

# Chinese Research Perspectives on Society

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# Chinese Research Perspectives on Society, Volume 5

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# Survey and Analysis Report on the Online Behaviors of China's Private Entrepreneurs 2015

*Lu Peng\* and Fan Xiaoguang\*\**

## Abstract

Based on the data from the 11th National Private Entrepreneur Survey, this paper provides an exploratory analysis of the online behaviors of private entrepreneurs and their impact on media trust. This series survey touches upon this topic for the first time in more than 20 years since it was initiated. This research attempts to answer the following four questions: (1) How many private entrepreneurs are netizens? Which private entrepreneurs surf the Internet? Which private entrepreneurs do not surf the Internet? (2) What about the frequency of using the Internet and the behavioural characteristics? (3) Which online platforms are used by entrepreneurs to express their views? (4) What impact do the online behaviors exert on their trust in different media? This paper will answer these questions and then offer relevant comments and policy suggestions for the academic circles and decision-makers.

## Keywords

private entrepreneur – online behavior – media trust

From the early Internet economy to the present Internet Plus, the Internet, which is prevalent in various aspects of economic life, has become an indispensable word for discussing the topics concerning industries and the people's livelihood. A great deal of research, special columns, comments and works touch upon the relations between entrepreneurs' enterprises and Internet

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Plus in the Internet era; however, what do entrepreneurs do when using the Internet? What about their preferences in surfing the Internet? Some theoretical articles have discussed this topic, but only a few cases of academic research answer these questions through empirical data, as a quantitative analysis based on cross-country samples is almost unavailable. This research is designed to fill this gap.

According to the latest data from the 11th National Private Entrepreneur Survey conducted by the United Front Work Department of the CPC Central Committee, the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce, the State Administration of Industry and Commerce and other departments, the use of the Internet by entrepreneurs was surveyed in the national questionnaire for the first time. The survey was initiated in 1992 and is carried out once every two years; it covers all provincial administrative units on the Chinese Mainland. This survey was started in 2014, data cleaning was conducted in 2015, and 6,144 effective samples were obtained.

## 1 Who are Entrepreneur Netizens?

Private entrepreneurs who surfed the Internet made up a high proportion; a large number of private entrepreneurs were netizens. As shown in Figure 18.1, 87.6% of the 6,144 respondents said that they surfed the Internet, 11% said that they did not surf the Internet, and 1.4% did not give any answers. The proportion of the surveyed private entrepreneurs who surfed the Internet was much higher than China's Internet penetration (46.9%, June, 2014).<sup>1</sup> According to relevant data released by the State Administration of Industry and Commerce, in late 2013, there were 24,857,000 investors in China's private economy. According to the proportion shown in this survey, there were 21.77 million entrepreneur netizens nationwide.<sup>2</sup>

1 According to the data from the 34th Survey Report prepared by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of June, 2014, there were 632 million netizens in China, with 14.42 million new netizens emerging within a half year; the Internet penetration was 46.9%, up 1.1 percentage points over late 2013; rural and urban netizens accounted for 28.2% and 71.8% of all netizens, respectively.

2 According to the State Administration of Industry and Commerce, as of late 2014, there were 30 million investors in China's private economy. Given that 87.6% of entrepreneurs were netizens, there were 26.28 million entrepreneur netizens. However, this survey was carried out during the period March–April, 2014, thus we adopted the data available as of late 2013 released by the State Administration of Industry and Commerce.

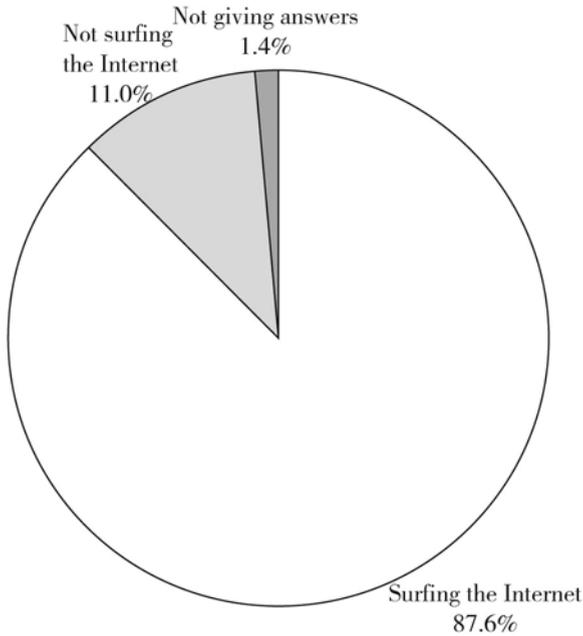


FIGURE 18.1 Whether the surveyed entrepreneurs surfed the Internet

The younger the surveyed entrepreneurs were, the higher the proportion of those surfing the Internet. A total of 97% of the surveyed entrepreneurs at and under the age of 30 surfed the Internet, while 68% of the surveyed entrepreneurs above the age of 60 surfed the Internet, showing a large gap between the two groups. The proportions of the surveyed entrepreneurs at all other age groups who surfed the Internet were higher than 80%—the surveyed entrepreneurs in the 31–40 age group who surfed the Internet accounted for 96.2%, while those in the 41–50 and 51–60 age groups who surfed the Internet accounted for 90.8% and 83.2%, respectively.

In order to further analyze the factors significantly related to Internet surfing by entrepreneurs, we developed one binary logistic regression model. As shown in the results, such factors as age, university degree, political status and location exerted a significant impact on Internet surfing by private entrepreneurs, while enterprise type had less impact and the impact of gender was not significant.

