 females, accounting for 38.2 percent and 61.8 percent respectively. The number of people and proportions of different age groups from the largest to the smallest are 18-34 (n = 115, 57.8%), 35-49 (n＝45, 22.6%), 50-64 (n＝35, 17.6%), and ≤ 17 (n = 2, 1%) and ≥ 65 (n＝2, 1%)

respectively. In terms of the regional distribution, more respondents are found in Guangdong and Sichuan provinces due to the researcher's personal background.

Participants being aware of the existence of Internet censorship are dominant, taking up 82.4%. For other three variables, users' frequency of experiencing Internet censorship (M = 2.09, SD = 1.27) is generally low, while their evaluations on the support of Internet censorship (M = 3.85, SD = 1.17) and national identity (M = 4.16, SD = 0.88) are relatively high.

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

4.2.1 Reliability

To achieve the confirmation of the variable National Identity with multiple items, a reliability analysis is conducted. According to the result, the Cronbach's Alpha is 0.838. $\alpha \geq 0.8$, so the internal consistency of the items is good. Therefore, the variable National Identity can be calculated.

4.2.2 Regression

To test the hypotheses, the answers Yes and No of the awareness of Internet censorship were represented by 2 and 1 respectively, and regression tests were conducted by SPSS, with the results presented below.

Table 5. Awareness, Frequency of Experiencing, and Support of Internet Censorship

	b	SE B	β	t	p
Awareness of Internet Censorship	-.460	.216	-.150	-2.130	.034
Frequency of Experiencing Internet Censorship	-.200	.064	-.216	-3.106	.002

According to the chart, for H1 "Users' awareness of Internet censorship in China negatively affects their support of it", b = -0.460, t = -2.130, $p < 0.05$. When support of Internet censorship increases by 1, awareness of it increases by -0.460. Therefore, H1 is supported. For H2 "Users' frequency of experiencing Internet censorship in China negatively affects their support of it", b = -0.200, t = -3.106, $p < 0.05$. When support of Internet censorship increases by 1, frequency of experiencing Internet censorship increases by -0.200, so H2 is supported.

Table 6. Awareness, Frequency of Experiencing, and Support of Internet Censorship, and National Identity

	b	SE B	β	t	p
Awareness of Internet censorship	-.322	.162	-.140	-1.987	.048
Frequency of experiencing Internet censorship	-.162	.048	-.234	-3.385	.001
Support of Internet censorship	.454	.042	.606	10.696	.000

For H3 "Users' support of Internet censorship in China positively affects their national identity", b = 0.454, t = 10.696, $p < 0.05$. When national identity increases by 1, support of Internet censorship increases by 0.454. Therefore, H3 is supported. For H4 "Users' awareness of Internet censorship in China negatively affects their national identity", b = -.322, t = -1.987, $p < 0.05$. When national identity increases by 1, awareness of Internet censorship by -0.322, so H4 is supported. For H5 "Users' frequency of experiencing Internet censorship in China negatively affects their national identity", b = -0.162, t = -3.385, $p < 0.05$. When national identity increases by 1, frequency of experiencing Internet censorship increases by -0.162, thus H5 is supported.

5. Discussion

Through the data analysis of 199 valid responses, all five hypotheses have been validated. The study firstly proves that users who are aware of or have more personal experience with the censorship are less likely to support it, which is consistent with Wang and Gloria's (2015) article. Previous scholars mainly focus on the management and monitory effect of Internet censorship in China (Rodrigues & Xu, 2020; Kou, Semaan & Nardi, 2017; Xu & Albert, 2014), while this finding suggests the importance of exploring this system from people's viewpoints. Differing from Wang and Gloria's (2015) research, in which 69.5% of participants are aware of Internet censorship in China, this study found this proportion to be more than 80%, indicating that it is an inevitable trend that more Chinese notice the censorship with the popularization of the Internet. Other than that, the above three people's psychological factors about Internet censorship are connected with a higher scale namely national identity, which is hardly discussed by other researchers. Of them, support for internet censorship in China is confirmed to serve to strengthen people's sense of national identity, though this is counteracted to some extent as people's awareness of or exposure to the censorship increases.

The findings demonstrate a complicated negotiation between the stated purpose of the censorship system and its actual effect as perceived by individuals. On the one hand, the Chinese Internet censorship system uses technology to achieve its aims of maintaining social stability and promoting ideology in order to foster a sense of national identity among citizens. On the other hand, the top down control is constrained by the fact that the perception and evaluation of the system by individuals themselves also has an effect on their sense of national identity and indeed on national stability from below, and can at times be in direct opposition to the official intention. To put it another way, when users are aware of the censorship and/or are frequently subject to it in their online activities, their level of support for the system is likely to be reduced. This awareness, this experience and the resulting negative evaluation will in turn have a negative impact on their sense of national identity and can therefore be a potential threat to national unity. In an age of globalization and regional instability, the importance of reinforcing internal cohesion as a means of dealing with external threats is only going to

increase. Hence policy makers need to look not just at the direct effect of the Internet system itself but also at the extent to which the system is actually implemented from the point of view of citizens. In particular, where it is now almost impossible to prevent an ever increasing number of people from becoming aware of Internet censorship, greater emphasis should be placed on improving the content of the censorship policies rather than simply on achieving the "seamless embeddedness" of the system (Wang & Gloria, 2015).

