



**“Reading the information in applications is like eating fast food”  
-Motherhood and social media**

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**Abstract**

This research explores young mothers' usage of social media to obtain child-rearing information in mainland China. I interviewed 11 Chinese women with the different background of their everyday social media practices. Through analyzing of their interpretation, the research displays one facet of mediated society, that is how social media influences young Chinese mothers in different aspects, shaping their cognition of health, transforming their relationship with medical service providers, stimulating their learning behaviors regarding nurturing. The research applies the qualitative methodology and connects the empirical data collected from the semi-structured interview with several theoretical frames related to the media studies, such as critical sociology of media and health, health literacy and socially structured motherhood of feminist studies. The research discloses that social media in China context has unique forms and play a crucial role in mother's lives. Mothers showcase different tactics to seek parental information, to apply curative instructions, to be empowered in the decision-making process, to management risk of illness and to negotiate their position in household relationships. This research highlights the significance of the cross-disciplinary study of media, people, health, and society, especially filling the gap of providing an original research focusing on the developing eastern country, where media environment is notably different from western society.

**Keywords:** social media, health, mothers, China

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

The Internet has become an important channel for individuals and social groups to seek help, to exchange information and get support since last century (Lupton, 2012, p.132). Both in developed countries and developing countries, online health-related Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs) are flourishing (Heaton, 2011). From medical webs to online communities, blogs, social media platforms, smartphone applications, and latest wearable gadgets, and each updating advancement of the technologies has a profound impact on people's life, especially in medical surroundings. According to a recent survey, at the end of 2016, 53.2% of China's population have access to the Internet. Among this huge population, 731 million people connect to the Internet through the smartphone<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, besides utilization of instant telecom services, the second primary function of the smartphone is to link people to social media<sup>2</sup>. Young mothers constitute a significant group of social media users. They need to obtain knowledge in short time about how to raise the new baby when extensive information on the Internet facilitates them to confront the transition from a woman to a mother. Social media is playing a significant role in this process as motherhood is a socially and culturally constructed norm; thus, social media has become an essential avenue to interact with information, others and themselves.

Mothering means stepping into an altered world and being aware of different aspects of themselves (Bailey,1999). In China's particular context, mothering has its different implication especially when China is considered as a representation of the traditional patriarchy, in which women were facing various oppression, encounter different "rules of games" and need special strategies to negotiate their identities (Kandiyoti, 1988). According to a survey conducted in 2015 among 9,260 Chinese mothers, social media is their primary source to obtain parenting information. I worked for one of the most popular parental websites in China, and I was a blogging mother for quite a long time.

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<sup>1</sup> CNNIC, 2017, *The statistic report of the development of the Internet in China*.<中国互联网络发展情况统计报告> Retrieved from :  
[http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/201701/t20170122\\_66437.htm](http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/201701/t20170122_66437.htm)

<sup>2</sup> CNNIC,2016,*The research report of users' behavior of Chinese social application in 2015*.<2015 年中国社交应用用户行为研究报告> Retrieved from :  
[http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/sqbg/201604/t20160408\\_53518.htm](http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/sqbg/201604/t20160408_53518.htm)

When I communicated with young mothers, I found that even with the flourishing popularity of new media platforms providing the tremendous amount of health care knowledge, some well-educated mothers coming from metropolis cities still stick to out-of-date child-rearing methods. I began to pay attention to the issue and tend to find the answer to the questions like Who influence their decision-making related to child's well-being? How do they perceive health and illness? Which media do they use to obtain health knowledge? I realized that social media not only plays a profound role in mother's information received, but influences their definition of a good mother, their standards of identifying health and illness, and their behaviors for promoting child's development are all associated with the social media they use every day.

To study social media's influence on mothers, I situate my research in a cross-disciplinary field including cultural studies, audience studies, and public health studies to theorize their behaviors and feelings about the media, health and the status of themselves. The background is China's social context and public health system, which is lacking original qualitative studies compared to that of developed countries like the US and Australia, where the researchers have studied the relationship between new media and public health extensively. Considering this situation, I propose the research to explore how Chinese mothers use social media in their daily life and how they are affected by the social media from the angle of the media studies. In China, there exists an industrial marketing strategy that annual report of the internet users' behavior is published to analyze their media contacting action, but none of these surveys apply the qualitative methodology and understand the issue from the perspective of sociology, which highlights the significance of the current research. I tend to explore the interactional relationship between social media and new mothers as new audiences through analyzing their use of social media to obtain health information. I apply the qualitative methodology to collect empirical data about their experiences, their sense, and their descriptions through the semi-structured interview. After that, I conduct the systematical analysis following the grounded theory. Besides, the aim of the research is going to understand the new media and new audiences under the complex media environment, so I connect concepts from social science to understand the empirical data about how the audiences perceive and practice in such a context. In my study, previous studies and relevant theories are thoroughly argued to make a deep understanding of

the current social phenomena. I focus on the experience and practices of audiences, namely, mothers who are using social media in their everyday life; thus the aim of the study produces that my research questions are following:

- 1) How do new mothers in China experience social media communication in their daily life, especially health information related practices?
- 2) How their feeling and understanding of motherhood is influenced by using of social media?

I divide the thesis into seven chapters and an appendix. Chapter one is the introduction explaining the purpose and research questions as well as its central significance. Chapter two is the background of the study. I elaborate on some key terms related to the research and introduce the Chinese social and cultural background related to my work. In chapter three, the previous researching works regarding social media, mothering, and health are introduced to prepare for my analysis, this chapter is also the starting point of my research. Chapter four is the theoretical frame of this study, in which cultural studies, audience studies, and public health studies meet and generate inspiration of my research. Chapter five presents the methodology of my thesis, in which I argue the different features of the methodologies, then I select the qualitative method as the optimal one. Relevant procedures such as recruitment, interview, analysis and the ethnic reflection are discussed to make the research transparent and valid. In chapter six, all the empirical data collected from the interview are synthetically analyzed to reflect the theories according to the process of applying the grounded theory. I present the main original findings concerning young Chinese mothers' use of social media platforms and the influence of the new media in their life. In this part, I elaborate core concepts in media studies and cultural studies such as everyday context, active audiences, identity, empowerment, power, and surveillance in relating to the captured data. Chapter seven is the concluding part discussing the research about the significance, challenges, and the contribution as well. The appendix part as the supplement of the detailed information encloses the bibliography, the consent form, and the interview guide.



## **Chapter 2. Research background**

In this part, I firstly illustrate the development of Chinese social media, since it is highly relevant to the following discussion about social media's role in mothers' daily life. Chinese social media platforms have unique features distinguished to western counterparts and influence people's cognition of social media. Chinese young mothers' status in the family also needs to be briefly introduced to prepare for the analysis of the impact of social media on these women. In my research, women's position in the household surrounding is also influenced by their media practices, so the basic knowledge of their domestic situation is necessary. This part also paves the way of later discussion of power relation and gender issue. Finally, Chinese current health care system will be introduced to present systematic power that affects people's choice and decision-making, and it is also the setting where personal behaviors encounter the social actors, such as hospitals, health care providers, and other organizations. After the introduction of social and cultural background, I move to some key concepts related to the research, such as social support, empowerment, and new mothers.

### **2.1 Social media**

There are two classic definitions of social media by different scholars. Some researchers view social media is the "participative Internet" with three forms, namely online support group, blogging and social networking site which was predicted continuously attracting the huge population of internet users and maximizing the influence of health communication (Chou, et. al,2009). Social media is also defined as "Web-based tools that are used for computer-mediated communication" (Grajales et.al,2014). Social media platforms are sorted into ten different categories, namely blogs, microblogs, social networking sites, professional networking sites, thematic networking sites, wikis,mashups, collaborative filtering sites, media sharing sites, and others (ibid.).