TABLE 18.1 The proportions of the entrepreneurs in different age groups who surfed the Internet

Unit: %

		Age group				
		30 years old and below	31–40 years old	41–50 years old	51–60 years old	60 years old and above
Do you surf the Internet?	Yes	97.0	96.2	90.8	83.2	68.0
	No	3.0	3.8	9.2	16.8	32.0
<i>N</i>		230	1224	2637	1572	281

## 2 What Do Entrepreneurs Do When Using the Internet?

Obtaining information was the most important online behavior of entrepreneur netizens, followed by social contact, business activity, political and social activity, while those involved in leisure and entertainment activity made up the lowest proportion. Specifically, among many online behaviors of entrepreneurs, those who got social news information online made up the highest proportion (70.6%), followed by those who browsed professional websites relating to finance, economics or their industries (53.6%), those who often made social contacts online (contacted friends online) (45.8%), those who often had business-related behaviors (contacted customers, promoted products or dealt with other business-related matters online) (40.3%) and those who had behaviors relating to political and social issues (expressed views and made comments on current affairs or social events) (only 14.8%). Interestingly, only 13.5% of the surveyed entrepreneurs said that they often enjoyed leisure and entertainment online (e.g. online video, online music, online games). This may be because some entrepreneurs had a very limited amount of time to enjoy entertainment, or some entrepreneurs mainly enjoyed entertainment offline and mostly participated in the activities for the sake of public relations, while online leisure and entertainment activities were more individual.

We assigned different points to the frequency of entrepreneurs' online behaviors, with 4 points - 1 point assigned to "often", "sometimes", "seldom" and "never" in the order of decreasing points. We figured out the mean value of the frequency at which different types of entrepreneurs participated in relevant

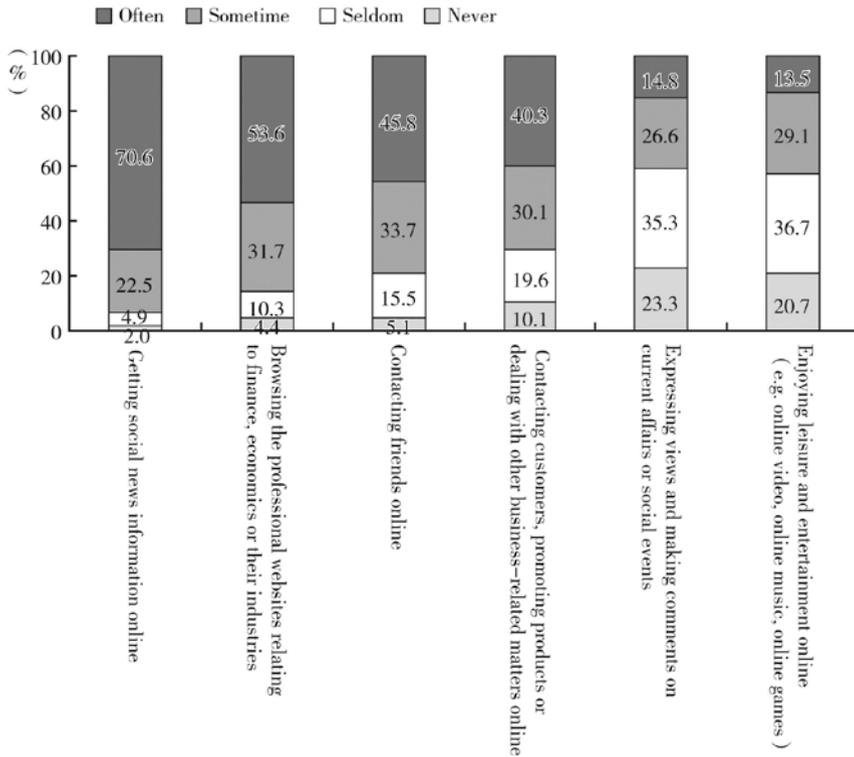


FIGURE 18.2 The frequency of entrepreneurs' online behaviors

activities. A higher mean value means higher frequency of participating in relevant activities. Male and female entrepreneurs were different in the level of the activity of online behaviors. Female entrepreneurs were more active than male entrepreneurs in social activity, voicing their opinions on political and social issues, making business contacts, leisure and entertainment. Although social activity (contacting friends online) and business contacts (contacting customers, promoting products or dealing with other business-related matters online) were online activities, they involved public relations, which was consistent with the impression that generally women were more adept at social contact. The online leisure and entertainment activities in which female entrepreneurs participated were apparently more frequent than their male counterparts; this may be because male entrepreneurs participated more in offline leisure and entertainment activities. Female entrepreneurs made comments on political and social issues more frequently than their male counterparts—although the gap was not obvious, the reasons deserve to be

TABLE 18.2 The frequency of the online behavior of male and female entrepreneurs (mean value)

Frequency of online behavior	Male	Female
Contacting friends online	3.19	3.29
Getting social news information online	3.63	3.52
Expressing views and making comments on current affairs or social events	2.32	2.39
Browsing the professional websites relating to finance, economics or their industries	3.37	3.23
Contacting customers, promoting products or dealing with other business-related matters online	2.99	3.08
Enjoying leisure and entertainment online (e.g. online video, online music, online games)	2.33	2.49
N	4617	849

further explored. On the contrary, male entrepreneurs were more active than their female counterparts in getting social news information/business information and browsing the websites relating to finance and economics, which presented the characteristics of access to information and business learning and showed more obvious introversion.

Generally, the younger entrepreneurs participated in online activities more frequently. The only exception consists in “contacting customers, promoting products or dealing with other business-related matters online”. The highest mean value of frequency occurred in the group in the 31–40 age group (3.41), followed by the group of 41–50-year-olds (3.35) and the group at and below the age of 30 (3.34). Moreover, it should be noted that there were great differences in the gap among age groups and among behaviors. The gap among age groups in contacting friends online was the smallest; the gap in mean value between the group at and below the age of 30 (3.64) and the group above the age of 60 (3.48) was only 0.16; the gap between the oldest group and the youngest group in getting social information was 0.71, while that in making comments on current affairs was 0.66, that in browsing professional websites was 0.51 and that in participating in leisure and entertainment activities was 0.81, the largest one. As shown, the gap among different groups in entrepreneurs’ online behavior was very noticeable.

