

# Different Types of Internet use and the Perceived Impact of the Internet on Social Mobility: Results from a National Survey in China



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# Introduction



Since China became a market-oriented economy, Chinese class stratification has transformed from a politicized social mobility regime under Mao to an open, evolving class system ([Bian, 2002](#)).



economic development → a generally rising trend of total and upward vertical mobility in Chinese society ([Chen & Qin, 2014](#); [Chen, 2013](#); [Li, 2020](#); [Narayan et al., 2018](#))



a vertical decline in social mobility ([Zhou & Xie, 2019](#)).



optimistic perceptions of  
social mobility among Chinese  
people ([Chen et al., 2018](#); [Du  
et al., 2021](#))

less optimistic views  
(compared to family  
background, higher  
education plays a less  
important part ([Mok &  
Wu, 2016](#)) )



The ways in which Chinese people are using the Internet and how the Internet has influenced Chinese Internet users are rarely studied ([Herold & de Seta, 2015](#)). A small body of literature studies the effect of Internet use in China, and the conclusions are mixed.

positively ([Lu & Kandilov, 2021](#)) or negatively affect subjective well-being ([Nie et al., 2017](#)).



The economic impact of Internet use is larger in the upper distributions of household income and expenditure ([Ma et al., 2020](#)). However, the use of mobile Internet platforms can empower villagers ([Ye & Yang, 2020](#)).





No quantitative studies have explored the relationships between Internet use and the perceived impact of the Internet on social mobility in the Chinese setting.

**Objective:** contributing to research in this area by testing whether some types of Internet use are associated with the perceived impact of the Internet on social mobility



# Literature review - the Impact of Internet use



Internet use does not necessarily lead to beneficial outcomes (the third-level digital divide).



Empirical research regarding the third-level digital divide is scarce, particularly the relationship between online activities and outcomes, and the results are somewhat mixed ([Scheerder et al., 2017](#)).



# The relationship between online activities and outcomes



Significant positive associations between Internet use and earnings growth, indicating that Internet use could potentially improve upward class mobility ([DiMaggio & Bonikowski, 2008](#)).



Information technology skills do not necessarily promote upward job mobility for lower-income people ([Tufekci, 2012](#)).



# the role of the Internet in social mobility is an open question

## **Maintaining or improving class position**

Internet use has a positive effect on social class mobility when controlling for age, gender, education, health, and previous social class membership ([Eynon et al., 2018](#)).

## **Does not mitigate the structural inequality**

While using the Internet for learning is positively related to occupational mobility, it does not mitigate the preexisting structural inequality of occupational mobility because disadvantaged groups are more excluded from such use in the first place ([Zhang, 2021](#)).



# Some Internet activities are more beneficial



## **Capital-enhancing Internet use**

Including obtaining news and opinions, sharing political opinions with others, visiting news websites, employing search engines to find information, and participating in social networking sites

## **Recreational Internet use**

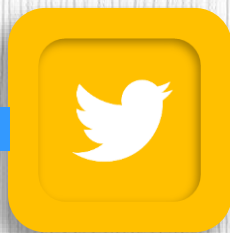
Playing video games and watching videos



# Method



The Chinese General Social Survey in 2017- a nationally representative continuous survey project



A stratified multistage probability proportional to size (PPS) sampling design and covers 31 mainland provinces



2430 respondents

# Measures

	Variable	Code	Mean
Dependent variable	Perceived impact of Internet on social mobility	continuous variable (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)	3.151
	Social use		3.212
	Online actions		1.880
Independent variables	Entertainment use	continuous variable	
	Information seeking	(1 = never, 5 = always)	3.310
	Economic use		3.520
Control variables	Gender	0 = male, 1 = female	2.870
	Age	continuous variable (years)	0.505
	Employment	0 = unemployed, 1 = employed	42.104
	Health status	continuous variable (1 = very good, 5 = poor)	0.650
	Subjective social status	continuous variable (1 = lowest, 10 = highest)	3.227
	Internet experience	continuous variable (years)	4.350
	Internet skills	continuous variable (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree)	9.331
			3.877



# Statistical analysis

Predictor (perceived impact of Internet on social mobility)	Model 1 $\beta$	Model 2 $\beta$
Gender	-0.011	-0.007
Age	0.096**	0.107***
Employment	0.036	0.038
Health	0.059*	0.052*
Subjective social status	0.102***	0.096***
Internet experience	-0.063*	-0.076**
Internet skills	0.034	-0.043
Social use		0.019
<b>Online actions</b>		<b>0.148***</b>
Entertaining use		-0.017
<b>Information seeking</b>		<b>0.089**</b>
Economic use		-0.013
Adjusted R2 (%)	2.1	4.5
Incremental R2 (%)		2.6***

1. Personal characteristics become less important
2. The negative relationship between Internet experience and the perceived impact of Internet use on social mobility
3. Internet skills have no effect
4. Online actions and information seeking are positively associated with the perceived impact of the Internet on social mobility

# Discussion - results

- ❑ People who are older, have better health status and have higher social status are more likely to believe that Internet use can lead to social mobility.
- ❑ Recent research reveals that personal characteristics may become less important, if not insignificant, to achieving the corresponding outcomes after accounting for engagement in Internet use ([Van Deursen, 2020](#)).

Our results partially confirm this point.





❑ Differentiated use of the Internet reflects known offline economic, social, and cultural inequalities and that this differentiated usage also contributes to reproducing existing societal inequalities ([Goldfarb & Prince, 2008](#); [Gutiérrez & Gamboa, 2010](#); [Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008](#); [Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014](#); [Van Deursen et al., 2015](#); [Witte & Mannon, 2010](#); [Zillien & Hargittai, 2009](#)).

❑ The negative relationship between Internet experience and the perceived impact of Internet use on social mobility found in this study seems to indirectly support this line of argument.



❑ Interestingly, Internet skills are found to have no effect on the perceived impact of social mobility.

does not disprove existing studies - **positive links between digital skills and capital-enhancing Internet use** ([Correa, 2016](#); [Hargittai & Dobransky, 2017](#); [Martínez-Cantos, 2017](#); [Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2010](#)).

It implies that Internet use and Internet outcomes might have different sets of antecedents.





❑ These capital-enhancing online activities (online actions and information seeking) encourage people to obtain information and protect their rights, which can translate to political opportunities in the offline world (Stoycheff et al., 2016).

❑ No significant relation between social use, entertainment use and economic use and the perceived impact of the Internet on social mobility

It is possible that social use and entertainment use are assumed to be less capital enhancing (Van Deursen & Helsper, 2017; Van Deursen et al., 2015).

❑ indicating that **whether Internet use has a positive effect on the perceived impact of the Internet on social mobility depends on what people do online.**

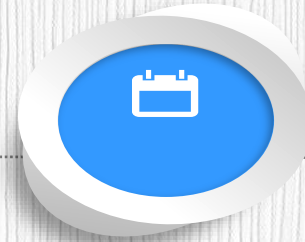
# Discussion - Limitations and Further Research



1.do not consider Internet nonusers  
examining the differences in perceived social mobility among Internet nonusers and users



2.Internet usage cultural differences  
cross-cultural studies of the perceived impact of the Internet on social mobility can be further explored



3.Measures about the perceived impact of the Internet on social mobility using objective measures to further verify these conclusions





THANKS FOR YOUR TIME