As it was clarified by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media is different from the concepts of Web2.0 and users generated content, which started from early social networking site to weblog and then advanced to blog. Although people tend to group Wikipedia, YouTube, Facebook and Secondlife into social media, there is not a systematic and abstract category of social media applications (ibid.). Scholars tend to

define social media from media and social dimension, which makes social media as a term that has two characteristics: the richness of medium including the status of self-presentation (ibid.) Fuchs (2013, p.37) analyzed the research literature of social media, and then he concluded that social media embraces all the concepts like collective action, communication, communities, connecting/networking, co-operation/collaboration, the creative making of user-generated content, and playing-sharing together. My research follows the sociological understanding of social media and adopts the description in *Spreadable Media* (Jenkins et al. 2013, p.6). Jenkins argues that social media platforms are making social connections increasingly visible and amplified, which attributes to the important feature of spreadability, and traditional audience personal behaviors will become commonplace and mainstream (ibid.p.148). In my research, I consider social media including interactive platforms that connect the individual audience to broad society through their smartphone or internet based technologies. Some researchers declare that we are in the midst of an altogether new communication landscape (Kietzmann, J. H. et al. 2011) with Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, etc., which have the characteristic of spreadability to inviting various kinds of participation from audiences. The other reason why I tend to apply the broader categories and do not designedly restrict to certain platforms is that people's access to health information in social media is diverse and changeable (Seale,2002).

## **2.2 Chinese social media**

In China, development of social media experienced a similar process with that in western countries. Chiu et.al (2012) concluded that Chinese social media began with online discussion forums in 1994. In 1999, the instant message service was widely used, followed by other web2.0 applications and blogs. The initial social media platform in China launched in 2005 called Kaixin Net; Sina Weibo as a copy of Twitter was created in 2009 and considered as the milestone of Chinese social media. In 2011, one of the largest internet company in China launched Wechat, and then Wechat has rapidly become the leading social media platform in China (Chan,2015). According to a recent survey conducted by China Internet Network Information Center<sup>3</sup>, in January 2017, the

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<sup>3</sup> CNNIC,2017.1.22., No.39 Statistics report of the development of China' s Internet. <中国互联网第三十九号发展报告>Available at : <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxbzg/>  
Date: 2017.2.16

number of Chinese internet users has reached 731 million<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, 95.1% of the netizens are using the smartphone when access to the Internet and the users of social media platforms. However, China has a different social media environment compared to other countries, because the most popular portals like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are blocked by the government media censorship for political reasons (Bamman et al., 2012). Therefore, social media in my study refers to the domestic Chinese platforms recorded in Chinese Information Industry Department. According to another report published by CNNIC in April 2016, Chinese social networking applications were categorized into following groups, namely instant message applications, all-round networking applications, video/photo networking applications, community applications, dating/friends-making applications and career related applications, and the instant message, and all-around social media. Among these categories, all-around social media platforms occupy around 90% mobile users. There are two dominant social media platforms in China, one is Chinese microblog site Sina Weibo(新浪微博), with 313 million active users by 2016<sup>5</sup>, which are compared with Twitter and Facebook usually. In Sina Weibo, regular user accounts and verified user accounts are the two types of the entity who uses the application through smartphones or log into personal computer's terminals. WeChat (微信) is another indispensable communication tool in China with 807 million active users monthly<sup>6</sup>. It integrates multiple functions including instant message, post/photo/video sharing, interactive games, and online payment, etc. Various kinds of organizations like government departments, private companies, educational institutions, NGOS, and public service providers or individuals can register as the Weixin subscription and publish information to audiences after real-name verified. Ordinary people must register their telephone number to use friend moments, comment function and other message services.

Because both the mainstream social media platforms along with other applications in China have multiple functions, my study does not emphasize on a particular platform

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<sup>4</sup> CNNIC,2017, *The statistic report of the development of the Internet in China*. <中国互联网络发展情况统计报告> Retrieved from :

[http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/hlwtjbg/201701/t20170122\\_66437.htm](http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/hlwtjbg/201701/t20170122_66437.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Sina Weibo,2017, The Fourth finical season report of Sina Weibo.<新浪微博第四季度财报> Retrieved from : <http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2017-02-23/doc-ifyavvsh5976843.shtml>

<sup>6</sup> Tencent, 2016, The Midterm report in 2016.<2016 中期报告>.Available at: <https://www.tencent.com/zh-cn/articles/1700291473387603.pdf>

but focused on those related to information sharing and spreadability. Furthermore, the purpose of the research is focusing on spreadable audience's experience within the area of media studies, only the communicational functions are valued, while other services like online payment, interactive games or personal instant messaging may be of less relevance. On the one hand, users might open any platform in a day to obtain information, just like what I will discuss later that people often switch between different platforms in several minutes. For instance, my interviewee told me that she logs into Wechat and Weibo at the same time and if she cannot obtain the information she needs in Wechat, she will immediately open interface of Weibo to search other keywords. That means, her motivation is clear, but her selecting action of media platforms is unsure. Thus, it is not possible for the research to totally rely on only one of these platforms. On the other hand, I tend to view social media as a part of the whole media ecology which invites various types of interactions and voices from audiences but not a particular platform.

### **2.3 Chinese young mothers in the family**

In this part, I would like to discuss young mother's status in the household and link to their media use. Mother's social media use in home environment interacts with the family structure and family relationships. Chinese family structures have experienced several transformations related to political and social factors since last century. China adopted the one-child policy in 1979, and the traditional extended family structure was challenged and reshaped to the unclear family (Davin, 1985). The nuclear family has been a typical family structure in China from that on, which means a family consisting of parents and their children without grandparents and other parents living together. However, according to the survey (Tsui, 1989), the family structure is not fixed because of reality factors, one of which is that Chinese women general have been issued 98 days of maternity leave before they return their careers. When young parents have their child, they usually invite the grandparents to join the family after the birth to take care of the child. Additionally, public day care of children is insufficient especially for children younger than three-year-old. Thus, the co-living situation usually continues at least three years until the children go to kindergarten. In some cases, the three generations must share an apartment for six or seven years till the child goes to primary school. Reunited family bonds the young family with the older family and the unclear structure

temporarily becomes into a traditional style, in which the father-son relationship is strengthened, and the elders control the family. The outcome is that new mother as a young daughter-in-law has the lowest status in the household and the mother-in-law usually makes the decision because she is the main contributor of the daily nurturing (Tsui,1989).

According to social and cultural studies, the way people communicate define the family relationships (Caughlin,2002, cited in Alexander, 2008), and media are becoming part of household life and major factors in family structure (Jordan,2002, quoted in Alexander, 2008). Contrariwise, family member's interactions influence the media use and related things (ibid.). In everyday life, the impact of social media on women could present in different aspects, including their sharing behavior in family, the action they take and their using habits. In my research, I emphasize the home environment not only because media cannot be separated from the living room even people's hands, but also because media change people's status in the family. The mother's use of media might influence their relationship with the mother-in-law. Thus, media affect the construction of power structure in a family. Through young mother's negotiation within the relationships, they reshape their identity and find an acceptable position of their own.

## **2.4 Chinese health-care system**

Although the proposed thesis focuses on people's media behaviors, it is necessary to analyze the particular social context in which the actions appear. In China, the current health-care environment has a profound impact on mothers' tactics to obtain information and to make the decision.

The doctor-patient relationship in China is very tense, and the collapse of the relationship was described as a "fundamental dysfunction" in the international news report<sup>7</sup>. Violent attacks on doctors by patients have increasingly occurred during these years<sup>8</sup>. Only in one month in 2014, three doctors were viciously wounded by patients'

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<sup>7</sup> Beam, Christopher. (2014). *Under The Knife, Why Chinese Patients Are Turning Against Their Doctors*. By *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/25/under-the-knife>  
Date: 2017.4.9

<sup>8</sup> Sudworth, John. *China's rise in patient-doctor attacks BBC news report*. On 28 February 2014. Retrieved from : <http://www.bbcukchina.com/news/world-asia-china-26379003>

or their relatives, which alerts social concerns and arouses heated discussion in social media. On the one hand, underdevelopment of health care insurance often makes citizens cannot afford the high expense of medical services. On the other hand, shortage of doctors increases the cost of seeking professional help. Defensive medicine is a common phenomenon, which means that doctors deliberately recommend diagnostic tests or prescribe drugs which are not necessary to the patients. The unique performance of this behavior is over-prescription in China, which is considered as the outcomes of profits incentives and doctor's self-protection of medical lawsuits (He, 2014). Li et.al. (2010) surveyed 784 community health institutions across the country and found that overprescribing directly results in the very high use of antibiotics, injections and hormonal medicines. Although Chinese government issued regulations on prescription management<sup>9</sup>, it has little changed what is happening. In my study, the health care system is an unneglectable part of the social context which interacts with people's media practices, and I discuss the particular cases in depth in chapter 6.