Generally, the entrepreneurs with a higher educational level committed online behaviors more frequently. They were very sound in getting news infor-

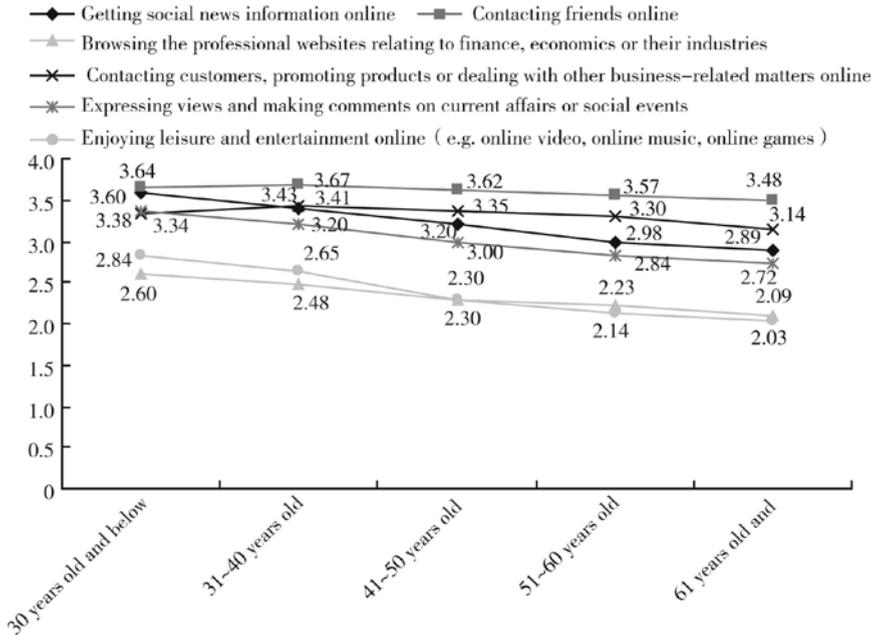


FIGURE 18.3 The frequency of online behavior committed by entrepreneurs of different groups (mean value)

mation, carrying out business learning and online social contacts. However, the respondents at the level of junior middle school made comments on current affairs or social events online less frequently than those at and below the level of primary school, but at higher levels, the higher the educational level, the higher the frequency of the activity. There was great fluctuation in participating in online leisure and entertainment activities.

Interestingly, in all types, entrepreneurs with experience in studying or working abroad saw the same impact on online behavior: the entrepreneurs with overseas experience participated in events more frequently. This includes not only learning, business and social activities, but also leisure and entertainment activities. In other words, the entrepreneurs returning from overseas preferred to learn and play online. Furthermore, the respondents once studying or working abroad also acted more frequently in consulting and social activities, while their participation in leisure and entertainment activities was at the lowest level.

Large entrepreneurs dedicated more energy to learning, with the least to entertainment. Specifically, the entrepreneurs at a larger asset scale got social information and conducted professional learning online more frequently.

They were very sound in both types of activities. For online social contacts, the frequency involving the entrepreneurs with an asset scale of 10 million yuan—100 million yuan (mean value 3.12) was slightly lower than that involving those with an asset scale above 100 million yuan (mean value 3.13), but the gap was very small, which may show no practical significance. Regarding making social comments, the entrepreneurs with an asset scale above 100 million yuan were most cautious, while other groups were governed by the following regular pattern: the larger the asset scale, the more frequent the activities. The frequency of contacting customers, promoting products and carrying out other business activities online fluctuated greatly along with different asset scales, and the entrepreneurs with an asset scale above 100 million yuan who participated in these activities made up the lowest proportion. This may be because these activities of large enterprises required less participation of entrepreneurs. Most interestingly, the frequency at which entrepreneurs participated in online leisure and entertainment activities decreased with an increasing asset scale. The mean value of the entrepreneurs with an asset scale below 1 million yuan was 2.5, while that of the entrepreneurs with an asset scale of 1 million yuan—10 million yuan, 10 million yuan—100 million yuan, above 100 million yuan was 2.33, 2.23 and 2.09, respectively. Given that entrepreneurs enjoyed leisure and entertainment to the lowest extent among main online activities, while large entrepreneurs dedicated more energy to getting news and business information online, the impact of the asset scale was greater.

In order to further test the above findings, we examined the online behavior of entrepreneurs with a different number of employees. Like the asset scale, the number of employees is also an important indicator for measuring enterprise scale; both indicators are highly correlated, but they were not completely equivalent—the enterprises with the largest asset scale may not have the largest number of employees. According to relevant data, the substantive change was not great; the entrepreneurs with a larger number of employees (at a larger enterprise scale) got news information and conducted professional activities online more frequently, while they participated in online leisure and entertainment activities less frequently. There was a slight fluctuation in several other events among some groups, but the overall trend remained unchanged.

Generally, the online behavior of entrepreneurs in the eastern region was more frequent, but the gap with the central, western and northeastern regions<sup>3</sup> was not large (as detailed in Figure 18.7).