In summary, the study investigates the link between internet censorship in China and national identity by looking at how people's awareness of censorship, how often they are exposed to it and their attitude to the system relates to their sense of national identity. Through the data analysis of 199 samples from a questionnaire, all five hypotheses were supported, proving the negative correlations between users' awareness and experiencing frequency of Internet censorship and their support of it and Chinese national identity, and the positive impact of people's support of the system on their national identity. Theoretically, these findings reveal the bottom-up effectiveness of China's Internet censorship and fill the gap between the censorship and people's national identity. Practically, this research suggests that practitioners should improve relevant policies from citizens' perspective.

Despite the fruitful data, the following limitations of this study should be addressed. First, the sample size of this research is small, and the respondents' percentages in terms of gender, age, and region are imbalanced. To make the sample more representative, further studies reaching more participants can be conducted. Second, the research did not discuss the differentiation between groups with disparate demographic or psychological features on their awareness, experience, and support of Internet censorship and national identity. Future researchers can explore other antecedents that may influence these variables, like people's age, region, and educational background. Third, this study only investigated the influence of the technological dimension of China's Internet censorship. More relevant research focusing on the differences in individuals' perceptions and attitudes towards different levels and regulations of the censorship should be carried out.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Dr. Shuang Wu for her teaching in the course China's Global Partnerships for Shared Prosperity at Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College (BNBU), which inspired the development of this paper.

References

Brown, R. (2000). Social identity theory: Past achievements, current problems, and future challenges. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 30*(6), 745-778. https://doi.org/10.1002/1099-0992(200011/12)30:6%3C745::AID-EJSP24%3E3.0.CO;2-O

Easton, D. (1957). An approach to the analysis of political systems. *World Politics*, *9*(3), 383-400. https://doi.org/10.2307/2008920

Fallows, D. (2008, March 27). Most Chinese say they approve of government internet control. *Pew Internet & American Life Project*. Retrieved from https://www.markle.org/publications/most-chinese-say-they-approve-government-internet-control/

Guo, L. (2007). *Surveying internet usage and its impact in seven Chinese cities.* Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Retrieved from https://www.policyarchive.org/handle/10207/16013

Hecht, M. L., Warren, J. R., Jung, E., & Krieger, J. L. (2005). A communication theory of identity: Development, theoretical perspective, and future directions. In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Theorizing about intercultural communication* (pp. 257-278). Sage.

Huddy, L. (2001). From social to political identity: A critical examination of social identity theory. *Political Psychology*, *22*(1), 127-156. https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895X.00230

Huddy, L. (2003). Group identity and political cohesion. In D. O. Sears, L. Huddy, & R. Jervis (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of political psychology* (pp. 511-558). Oxford University Press.

Kou, Y., Semaan, B., & Nardi, B. (2017). A Confucian look at internet censorship in China. In J. O'Neill, G. Dalvi, A. Joshi, D. K. Balkrishan, M. Winckler, & R. Bernhaupt (Eds.), *Human-computer interaction—INTERACT 2017: 16th IFIP TC 13 international conference, Mumbai, India, September 25-29, 2017, proceedings, Part I* (pp. 377–398). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-67744-6_25

Li, C., & Liu, S. (2018). Influencing factors of national identity and its generational characteristic differences. *Social Science Digest*, (7), 57-59.

Palfrey, J., Roberts, H., & Zuckerman, E. (2009). *2007 circumvention landscape report: Methods, uses, and tools*. Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Harvard University. Retrieved from https://cyber.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.harvard.edu/files/2007_Circumvention_Landscape.pdf

Rodrigues, U. M., & Xu, J. (2020). Regulation of COVID-19 fake news infodemic in China and India. *Media International Australia*, *177*(1), 125-131. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X20948202

Shklovski, I., & Kotamraju, N. P. (2011). Online contribution practices in countries that engage in internet blocking and censorship. In D. Tan, G. Fitzpatrick, C. Gutwin, B. Begole, & W. Kellogg (Eds.), *CHI '11: Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1109-1118). Association for Computing Machinery. https://doi.org/10.1145/1978942.1979110

Smith, A. D. (2010). *Nationalism: Theory, ideology, history* (Y. Ye, Trans.). Shanghai Century Publishing Group (Original work published 2001).

Tajfel, H. (1978). Social categorization, social identity, and social comparisons. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), *Differentiation between social groups: Studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 61-76). Academic Press.

Verkuyten, M. (2021). Group identity and ingroup bias: The social identity approach. *Human Development*, *65*(5-6), 311-324. https://doi.org/10.1159/000519089

Xu, B., & Albert, E. (2014). *Media censorship in China*. Council on Foreign Relations, 25, 243.

Yang, B. J. (2023). *Influencing factors of national identity among college students in the context of COVID-19* [Master's thesis, Hangzhou Dianzi University]. China National Knowledge Infrastructure. Retrieved from https://link.cnki.net/doi/10.27075/d.cnki.ghzdc.2023.001667

Zhan, X., Wang, S., & Qu, Y. (2014). Cultural identity in the perspective of political identity. *Chinese Social Science*, *35*(2), 155-173.

Zhang, S., Li, H., & Liu, F. (2012). A review of identity research. *Psychological Research*.

Zhou, G., & Li, H. (2016). Territorial identity: The foundation of national identity—Constructing a more complete theory of national identity. *Chinese Social Science*, (7), 46-64, 205.