### **Summary**

In chapter two, the background of the research is reinforced, which highlights the significance of the thesis. As I argued previously, Chinese social reality provides a unique case for health information communication not only in the household environment but also in medical encounters and at the social levels. Acknowledging of the background will be helpful to understand people's behaviors related to health communication. The research spans a wider space from public health studies to cultural and social studies, by connecting political, economic, psychological and cultural factors. In chapter six, these factors will be analyzed continuously and intensely discussed through the empirical data.

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Date: 2017.4.9

<sup>9</sup> The People's Republic of China Ministry of Health Order No. 53 (中华人民共和国卫生部令第 53 号)

Retrieved from :<http://www.moh.gov.cn/mohzcfgs/pgz/200804/29279.shtml>

Date:2017.4.8

### **Chapter 3. Literature review**

It is challenging to do the literature review of the research because it is a cross-disciplinary study approach which includes connected but distinguished concepts being studied systemically in different disciplines. In public health studies, media studies, and social studies, there are plenty of the concepts related to my research questions, namely media literacy, audience, social support, empowerment, and consumerism. Instead of discussing them separately, I will illustrate their connection with my study and weave my review within different theories to map the relationship between mother audience and social media, and finally, land in media studies. The literature review is divided into two parts, which are relevant to each other and each part has following titles to emphasize the preferences of different research

The search strategies adopted for this study is identifying relevant research works concerning mothers and social media related to health issues from 2007 through to 2017. The most used search engines are Google Scholar and searching database in Lund University Library. To include the relevant studies as wide as possible and not miss important ones, I searched with broad key terms, namely "mothers", "social media", and "health". I replaced these keywords with similar words like "new mothers", "new media", "health communication", and other arrays of combinations, such as "mothering/motherhood" +"digital media" +"children's health" and "digital parents" +"internet" +"health" +"children". Other words related to the research questions were also searched to not miss the relevant research, like "Chinese mothers", "healthy literacy", "E-health", and "M-health". Eligible literature is focusing on the relationship between various social media platforms and health, including across platforms statistics research and particular study centering on an individual platform. Concerning the validity, articles that published in academic journals and conferences with peer-review were valued particularly. However, studies with small empirical samples were excluded.

#### **3.1 Mothers and Social media**

I have discussed that the development of technologies makes social media as a collection of various forms of internet based communicational platforms with multiple characteristics, and the prominent feature is spreadability. "Parenting websites, online

discussion forums, blogs, email, mobile phones and message and video services, social media and apps are all different forms of new media that make it possible for parents to access the Internet from anywhere" (Lupton et al., 2016, p.730). Social media platforms in previous studies are diverse, namely, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or a pilot platform to map mother user's behavior in digital media environment (Longhurst, 2009; Morris, 2014; Bartholomew, et.al., 2012; Tiidenberg, 2015; Palmén & Kouri, 2012).

Instead of emphasizing on a single platform and its influence on mothers, for instance, Facebook or YouTube, I reviewed all the articles relevant to social media and mothers and abstracted the findings of the "relationship" between platform and mother users. Scholars concern social media and parenthood and discuss mothers' and father's practices (Evans, et.al,2012; Bartholomew, et.al,2012; Ammari et al. 2015; Lupton et.al,2016). They argue that researchers should pay more attention to fathers because their role in a family is normally distorted and their experiences are neglected (Lupton,1997). However, my research concerns only on mothers, because they use social media more than fathers across the west and the east, and they are the main caregivers in Chinese families. To support the validity of my research, I would like to cite the findings of Pew Research Center that "Mothers are heavily engaged on social media, both giving and receiving a high level of support via their networks" (Duggan & Lehnhart, 2015, p.1). Additionally, in China's particular social and cultural context, social media has become the overwhelming channel for women to access health-related information. The social reality promotes me to concrete on the mother users.

### ***3.1.1 The mainstream supportive viewpoint***

The positive voice is the mainstream attitude towards social media using among mothers and "support" is a highly-expected norm. Concerning social media's influence on mothers, research starting from different theoretical frames show similar promising judgment. In the health communication field and the public health studies area, scholars suggest that the main contribution of social media is that it provides social support and parental knowledge to parent users. The Internet and social networking, specifically blogging, could connect new mothers to the outside world and encourage their confidence and improve maternal well-being (McDaniel, et al.,2011). Social media



plays a major role in supporting new mothers, although fake news are disseminated, social media is still a supportive vehicle delivering informational and emotional help to new parents (Doty & Dworkin,2014). Morris (2014) argues that new mother's use of the social network is changing as times passing by, and they commonly use social media as an inevitable medium to sharing information about children-rearing and seeking parenting-related information, including social support. Gibson and Hanson (2013) find that new technologies support new mothers by increasing their confidence and shaping their new identities. Even a pilot web service in the Finish local clinic could build a virtual community to shape the belonging feeling of mothers and disseminate necessary parental knowledge to them (Palmén & Kouri, 2012).

Literature showed that personal experiences are crucial in understanding people's daily media practices. Previous researches confirm the orientation of the study that qualitative research is widely used by researchers to illustrate the role that social media plays in mothers' life, and it is also an appropriate methodology to study human behaviors and experiences. Furthermore, qualitative methodology is helpful to construct an interactive atmosphere along with researchers.

### ***3.1.2 Contextualized mothers***

Mother users of social media in previous research are divided into different groups according to their social attributes. The research on the sensitive group such as adolescent mother underlines that seeking for parental information in social media could be a potential vehicle for health prevention among younger mothers. Literature presents a broad range of geographical choices, but still concentrates on global north, namely, the U.S, Canada, U.K, Russia, and Finland (Ammari,et.al,2015; Morris,2014; Gibson & Hanson, 2013; Bartholomew,et.al,2012; Madianou,2016; Palmén & Kouri,2012) .Australian researchers published influential works about digital media and women (Wen, et.al,2011; Lupton,2016;) and other research targeted on African women in American (Asiodu, et.al,2015), but they were still focusing on mothers in developed countries.

Song et.al. (2012) interviewed new mothers about their experiences of using smartphone applications and social media to make the decisions on pregnancy and

childbirth; then the researchers found that new mothers' use of new media is complex with the diversity of personal factors. The research is informative and significant but still focuses on privileged white middle-class women. Literature about Chinese mothers' social media practices is scarce; questions like how such a huge population of women in developing country uses social media in their daily life and what kind of influence that their behaviors produce has not been studied adequately. Mak (2016) explored how social media influence Hong Kong mothers' infant feeding practices through a case study and asserted that digital media play a profound role in mothers' child-rearing practices, by providing a public space and allowing exchanging of alternative knowledge, while Mak did not discuss their media practices thoroughly.

### ***3.1.3 Flourishing micro-level studies***

Concerning mothers' motivation of using social media to obtain information, social scientists find that information seeking is an important way for mothers to manage risk. Some researchers focus on the mechanism behind mothers' media behaviors and use psychological techniques to explore the benefits of social media. Bartholomew et.al (2012) found that new mothers use social media more than fathers, and furthermore their use of social media keeps increasing because of the pressure.

Schoenebeck (2013) additionally reinforced that online communication is an emotional outlet of mothers. Thus they can talk about negative norms and feelings of their personal life anonymously, and the result also coincides with the support viewpoint. Moreover, Evans et.al (2012) displayed that online support groups significantly encourage new mothers with postpartum depression in different extent. Postpartum depression is a keyword related to new mothers in public health studies, while it is not a usual topic in media studies. In China, postpartum depression is becoming a heated topic in social media, but there is no relevant research in media studies field. As noted previously, considering huge population of new mothers are using social media to communicate with outside world, it is necessary to pay attention to the connection between postpartum depression and social media usage. Apparently, the proposed thesis will provide original empirical data and sociological approach to understand motherhood and social media.