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3 The traditional regional division is based on the methodology of dividing China into the eastern, central and western regions adopted by the National Bureau of Statistics. However,

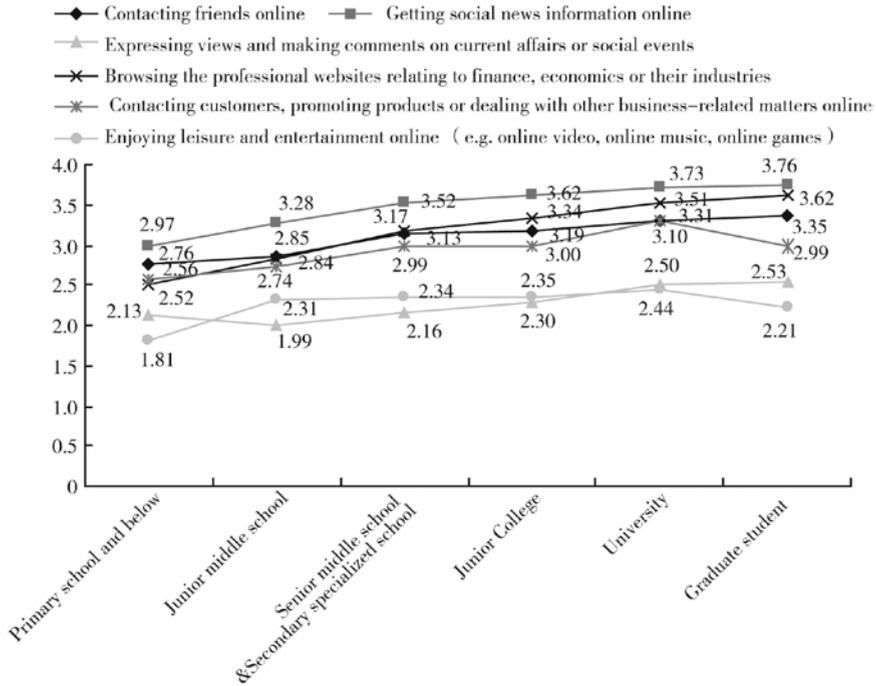


FIGURE 18.4 The frequency of the online behavior of entrepreneurs at different educational levels (mean value)

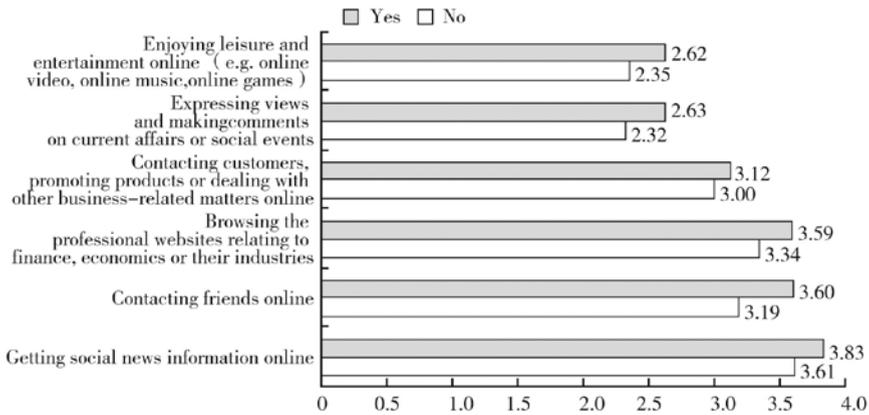


FIGURE 18.5 The impact of studying abroad on the online behavior of entrepreneurs

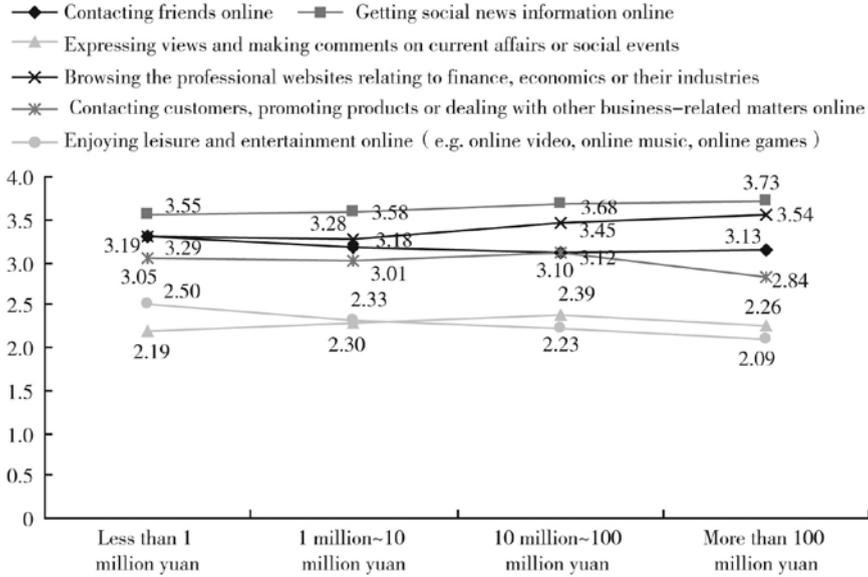


FIGURE 18.6 The frequency of online behavior of entrepreneurs at different asset scales (mean value)

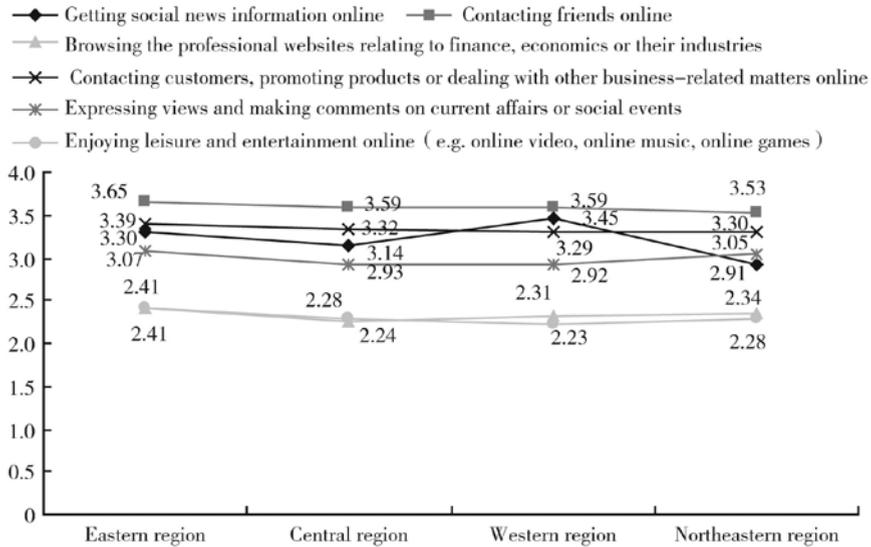


FIGURE 18.7 The frequency of the online behavior of entrepreneurs in different regions