### ***3.1.4 Feminist studies***

In the specific social background, cultural studies and feminist research presented different perspectives beyond support viewpoint regarding social media and mothers. Madianou (2016) interviewed Philippine migrant mothers in U.K who use social media and found that social media maintains mothers' bond of family and alleviates their missing of children. Tiidenberg (2015) analyzed Russian mothers' selfies in social media and concluded from a feminist angle that mothers present their body and beauty in social media to emphasize their femininity. By posting breastfeeding selfies, Canadian mothers participate in social media to negotiate their identity between virtual narcissism and real motherhood (Boon& Pentney,2015). These research works take the women's standpoint when discussing gender stereotype, social discourse, and sexism. However, there is also a clear tendency that the researchers focus on female's individual behaviors in the parental practices, while less research reflects the relationship between mothers' media practices and their family. Ammari, et.al (2015) found that mothers post more on social media platforms compared to the fathers, and through their publishing activities, they take more responsibility for shaping children's identity. Consequently, economic and political factors behind mothers' media use behaviors and family structure as the mediated environment are neglected in these studies. My study will fill the knowledge gap by combining media studies with mothering behaviors and scrutinize the complicate power relationships within and outside family which is influenced by social media use.

According to literature, methodologies of research about social media and mothers are determined by the different researching purposes. Qualitative interview and quantitative cross-sectional surveys are mostly used methods both in public health studies and in communication studies. Ethnographic methods, including observation, discourse analysis/visual analysis are also widely used techniques.

### **3.2 Social media and health**

When I searched literature of social media and health, I started from the standpoint that there is no universal standard of health, in other words, the constitution of health is always contested and constructed (Turner, 2003, in Albrecht et.al ed.). Health is a socially constructed item, and media representation has an impact on people's

awareness of health, their behavior to maintain health and their decision to avoid illness. Today, social media is a universal tool, and it gradually plays a significant role in health education and health promotion. I will not discuss health issue or medical topic directly, but I will focus on mothers' social media practices to strength their knowledge of health, to take care of their children, to maintain their own and the child's well-being, and to prevent possible health risks. Starting from the consideration, health in the research is not only a result or physical/psychological condition but also a process. Mothers of this research, obviously are not patients who are usually contrary to the doctor in medical encounters, but they perform health communication in social media. I will discuss their status and role in health communication in depth in the latter chapters.

### ***3.2.1 Beneficial social media***

The map of social media is not a fixed structure, especially associated with the changing development of the technology. Social media contributes to health care in different dimensions, and it is diversely utilized by individuals and organizations to communicate on health issues and improve well-being outcomes (Grajales et.al,2014). Researchers find that social media promotes public health because of its impact on changing health communication (Vance et.al, 2009; Thackeray et.al,2008; Norman et.al,2008). Social media is commonly useful to improve mutual communication between patient/doctor and peer-to-peer, to promote organization marketing, and to enable collaboration between different interest groups (Grajales et.al,2014). Social media was identified with six benefits for health communication including increasing interactions, sharing information, increasing accessibility, providing emotional support, conducting public health surveillance and influencing policy (Moorhead et.al.,2013).

On the one hand, social media is viewed as a revolutionary platform with distinguished characteristics potentially enhancing public health (Khan,2007; Thackeray et.al,2008; Norman, et.al,2008; Khanna,2008; Vance et.al,2009; Wangberg et.al,2008; Idriss et.al,2009; Hawn,2009;Bender et.al,2011). On the other hand, research fruits contributing to explore the relationship between social media and health center on critical issues like information accuracy (Keelan et.al,2007; Adams, 2010; Westerman,2013; Syed-Abdul et.al,2013;), ethics (Moubarak et.al,2010; Thompson et.al., 2011; Monks et.al., 2015; Chiu et.al., 2015), professionalism (Thompson et.al.,

2008; Greysen et.al., 2012 ), digital divide (Viswananth & Kreuter,2007; Jackson et.al,2008 ; Habel et.al,2009; McNab,2009Chen et.al., 2014; Powe,2015; Kim, 2015 ) and empowerment (Andersen, Medaglia, & Henriksen, 2012; Mano,2014; Koteyko & Hunt, 2016).

### ***3.2.2 Evaluation the literature of health-related applications***

The literature of social media and its health-related utilization is great, and consequently, the voices from different academic fields have different focuses. Reports and articles concerning the specific platform reflect different peculiarity of the social media application. For instance, research on social media game Secondlife and health focuses on the relationship between virtual health activities and real health activities (Beard et.al.,2009), while the publication aiming at Wikipedia surveys people's seeking behavior and tests its relationship with epidemic diseases (Laurent, 2009). Regarding my research questions, I think it is more meaningful to consider the influence of different forms of social media systemically instead of splitting them one by one and discussing individually. Users' preference of social media platforms regarding health is practical, and they usually start from the instant needs to jump between different platforms. However, it is valuable to learn from the various streams of studies to get the holistic image of the relationship between multiple social media applications and health issues.

Regarding methodology, studies aiming at getting the general image of the situation and giving suggestions to medical service providers and policy makers usually apply cross-sectional survey approach (Chou et.al., 2009; Bosslet et.al.,2011). Scholars focus on the specific sensitive group of people like adolescent usually bring about ethical considerations (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011; Moorhead et.al.,2013). There were multiple methods to investigate social media and health promotion of specific health issues, among which big data analysis is mostly used (Greene, et.al.,2011).

I notice that few qualitative research works have been conducted on new mothers and their health-related communicational behaviors in social media platforms. Additionally, most studies were operated in English, probably because prevalent social media platforms are originated from the US. Few studies on developing countries were

published and reviewed by scholars as well. China has blocked public access to social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, so there is no space for discussing these social media sites in the Chinese context.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I review the literature related to the keywords of this research, namely social media, mothers, and health. I start from seeking research papers concerning the relationships between the relevant keywords instead of searching them separately. Firstly, the research papers regarding social media and mothering are evaluated; Then prior studies of social media's influence on health communication are discussed. The previous research presents fruitful outcomes, but few works focus on the same issue as the current research. Mothers' use of social media in health communication in developing countries has not been studied adequately yet. Furthermore, through the review of the literature, methodologies of previous academic papers leads the direction of my research to qualitative research because it is helpful to understand the complex relationships between people and socially constructed media behaviors.

## **Chapter 4. Theoretical frame**

In this chapter, I discuss the relevant theories for my research. The research suits in a cross-disciplinary spot made of cultural studies, media studies and public health studies, which gives multiple frames to consider the theories and concepts, whereas I focus on audience studies and sociological study of health and society.

### **4.1 Active audience**

"Media are central to our everyday lives that we must study them" (Silverstone, 1999). I would like to introduce a core theoretical frame associated with my research in this chapter, namely active audience. The paradigm seems more related to the methodology, but its importance as a series of theories regarding audience studies is worthy to be emphasized. Today, the complexity of the constitution of audiences is widely acknowledged by scholars. It is noted that the boundaries between producers, users, consumers, and audiences of mass media are blurring (Nightingale, 2011). In audience research, I follow the frame of "active audience," which is crucial to the aim of the current study. Audience studies concentrates on "active audience" and analyzes details of people's interaction with media and the implication of their experiences (ibid.). However, the understanding of this viewpoint experienced the evolvement of half of a century.

New generations of "audience" were studied when television became a domestic medium. The norm "domesticated technology" was coined by Roger Silverstone (Green & Holloway, 2013), which means people consume communicational technologies in their home and their engagement with the media is a complex production of culture and society. The boundary between household and the outside world are crossed by the television, consistent with what is happening in our living room today. Furthermore, mobile media are pervasive and make people immersing in the mediated environment anytime anywhere. To understand audience's everyday media practices, we need to scrutinize how audience invest media with meanings (Morely, cited in Holloway & Green, 2013). Ultimately, "what they do, and why, when they choose to consume media need to be studied to make audiences' priorities and negotiations visible and showcase people's everyday media and communication choices" (ibid.p.2). To understand the

relationship between everyday life and media practices, Silverstone promotes the sociology perspectives of audience studies and accounts for people's engagement with media through three dimensions, namely agency, modernity, and domesticity to reflect the process, content, and context (Silverstone, 1994). I follow the ontology of audience in my analysis and explore mothers' daily behaviors in social media to present their identity, media consumption and the complex social context which the engagement is grounded in.

#### **4.2 Health in sociological studies**

Concerning mother users of social media, I cited Deborah Lupton's works frequently, because she highlights the new media's influence in health promotion and analyzes personal health practices from a sociological perspective. In sociology, people's knowledge about health along with illness and body are also socially constructed (Lupton,2005). If we scrutinize health in digital media areas from the perspectives of critical studies, it is possible to bring forward a different angle and make the research focusing on issues of identity, trust, discourse and social and cultural context (Bunton & Nettleton, 1995). Lupton illustrates that health is not a pure existence by individual's physical sense, but a reality, including make-meaning and, is shaped through social interaction based on common definitions (Lupton, 2005). Lupton is inspired by Foucauldian and power theories, which understand health related issues with several key concepts like knowledge, power, meanings, and discourse. Her works gear to the current study in finding how new mothers in China perceive health and illness in social media environment; how they make sense of child's health and how they are talking about medical resources; and subsequently, what kind of power relationship could be reflected through their sense-making.

Foucault (1975) coined the notion of "medical gaze" to demonstrate the relationship between patient and doctor, which is a product of discourse. The outcome of the medical gaze is called medical surveillance (ibid.). Medical gaze does not merely exist in medical examination in hospitals and clinics, but also appears in domestic surroundings, for instance between mother and children, as well. Through the gaze, a mother exploits surveillance on children and use her power as the mother. Foucault (1978, p.98) critiques that the body of the child is under surveillance from the beginning of his life



by "an entire watch-crew of parents, nurses, servants, educators, and doctors". Lupton (2005) centered the idea into "the discourse and practices of medical knowledge produce and worked on particular kinds of bodies". Seale contributes that extremely concentrated interest on childhood is attributing to the surveillance (Seale,2007, p.121). The current thesis is about mothers and it is inevitable to mention children's body. As chief caregivers, mothers' feeling of health is closely associated with their attention on children's body. Body is not only the carrier of health and illness, happiness, and pain, the consumer of medical services and product, but also the representation of power relationship of mother-child, patient-doctor, and individual-society. Media has lots of influence on shaping the surveillance by giving advice, setting up examples and erecting the standard of health (ibid).

### **4.3 Ideal mothering**

Another subsequent concept related to the social constructionist understanding of health is central. Lupton cited from Foucault and stretched to "[...]technologies of the self involves the voluntary internalization of norms governing appropriate behavior in the interests of achieving the best possible self, including the quest for self-knowledge, self-mastery, and self-care" (Lupton, 2000,p.56 ).It is an appropriate concept of the current research, because mothers' behaviors like seeking, producing, and sharing health information in social media could be viewed as the process of vulnerable technological of self, and self-surveillance, self-management are all displayed during the process.

Mothers' self-involvement in childrearing behaviors not because of the biological relationship between mother and child but also because of the social and cultural cause (Everingham, 1994). Hays coined the term "intensive mothering" to describe the dominant ideology of mode of mothering in the western world, which means child-centered and expert parenting. Mothers are primary caregivers and must spend "copious amounts of time, energy, and resources on the child," to "acquire detailed knowledge of what experts consider proper child development" (Hays,1996, p.8-p.9). He asserted that all mothers "ultimately share a recognition of the ideology of intensive mothering" (Hays,1996, p.131). In the current case, on the one hand, the ideology of intensive mothering is represented and shaped by social media (Chae,2015). On the other hand,

intensive mothering leads to the prevailing ideology of scientific motherhood (O'Brien, 2009, p.739) and informative patients, which reflects Foucauldian "technology of self" (Song et.al.,2012). Social media plays a profound role in the process of the internalization of intensive mothering and make this ideal image become the expectation of new mothers.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I discuss the main theories applied in the proposed research, namely active audience, health, surveillance, and mothering. Other theories like motherhood and surveillance are directly related to postmodernist Foucauldian theories, although Foucault's fundamental ideas are not articulated to new technological mediated environment, they privilege making sense of identity, power, and society in communicational studies.

## **Chapter 5. Methodology**

The current research locates in the overlapping zone of media studies and cultural studies offering an account of audience engagement within a broad social context. The research explores audiences' daily experiences through their description and narrative in interviews. A qualitative audience study is carried out because "it is a development of reception studies, which based on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding approach (Bird, 2003, p.6)". Determined by the research aim and the theoretical frames, the methodology reflects the influence of ethnographical methods; thus the research subjects are people and their practices in particular context. Therefore, firstly, the research relies on the ethnographical methodology to undertake a qualitative interview to collect empirical data; then synthetically and systemically theorizing method is applied to analyze the data based on the grounded theory.

### **5.1 Methodological approach and method**

Seale's argues that media's effect on audience could be considered from media participating in health fields, and furthermore people's thought about health is constructed by media representation, including form and content (Seale,2002). Starting from this social-structuralism viewpoint, I thought of operating content analysis to evaluate the influence of social media on mothers or employing discourse analysis to research how the ideology of mothering and health are represented in social media. However, choosing from quantitative or qualitative approaches is not determined by my preference but by the research questions. Quantitative research approaches are aiming to test pre-determined hypotheses and produce generalizable results, while qualitative methods tend to provide illumination and understanding of complex psychosocial issues and answering questions of why and how (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Qualitative research focuses on the interaction between social factors, and concerns words rather than numbers (Bryman,380). I agree with Seale that to study media's place in people's live, and it is important and necessary to pay more attention to analyze the " relationship between mainstream media products with the everyday life experience of people in contemporary societies " (Seale, 2002, p.20). Considering the balance between audience and content, media representation and mother's experience, I finally decided to choose a qualitative methodology for this research and apply semi-

structured interview as the specific approach to collect data. I am trying to achieve an in-depth understanding of mothers' use of social media and their perception of media effect through their description and interpretation. According to my literature review, few qualitative studies related to the topic were done in this field so that the current research will make a relative contribution.

## **5.2 Semi-structured interview**

The topic of the research was confirmed during February 2017, and the interview was carried out between February to May 2017, and 11 Chinese women were interviewed including one pilot interviewee. After the pilot interview, I began to work more intensively on the literature review and theoretical frame discussion, occasionally going back and forth between theories and interview. The current research tends to investigate people's practices of consumption of communicational products, and therefore, self-reflection and analysis from those participants are crucial. Previously, similar ethnographic studies of audiences were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s when television penetrated our living-room as a "domestic technology," and then the researchers focused on domestic and everyday context (Holloway & Green,2013). Because of historical reasons, in the past half century, media studies has been preoccupied with television research, producing lots of assumptions based on the theories of television, but television is different with new media (Livingstone, 1999). Holloway and Green (2013) argued that the research "[...] recognizes the value of understanding common experience, of exploring why people enjoy soap operas on television or reality TV [...]. It avoids the value judgments [...] and aims to 'understand social pleasures and meanings' (Holloway & Green, 2013, p.19). Social media communication shares some similarities with television in technologies driven, time-space separation, stimulating consumerism, creating the transnational audience and penetrating in private sphere, so I could embrace previously fruitful researches but hopefully contribute to critical new media studies.

In-depth interview is a kind of personal records to "deconstruct the underlying sociocultural meanings in medical and health research field (Lupton,2005). The topic of my research tends to explore health-related communication; thus semi-structured interview could be adapted, and additionally, the purposive conversation between

researchers and interviewees, which the semi-structured interview offers is an appropriate method to obtain relevant personal information, sense, and cognition.

Although the qualitative research is criticized for being too "impressionistic and subjective" (Bryman,2012, p.405), it is a process in which everyday practices and identity appear, and a typical interaction in which participants could collaborate and interact with each other (Rapley,2011).

I used Wechat audio telecom function which is like a phone call but connected to Wifi to do my interview. To set off the interaction, I gave a warm-up chat, and then I explained the aim of the research to my respondents. During the interview, I recorded our conversation by using my other telephone, and I always informed my respondents that I was recording the content for the later double check. The practical outcome confirmed that the recorder has little influence on the flows of talk, which support Rapley's (2011) suggestion. The interview averagely continued from 30 to 60 minutes. Regarding the difference between telephone interview and face-to-face communication, Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) compared the two approaches in a qualitative study and found that there is no significant difference between the two methods. In my actual operation, I felt that telephone interview efficiently avoided environmental distribution, and at the same time, it was helpful to make the participants focusing on the conversation itself. Specifically, when I made notes of impressive views when we are talking, my writing action did not interrupt the flows of conversation.