### 3 Which Online Platforms are Used by Entrepreneurs to Express Their Views?

Among WeChat, blog, microblog and BBS, WeChat is the platform most used by entrepreneurs to express views online. A total of 30.3% of the surveyed entrepreneurs often used the Circle of Friends and group chat, two functions of WeChat, to express views; only 9.3% often used blog and microblog; only 6.4% often used BBSs. Even if the proportion of those in the case of “sometimes used” is included, that preference remains unchanged. The surveyed entrepreneurs who often and sometimes used WeChat, blog/microblog and BBS to express their views accounted for 62.3%, 32.9% and 26.4% of all the respondents, respectively. Obviously, the rising WeChat has greatly reduced the people’s dependence on such early popular products as BBS, blog, even microblog; WeChat has, to some extent, become currently the most popular social software. Moreover, the Circle of Friends and group chat in WeChat ensure better privacy, which may also be the reason why entrepreneurs preferred to use this platform to express views.

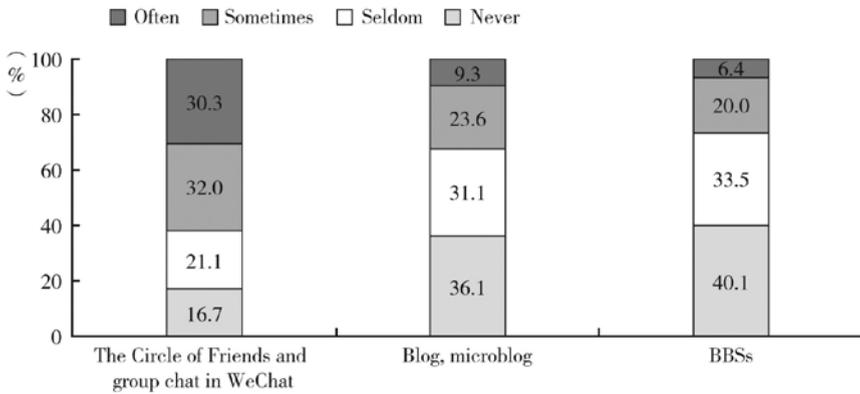


FIGURE 18.8 The entrepreneurs’ preference of platform for expressing their views online

in recent years, the National Bureau of Statistics has adopted the methodology of dividing China into the eastern, central, western and northeastern regions on some statistical occasions. The latter methodology is as follows: the eastern region includes Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Shandong, Guangdong and Hainan; the central region includes Shanxi, Anhui, Jiangxi, Henan, Hubei and Hunan; the western region includes Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Chongqing, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Tibet, Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia and Xinjiang; the northeastern region includes Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang.

TABLE 18.3 The preference of platform of female and male entrepreneurs for expressing their views online (mean value)

	Male	Female
Expressing views through the Circle of Friends and group chat in WeChat	2.71	3.00
Expressing views through blog/microblog	2.03	2.21
Expressing views through various BBSS	1.92	1.99
N	4577	856

Like the frequency of entrepreneurs' online behavior, we also assigned points to the frequencies at which the respondents used WeChat, microblog and BBS to express views, and obtained the mean value. The higher the mean value, the higher the frequency of the activity. On these three platforms, female entrepreneurs expressed views more frequently than their male counterparts. On WeChat, the mean value of female entrepreneurs was 3, while that of their male counterparts was 2.71. On microblog/blog, the mean values were 2.21 and 2.03. On BBS, the gap was small, it was 1.99 and 1.92. This finding was consistent with our previous finding that female entrepreneurs more often commented on current affairs and social events online than their male counterparts.

The preference of platform of entrepreneurs in different age groups was very noticeable, and the trend of differences was very sound. It was more likely that the younger respondents expressed views through WeChat, blog/microblog, BBS. Attention should be paid to the gap in mean value between the youngest group, at and below the age of 30, and the oldest group, above the age of 60. The gap in the above three platforms was 1.02, 0.95 and 0.61, respectively. If we compare the gap with the age gap among the previous online behavior frequencies, we can find that the gap was larger than that in online behaviors. Furthermore, interestingly, the more avant-garde the platforms (e.g. WeChat), the greater the impact of age gap. This may be because the younger groups were more prone to using more avant-garde platforms, thus widening the gap.

The surveyed entrepreneurs with a higher educational level expressed views on social events through various platforms more frequently. This trend was very sound in each of WeChat, blog/microblog and BBS, and the gap in each group among different educational levels was relatively salient. Only the groups at the undergraduate and graduate levels showed a relatively small gap;

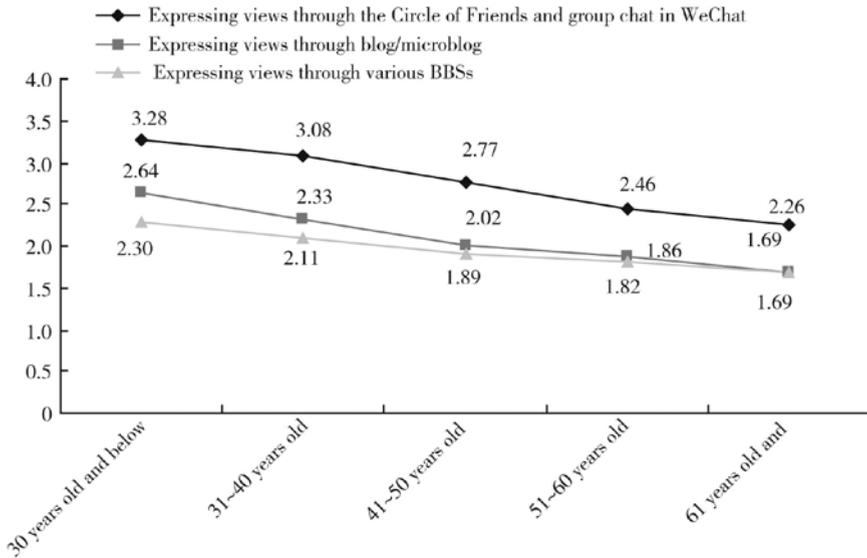


FIGURE 18.9 The preference of platform of entrepreneurs in different age groups for expressing their views online

in other words, the gap between the groups at the undergraduate and graduate levels was not as large as that between them and the entrepreneurs below the undergraduate level; this also proves that the undergraduate level may be an important differentiating indicator. In addition, various platforms ranked in the entrepreneurs' preference as follows: WeChat was far ahead, while the gap between microblog/blog and BBS was small, especially among the respondents at lower educational levels.