I developed an interview guide including a certain number of themes and questions to help me structure the data collection and perform the interview. When I was executing the interview, I followed Rapley's (2011) argument that pure neutrality is impossible. I usually encouraged my respondents to talk more about their feelings and experiences, at the same time I elaborated the questions to make sure they give clear answers. To make them feel comfortable, I sometimes shared my personal experiences to bridge the connection between researcher and interviewees. In the ethnographical interview, the authentic conversation is encouraged (Holloway & Green, 2013), and respondents can even decide the agenda within the main research topic to construct an open-ended communicational atmosphere. When I did the interview, I was not strictly follow the

order of each questions in the interviewing guide, but I usually changed the sequence to lead a more productive conversation. However, the guide was used in a flexible way as a checklist to make sure all themes and questions were covered. For instance, when the respondents answered the question of "What media do you use often? ", some of them directly jumped to the other question of "What kind of function in social media do you usually use? ", because they mentioned social media in the first questions, then they just began to illustrate their favorite social media platforms. Although this happened frequently in my interview, I did not depart too far from the guide and tried to maintain the logical structure of the interview.

### **5.3 Sampling and recruitment**

Different sampling strategies are commonly overlapping and flexible (Marshall,1996). My selected 11 people, based on a convenient sampling method, because it is possible for me to undertake the analysis. As my intention is to explore the relationship between social media use and mothers' practices, the criterion of sampling is supported by a theoretical point that mothers need information and support most than fathers. Mother is evitable taking responsibility to take care of the new child beginning with her breastfeeding.

In the study, the term new mother refers to women who have their first child. In China's context, that setting has significance. Chinese new mothers' depression is more related with social relationship. A survey conducted within 376 pairs of new parents shows that new mothers' depression is coming from less sleeping time and tense relationship between her mother-in-law, and father's concern is about the baby's gender (Mao, et al. 2011). Initially, I tended to strictly follow the criterion that only mothers whose child/children younger than one year old is qualified, because the first one year in a child's development is important for growth and health (Öhrling & Nyström, 2004), and being a parent during this period is described as "overwhelming" (ibid.). However, in my pilot interview, the interviewee withdrew the conversation because her four months old child was crying for needing frequent breastfeeding. Considering the practical problem, I had to widen the age limit of children from one year old to three years old. The new age standard generated little impact on the research, but balance between practical conditions and the credibility of the research, I should say that the influence

is in the acceptable range because broadened age limitation is helpful to include more mothers to talk about their experiences related to the research questions.

In the recruiting process, two methods of recruitment were taken to minimize the personal influence on the outcome. Firstly, I recruited the informants of this study through snowball sampling in my social media network. I was blogging for two years in Wechat's subscription channel, then I stopped writing half a year because of personal reasons. I have almost 20,000 subscribers coming from different places in China, including the major cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong, and remote southwest or northwest towns. Some of them leave comment or talk with me through Wechat, thus I have nearly 1,500 people in my personal contact list, who are readers of my blog but I don't know them off-line. Firstly, I posted a recruiting letter through my Wechat own page asking my readers to take part in the research as interviewees voluntarily. Secondly, I asked them to recommend two or three of their friends or relatives or acquaintances to be my interviewees. I randomly chose one person from their recommendations and then contact that person to ask if she wanted to be my interviewee. The process of the sampling is a standard approach following the request of heterogeneity and homogeneity (Bryan,2012, p.417). The mothers I interviewed have various social background, like residence, education, career, which meets the standard of dissimilarity; at the same time, they are sharing some similarity that we can read from their narrative of personal experiences.

#### **5.4 Data analysis process**

In qualitative research, theories and concepts are viewed as outcomes of the research process, and qualitative researchers are much more inclined to provide a great deal of descriptive and analytical detail and depth compared with quantitative researchers. (Bryman, 2012, p.401, p.412). Qualitative approaches focus on the importance of the understanding of social behavior, which means that behavior and values must be understood in context (ibid.). The first-hand data from the research are the transcript of my record of semi-structured interview. When I finished each interview, I listened to the record and dictated all the conversation one sentence by one sentence, after which I translated the transcript into English and began to do coding and analysis.

Being a researcher, my interpretation and understanding of the data have an impact on research, and my interaction with interviewees is also a constituent of the research process. Just as Holloway and Green (2013, p.17) noted that "there is always a subjective element determined by the researcher [...]the decisions about who is interviewed, in the questions asked, in the size of the interview sample, in the inclusion of other research materials, and in the identification and use of themes from within the data ". Instead of using qualitative interpretative software or other assistant tools to process the data, I relied on my subjectivity to conduct the reading of the data. I moved from empirical data and thematic analyses back and forth to refine the final themes. I frequently went back to literature to read about theories which are related the research. In the repeated procedures, the respondents' narrative and their sense of the outside world were highlighted and linked to the theories, thus it is possible to discover the unconscious elements in their words about identity, power and other related concepts.

Some information coincides with previously theorists' viewpoints and could be explained thoroughly with certain paradigm; however, there also appeared sparking points that went beyond my imagination before I interacted with the respondents. The strategy I used in coding is a combination of inductive and deductive coding regarding theoretical sensitivity (Seale, 2012, p.368). Through coding process, the data was abstracted and then sorted into thematic categories. Firstly, I looked for recurring "patterns," which means shared experiences, reoccurred moments and frequently mentioned key words from different interviewees were identified and abstracted; secondly, I did not neglect the exceptional information expressed by respondents reflecting the diversity of reality. I thematically analyzed all the codes and sorted them into several categories, from which themes were formed. Based on the grounded theory, the analysis procedure built a bridge from empirical data to construct theory, and consequently, theoretical propositions were revised and explored further.

## **5.5 Ethical reflection**

There are four principles and widely accepted ethical consideration in social research (Bryman, 2012, p.135), namely, harm to participants, lacking informed consent, invasion of privacy and deception. I will discuss the principles and link to ethics reflection in my research. Concerning harm to participants, different ethical guidelines



describe from different angles but the core consideration is same that avoid possible emotional or physical harm to the research subjects (ibid.). The physical harm does not exist in my research because the only process with subject's participation is the distant interview through Wechat application in smartphone. Considering possible expense on internet connection, I always suggested to respondents that the interview should be done in a Wifi accessible place, such as at home or coffee shop. Considering the possibility of potential harm that will cause any uncomfortable feelings, when I began to ask questions, I reminded them that they could withdraw from the interview whenever they felt discomfort. No respondents reflected this condition. Furthermore, to protect confidentiality and participant's data (Bryman, 2012, p.137), the personal information of each interviewee was not be stored in any form. Besides, I used fake names for my papers to protect their privacy.

One important principle of informed consent is that the participants should always know the research process (Bryman, 2012, p.138). I did not have a chance to print out the consent form and let my interviewees sign the paper because I chose a long-distance telephone interview. However, I explained to the respondents about the research once they agreed to do the interview. I read the consent to them about who I am, where I am, what my research is for, why I need to talk to them, and how the data will be used, and when they were clear with the research, then the interview started. My reading of the consent form was recorded.

Another ethical reflection is about cultural difference, which makes some of the questions sensitive and easily generated inaccurate understanding between the interviewees and me. Sensitive in social research relates to context and cultural norms and values (McCosker et.al.,2011). Although the current research has no relation to sensitive issues like sexuality or death, or issues that might generate stigmatization or political threat (ibid.), it is a study that promotes the interviewees to talk about their private experience, namely, family relationship, spouse, and child. Chinese is a conservative country compared with western countries, and correspondently questions about gender, power, and family members are easy to arouse interviewees' subtle psychological reaction. To tackle the problem, I technically changed the format of sentence frequently to avoid their alert and encourage the interviewees to talk more.

For example, instead of asking them "Do you think that social media communication influences the relationship with your husband?" , I preferred the question like "Will you transfer the links in social media to your husband? ". The second asking is apparently helpful to make them talk more about gender comparing with the first question.

The last issue is also the limitation of the research that was related to language obstacle. One obvious example is about the understanding of some key concepts like social media. As I mentioned before, China has a censorship policy regarding foreign social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter or YouTube, people have no commonsense of what social media is and its definition, when they were asked about the daily use of social media tools. I usually took examples of Chinese platforms to make them generate an association. My leading attitude in interview kind of influenced the interviewees subjectively and the potential impact was not being evaluated. Same challenge existed when I was translating the recorded transcript in Chinese into English, although it is not a language barrier between me and participants. The study is not only a qualitative research, but also a study of meaning, in which words and language is the core medium. "Language difference" causes meaning losses in the translation when researchers have the same non-English language and the research will be published in English (Van Nes et.al., 2010). As a social scientist, I have common social and cultural background with the interviewees, and it is my responsibility to capture the meaning generated during my research, although there is no language difference in data collecting and first analysis. My solution of language difference in this phase is to select the most fitting words in English to translate the phrase and later coding to increase the validity and quality of the research.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I elaborated the reason why I selected current methodology of the thesis. Following the recommendations from sociologists, qualitative research approach was applied because it is typically useful in understanding social behaviors, and consequently semi-structured interview was employed as the method of collecting data. The interview was an interactional communication between the interviewees and me, in which the mothers and I collaborate to participate in the meaning-making process of understanding current impact of social media on Chinese new mothers. To pursue the

valid of the research, ethical consideration and methodological limitation were discussed. As a researcher, I must face the language barrier and cultural difference, which are existing in my study, but I tried to minimize the negative influence of the methodological preference.

## **Chapter 6. Analysis and discussion**

In this chapter, findings from my analysis are presented and then linked to core concepts and theories introduced in theory frame chapter. I also cite some previously relevant studies and compare the results with my research. Qualitative is promising to support or verify previous research and even promote to generate new theories based on solid analysis process. This section offers an in-depth understanding of the media practices of a particular group of users in China and unfolds the complex social, cultural, economic, and political context that the practices are situated in.

### **6.1 Active audience and everyday social media**

In this part, I decode the description of the interviewees about their media practices in daily context and relate the discussion to relevant concepts and theories in cultural studies and media studies, namely active audience. Livingstone (1999) suggest that sociologists employ a wider definition of new media and at the same time pay attention to social change more instead of only discussing the outcomes of technological development in the communicational field. In my point of view, mothers' daily media behaviors are not the aggregation of the mundane and the minor living chips, but these mediated practices reflect the socially determined reality and the fluidity of important concepts in social science.

#### ***6.1.1 Prevailing new media***

Mobile users are exceeding the users of laptop or computer in amount when accessing the Internet in China. As I mentioned in the introduction, at the end of 2016, 731 million of China's population are connected to the Internet, and according to another report, 87% of them are mobile users. Social media is defined as synthetically social applications (综合性社交应用), and it has become the dominant channel for Chinese internet users to share social information. Social media platforms develop rapidly, thus in 2016, a commercial survey reported that 56 % of Chinese urban citizen were users of social media (社交媒体). The reality caused trouble in my interview because the interviewees and I encountered the dilemma of defining news and media. Almost all the mothers admitted that they rely on the mobile phone to be informed with outside information, whether what they are reading is news? How do we define the activity of

reading? When I was trying to ask my warm-up question like “What media do you use often?”, the respondent replied, “Do you mean reading news or broad getting informed?”; When I asked, “What kind of social media do you use?”, They questioned “What social media do you mean ? ” I think it is not a unique confusion, but a widely existing issue. It is impossible to define social media in a simple clarification, and within such a context users’ understanding of media and news is changing profoundly. When new media form is scrutinized, it is productive if we discuss the newness from the perspective of the audience. Livingstone (1999) demonstrated that new media have outstanding characteristics including owned by individuals, diverse formats, convergent information and interactive features, and to explore the new media within current society, more attention should be focused on social changes and the transformation of audiences. In my interview, the mother informants offered their experience of living a social mediated life:

*“I hold my mobile phone in hand at anytime, anywhere. I just cannot live without it even when I was laying on the bed in my post-partum period” (Wang).*

“The Cell phone is an instrument that preserves diffuse, pervasive roles which demand that the incumbent is available almost all the time because such encompassing availability can be upheld even when individuals are highly mobile and involved in other social or private activities” (Geser, 2004, p.241) . The only time they do not stare at the mobile phone is when they are doing something that needs the absolute concentration, for instance, driving or writing. However, once they can withdraw from the activities even only one minute, they will scan their smartphone when waiting for the traffic light. The average using time of the mobile phone is different among the mothers, from one hour to four hours daily. But it is evident that when they answer the using-time questions, the interviewees are not able to give a clear account. They use the mobile phone for social media when they are alone, and it is also their child/children’s bedtime. From 8 pm to 10 pm is a hit time of engaging with social media almost for all of them. It is also widely agreed that mothers should not use the mobile phone when playing with children; massive addicting to the mobile phone have caused self-blaming, because

*“It is harmful to my kid. I saw a photo of two pairs of mom and child. One pair is reading a book, and the other is playing mobile phones. But I cannot stop using it even when I am accompanying my little boy” (Mu).*

### **6.1.2 Active audience**

Active audience theory is re-evaluated by sociologist and has become a mainstream paradigm to challenge several key assumptions about television audiences (Livingstone, 1999). Audiences “[...]as users are increasing to be understood as plural (i.e. multiple, diverse, fragmented), as active (i.e. selective, self-directed, producers and consumers of texts), and both embedded in and distanced from specific contexts of use” (ibid.) Mothers’ preferences show the diversity of obtaining childrearing information from different channels, whereas they give priority to social media as the uppermost avenue. I found that they have no idea of the definition of social media, probably caused by the different technological discourse between the western world and China. When I tried to give them an example of social media platforms in China like Wechat, Weibo or QQzone to let them make a choice, they were reminded immediately and then evaluated Wechat and weibo or other social media applications. The different interpretation of social media make people confused, and some of them think Wechat is the only social media platform in China. In this research, as I discussed before, social media could not be literarily defined as a simple notion. Mothers’ preference on different social media tools based on their sense of credibility, value and other individual factors.

*“I switch from Wechat and Weibo occasionally when I am seeking health information” (Zhang).*

*“I am a fan of medical subscriptions in Wechat, but I also follow some verified doctors’ miniblog, the Weibo” (Bo).*

New technologies offer numerous information through different accessible channels, and switching between different platforms is very easy. Users might jump from a social media site to another application, and if alerting notice sent on other internet services is shown at the top of the smart phone’s screen, they are possible to click and then be linked to new information. The seamless shuttle activity across different surfaces

connects various formats of media content coming from different sources making mothers' choice diversified. Previous studies regarding parent's information seeking behavior focused on the accessibility of information, data quality and user-friendly design of websites (Cline,2001). In an extensive survey, parents' utilization of health-related information showed their tendencies of choosing online sources, and consequently, those easy access ones are more applauded (Khoo, et.al.,2008). Parents mostly trust traditional sources more than the Internet (ibid.). However, today's social media environment displays a more diversified and complex situation, and consequently, researchers need to consider people's behaviors and drives with crossing-disciplinary perspectives. In my research, on the one hand, mothers' option of different digital media tools is based on their practical needs. For instance, when their child was sick, they need information that can help them judge whether it is necessary to see a doctor or stay at home. If they need general health education information to avoid potential risk, they will read professional knowledge disseminated by medical experts. On the other hand, their preference of different sources is determined by a variety of factors, and the multiple mechanisms make their behavior diversified. Just like what Seale (2002) discussed that medical audiences are situated in a complex environment in which their exposing of media forms and media contents are changeful and unfixed. My respondents' reply related to this issue supports this assumption:

*“When my child is sick, I tend to use Weibo to search relevant information because it is more convenient and the information there is more targeting. I searched keywords then I got a great deal of tweets or comments posted by other parents who were experiencing the same thing as me. When my little boy goes to bed, and I can have a rest, I open my Wechat and read friends moments or other parental subscriptions” (Bo).*

Mothers' acceptance of information from each platform reflects their different personality, values, and personal background. Hill (2009) studied people's inclination of TV programs and found that different choices reflect people's different identities. Cultural studies suppose that audience reception of media content is a process of decoding and their interpretation of the message is socially constructed. When mothers decode the message they are getting from different social media platforms, they subjectively apply practical tragedies to maintain their values and identities. The

relevant researcher also focused on the issue and described that the behavior helps mothers to preserve their “old identity” (Gibson, 2013).