The entrepreneurs once studying or working overseas expressed views on various platforms more frequently, and there was an obvious gap with the control group. Given our previous finding that all online behavior of the entrepreneurs with overseas experience was more frequent, they were active in the Internet world.

The entrepreneurs with a larger asset scale expressed views on various platforms less frequently. The mean value of the entrepreneurs with an asset scale below 1 million yuan who expressed views on WeChat was 2.78; the mean value decreased with the increasing asset scale; when the asset scale exceeded 100 million yuan, the mean value decreased to 2.51. Moreover, as we mentioned above, the entrepreneurs with a larger asset scale got news information and conducted business learning more frequently, while they participated in leisure

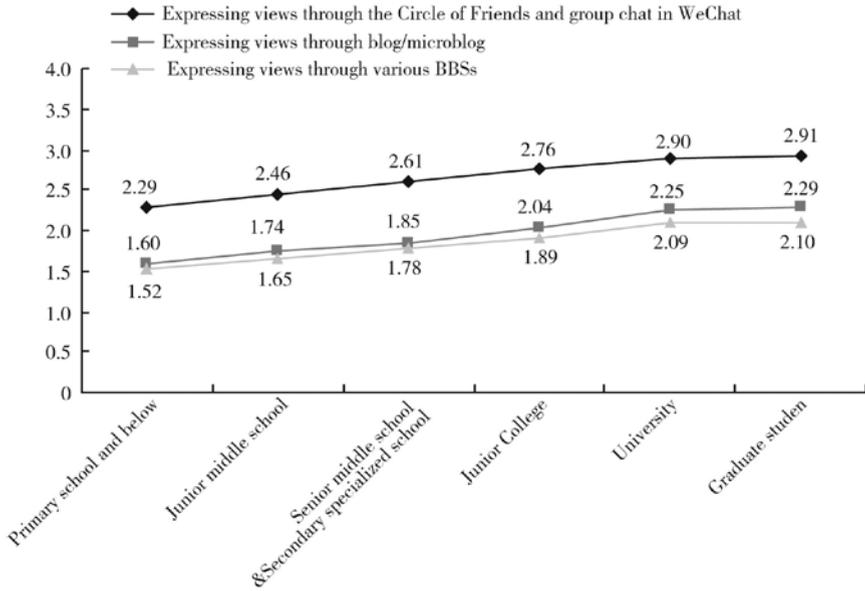


FIGURE 18.10 The preference of platform of entrepreneurs at different educational levels for expressing their views online

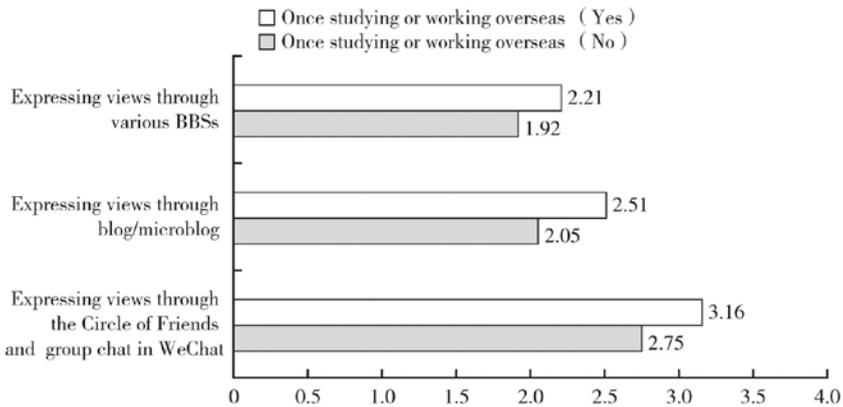


FIGURE 18.11 The impact of studying overseas on entrepreneurs' preference of platform for expressing their views online

and entertainment activities less frequently. Large entrepreneurs preferred to use the Internet to learn something, they did not like to enjoy entertainment and express their views online, while the preference of small entrepreneurs was the opposite.

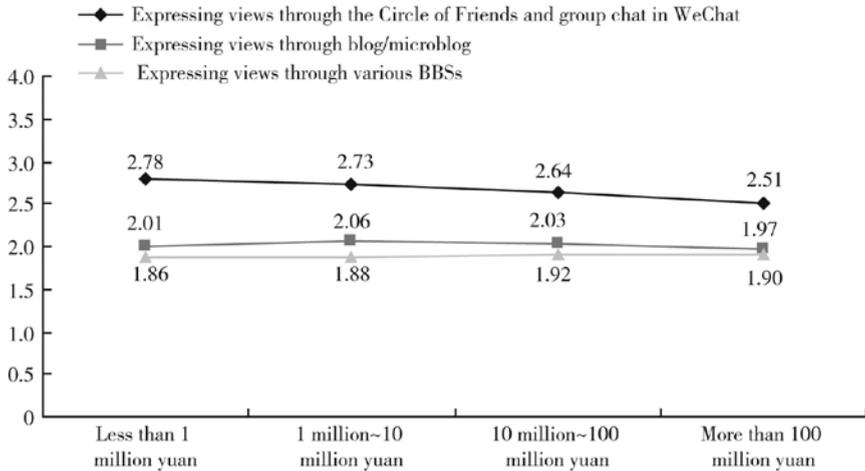


FIGURE 18.12 The preference of platform of entrepreneurs at different asset scales for expressing their views online

#### 4 The Impact of Online Behavior on Entrepreneurs' Trust in the Media

Internet access produced a clear effect on entrepreneurs' trust in the media. The entrepreneurs who often surfed the Internet showed more trust in official mainstream media, the government-sponsored research institutions, non-governmental organizations, market-oriented media, overseas famous media, and overseas Chinese media. Generally speaking, although Internet access opened another window to entrepreneurs so that they can get access to more sources of information, this did not affect their trust in various "formal" media. On the contrary, very interestingly, the entrepreneurs who surfed the Internet showed a lower degree of trust in microblog, online BBS/chat room. This provides us with another piece of evidence showing a reverse movement of online public opinion.

Internet access is only the simplest behavior. The people have various types of online behavior, including learning, entertainment and social contact; the frequencies were different. Among the above-mentioned online behaviors, we first chose the behaviors of "getting news information online" and "expressing views on current affairs online" to further test the impact of specific online behaviors and their frequencies on entrepreneurs' trust in the media. We made this selection because we believed that they exerted a more straightforward impact than such behaviors as social contact, entertainment and business activity.

In general, the entrepreneurs who more often got news information online showed a higher degree of trust in formal media. The media include official mainstream media, the government-sponsored research institutions, non-governmental organizations, market-oriented media, well-known overseas media and overseas Chinese media. The respondents who seldom got news information online gave the highest trust score with respect to their trust in the government-sponsored research institutions; however, with such impact excluded, the trend remains as follows: the higher the frequency of surfing the Internet, the higher the degree of trust. Correspondingly, the entrepreneurs who got news information more frequently showed a lower degree of trust in informal media such as microblog, online BBS/chat room. It is likely that this was related to more chaotic phenomena exposed to them online.

Interestingly, in many respects, the entrepreneurs who expressed views on current affairs online more frequently showed the opposite pattern of trust in the media (see Figure 18.15). The most obvious one was trust in microblog, online BBS/chat room. The respondents who expressed views online more frequently showed a higher degree of trust in these two informal media and an apparent gap. It is likely that this phenomenon was closely related to their experience. After all, these less regulated media platforms were the main

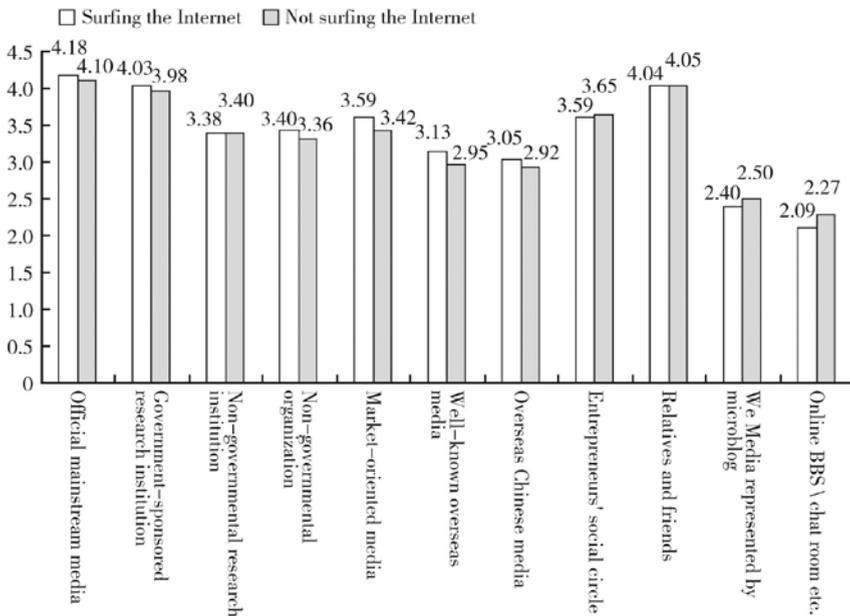


FIGURE 18.13 The impact of Internet access on entrepreneurs' trust in the media

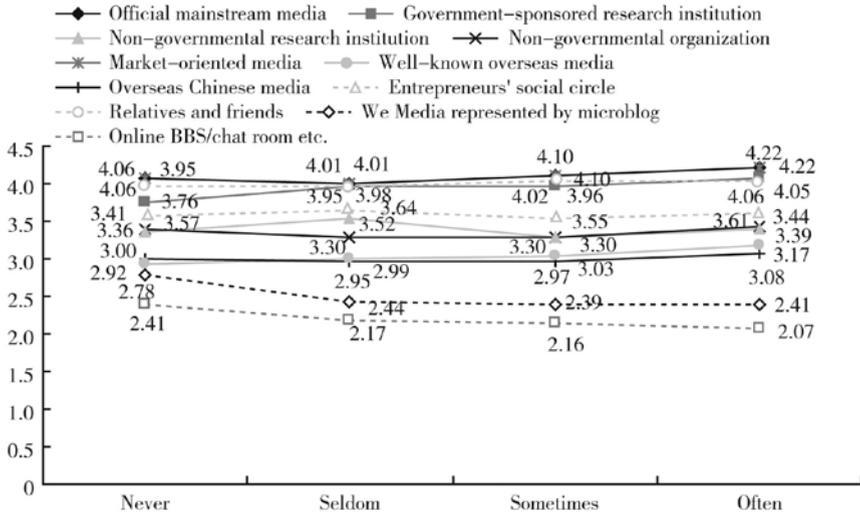


FIGURE 18.14 The impact of the frequency of getting news information online on entrepreneurs' trust in the media

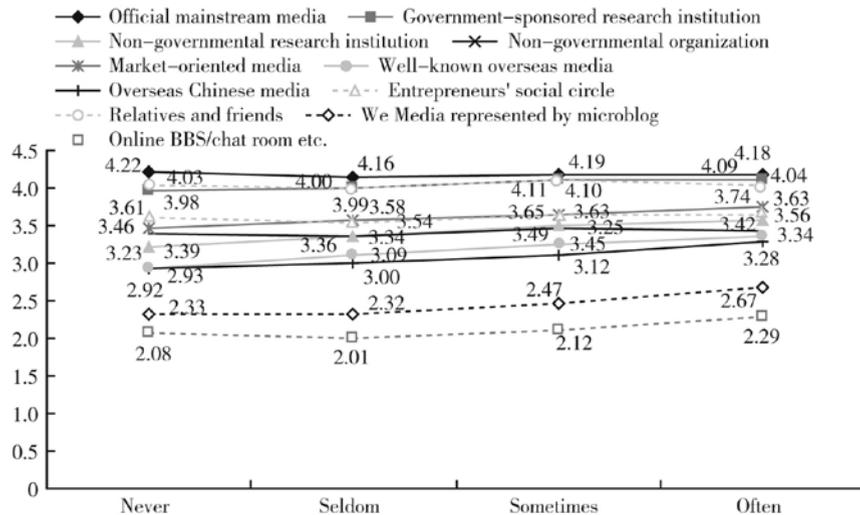


FIGURE 18.15 The impact of the frequency of expressing views online on the degree of entrepreneurs' trust in the media

fronts for expressing views. Correspondingly, the degree of their trust in official mainstream media decreased with the increasing frequency of making online comments.

Furthermore, the entrepreneurs who expressed views online more frequently showed a higher degree of trust in the government-sponsored research institutions, non-governmental research institutions, non-governmental organizations, market-oriented media, well-known overseas media and overseas Chinese media. In particular, on their attitude toward market-oriented media and two types of overseas media, the entrepreneurs who expressed views more frequently showed a more obvious increase in their degree of trust. Therefore, it is difficult to know that the entrepreneurs who expressed views identify the media they trusted by “formal/informal”. The main cause for such a pattern is that the channels and space made available by official mainstream media for entrepreneurs to express their views were far from meeting their needs.

## 5 Summary and Policy Suggestions

This report is designed to make an exploratory description of the characteristics of entrepreneurs' online behavior in this field. According to this research, surfing the Internet was a common behavior of private entrepreneurs, the Internet exerted a more significant impact on the production operations and daily life of the young well-educated entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs' online behavior was dominated by getting information, followed by social contact, business activity, political and social activity, while leisure and entertainment activities made up the lowest proportion. WeChat served as the most important online platform for private entrepreneurs to engage in social contact and communication; it is more likely that the younger respondents at higher educational levels and who had once studied abroad expressed views through WeChat, blog/microblog and BBS. Generally, the younger entrepreneurs participated in online activities more frequently, and the age difference in entrepreneurs' online behavior was very obvious. In addition, generally, the entrepreneurs at higher educational levels and who had once studied abroad had more frequent online behavior. Based on the above findings, we put forward the following policy suggestions.

First, the platforms on the unified front should be built on the Internet clients often used by key targets, so as to enter entrepreneurs' Circle of Friends. The fact that nearly 90% of the private entrepreneurs surfed the Internet indicates that the unified front work on this group must be based on the line of thought of Internet Plus. Some governments and official industrial associations have built their websites, but whether they really show care for entrepreneurs

is still questionable. The market-oriented media, non-governmental chambers of commerce and other forces have established public accounts and subscription accounts on such platforms as WeChat and microblog, and there are a large number of online communication groups initiated by entrepreneurs, but the Party and government departments still lag behind in this respect. It is not necessary for the united front department to carry out a movement of occupying the online battlefield, but it is necessary to carefully cultivate a number of influential online clients.

Second, the new-generation young, well-educated entrepreneurs with overseas experience should be regarded as the main targets for cultivating active online participants in light of their behavioral characteristics; online and offline support should be provided to them for building their platforms and channels. In fact, some young well-educated entrepreneurs, especially the new-generation entrepreneurs with overseas experience, have become Internet celebrities or the active participants in online platforms. Most of them act in the form of We Media, they have not yet built their organizations. The active participants among these people should be guided and encouraged to adopt the more organizational modes to carry out their activities. A small part of these people have drawn more attention due to social and political attributes, especially the label of rich second generation, but most of them have participated in the online activities relating to economic development, scientific and technological innovations, and cultural exchanges. Emphasis should be placed on supporting these platforms online and offline.

Third, attempts should be made to build the national online social platforms for entrepreneurs, encouraging large entrepreneurs to express views on political and social issues. A considerable proportion of entrepreneurs are keen on participating in online social contacts, business activities even political and social activities; the older entrepreneurs and those with a larger asset scale carry out online activities mainly related to business rather than leisure and entertainment. In fact, online social contact activities are mostly related to their business. At present, there are many social network sites, but the national social platforms focusing on private entrepreneurs have not yet been cultivated, thus leaving the space for decision-makers to leverage the first-mover advantage. Moreover, large entrepreneurs take actions and express views online in a cautious way, but this does not mean that they have no opinions and refrain from expressing their views. Except for a small part of entrepreneurs with a large number of online fans, some large entrepreneurs are more inclined to express their views in small circles and social groups. Relevant departments should encourage and provide some platforms to ensure, in a more inclusive manner, that they can express their true opinions in a public and open way.

Fourth, sampling surveys on entrepreneurs' online behavior should be conducted, and big data should be used to get more key information. It is essential to carry out special sampling surveys on entrepreneurs' online behavior in the future. More importantly, more data on entrepreneurs' online behavior are actually in the hands of communication and Internet giants, including private enterprises Tencent and Baidu, and state-owned enterprises China Mobile, China Unicom and China Telecom. It is imperative to utilize, from the perspective of national strategy, such technologies as cloud computing and big data to conduct a survey on entrepreneurs, so as to obtain more key information.

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