*“I read a doctor’s subscription, a sleeping-management subscription and a vaccine and immunization subscription. I only trust information provided by someone who has been trained professionally and has independent thinking, which would help me to identify useful messages. But I need to make a judgment by myself. Selecting what kind of information is a complex and long-term process and I choose those consistent with my personal values. I am not sure if it has an influence on my identity, but I believe that you are what you believe and you do that to strengthen your values” (Tao).*

Although Tao did not realize if her choice is related to her identity, she expressed the same idea with Woodward’s understanding of the constitution of identity that is profession, class, and gender. In cultural studies, identity is both single and plural, and “Identity gives us an idea of who we are and of how we relate to others and to the world in which we live. Identity marks the ways in which we are the same as others who share that position, and the ways in which we are different from those who do not” (Woodward, 1997, p.1-2, cited in Bird, 2003, p.90). People’s showcasing of their identities also conveys what they want to be and what they need, and their thirst for learning more is also caused by ideological parent model, which will be discussed in later sections.

*“The subscriptions in Wechat offer methods and values at the same time, but I think values are presented more. I select these sources because I read books before and I knew what my values and standpoints is. Then, I will identify among abundant of resources and tend to choose which is consistent with my values. The process shapes my self-confidence system” (Tao).*

Tao is an editor working for a news magazine, and she also received a master’s degree in liberal arts. Her higher educational background influences her attitude towards her taste of health information.

*“There are plenty of information about how to choose between the different brand of*



*vaccines. Various parental applications hold different viewpoints. Some support local products; others suggest buying imported medicines. I believe in China-made medicines. I think that it is associated with my values. I was raised in an environment that we were all using vaccine by local doctors. In Shanghai, the quality of the medicines is guaranteed. I am not to say I am wholly correct. I am subjective as well as my judgment” (Hu).*

*“I participated some communication groups in Wechat and subscribed some experienced mother’s subscription. I have my view. I tend to believe in sources which are more objective and more scientific. Frankly speaking, what to believe and what to abandon both are personal business. It is not the responsibility of the publishers” (Li).*

Mothers in my research shown the different level of self-cognition and I noticed that mothers who have higher education background are more likely possible to talk about values, identity and themselves. However, no matter what their careers are, they all expressed the same feeling about self-determination in selecting social media products. This kind of performance is related to what social scientists noted as the agency. Being the agency, people have the capacity of reflexive and purposive behavior (Giddens,1984, cited in Silverstone,1994), which including personal and collective actions. Silverstone argued that agency reflects active engagement with media “define our involvement with the rest of everyday life” and other essential social structures (Silverstone,1994).

### ***6.1.3 Transforming audience***

Sociologists argued that postmodernity society is experiencing a process of detraditionalization and individualization (Carpentier, et.al., 2013). With the transformation of the society, audiences and their usages of media are encountering the same transforming situation in a series of aspects, namely technological, organizational, cultural, political, economic and social (ibid.). Some concepts are describing new characteristics of audiences in the different context, like diffused audience, and elusive audience. Audiences are deemed as users or consumers of technological services, and the noticeable features are fragmentation and individualization (ibid.). In New technology, new audience, Silverstone argued that the complexity of media

environment generates new audiences different from the audiences of television, and she also emphasized the focus of social studies on transforming audience (Silverstone, 1999). I realized that mothers' role in their engagement with social media manifesting the feature of diversity. They are individuals with the personal mechanism, and sometimes appear in groups/community in Wechat platform; they are consumers of different sources of content and technological services; they are producers of information disseminating what they trust. Although scholars are debating how to define them, I prefer Gassner's standpoint (Gassner, 2007, p.127, cited in Carpentier, et.al.,2013, p.6). "As long as there are any media, there will be an audience and vice versa. The question to be asked is rather if the nature of the audience has changed and in what way and due to what circumstances this has happened."

In my interview, mothers' engagement with social media tools manifests individuation in many forms, some of the differences could be explained by concept of media literacy in information studies field. I think the perspectives and research from information studies about parent's health literacy are helpful to analyze their choice. In information studies, Parents' health literacy was initially noted as comprehensive and functional skills to understand health-related materials (Baker, 2006), and the relationship between reading ability and health outcomes were studied to grade parent's health literacy (Rudd, 2007). Nutbeam (2000) broadened WHO'S definition and conceptualized health literacy into functional, interactive and critical levels. Some researchers from economic studies also discussed health literacy related to information seeking and self-management (Hesse, et.al., 2005). Scholars use the phenomenographical methodology to study health literacy of the particular group of people (Yates, et.al.,2012; Bonner & Lloyd,2012; Lloyd et.al., 2013). Similarly, they explore people's health literacy in the everyday context and focus on health promotion, health protection, disease prevention, health care and maintenance, and systems navigation (Rudd,2007). However, information studies emphasize the importance of material condition, while partly neglect the role of media representation and interactive meaning-making process between media and audiences, which constructs the present mediated environment. Another debatable issue is that the progress of technological development is always a dynamic and ongoing process, which means in a fluid social reality, the profound influence of media should be considered associated with changing of discourse.

*“This is my first time being a mother. If I don’t follow the books, then I must rely on the experts in social media. I am growing up with my kid without knowing who are right and who are wrong. But I am the one who needs to address problems. All the information they post is only methods, while I need to test myself to see which method is appropriate. There are wide debates between western-training doctors and traditional Chinese therapists on how to take care of children in social media, especially about the normal disease. I tried them all, one by one, to verify the right method” (Zhang).*

*“I read a lot about infant early education in social media. There are always different opinions. How can I do? I had a look at negative views firstly; then I read some supportive opinions. If (people’s) bad experiences are beyond good ones, then I won’t take my baby to the infant’s courses” (Su).*

*“After the birth, a mother is often suggested to drink warm soup to produce more milk. My husband told me that he read from the parental application it is better to drink soup made of younger roosters because hen soup is likely to reduce a mother’s milk. However, the grand generation in my family insisted that the traditional menu is using hen soup. Different views were conflicting. My husband is relying on new knowledge. I am not so stubborn. Finally, I drunk both soup and my milk was not affected. I always listen to myself. (Hu)”*

Carpentier et. al. (2013, p.7-p.8) addressed individualization of audiences fed by the need of self-realization, self-expression, self-representation, but their deeper engagement is hindered by limitations, namely accessibility, knowledge, literacy, and trust. This argument sheds light on the diverse strategies of mothers’ reading of health information in social media. Apparently, mothers’ reception of information causes different results, and almost all of them declare that they will not accept the information, even if it sounds useful. Consequently, no matter who is publishing the information, these active audiences have their own decision, which is noted by Seale (2002, p.44) that is “The life of media content depends on the interaction of producers and audiences and the construction of meaning is the core process.”

#### **6.1.4 Power and empowerment**

Regarding the new generation of audience, another important issue worth discussing is power and empowerment, which contributes to audiences' strengthened capacities to communicate (Carpentier, et. al. (2013, p.7). In my viewpoint, power and empowerment are interrelated but distinguished concepts, especially in the cross-disciplinary study. I would like to discuss empowerment in the broad context including the medical field, and correspondently span to social and cultural context by linking with power structure which goes beyond health and medicine circumstances. The starting point of the argument is based on mothers' daily practices in social media platforms, from which pervious research and my study with specific empirical data will be deliberated.

Being a process and outcomes, empowerment has the meaning of empowering and being empowered, thus the definition of it is diverse (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995). Literature review regarding empowerment and social media shows that social media benefits and challenges patients, but it is a tool of empowerment with promising advantages, such as “community engagement, information sharing, data collection functions, appointment setting, prescription notifications, providing health information, engagement of the elderly, improved participation, autonomy, motivation, trust, and perceived self-efficacy” (Househ, et.al., 2014, p.56). From the narration of interviewed mothers in the research, we can see the empowerment is not an obsoletely passive process, meaning active when being empowered. Regarding outcomes of empowerment, there appears the shifting of power structure between individuals and the health care system, and that might be related to the social background in China.

*“The doctor I am following in social m Wechat disagrees with prescribing Chinese herb medicines. I learned his point of view as well as his logic judging process. I agree to do not use herb medicines. When I went to see the doctor in the hospital, I asked the doctor ‘could you please don’t prescribe the Chinese herb medicine?’ But I was refused. I went back home with the medicines, but I didn’t allow my mother to give the medicine to my daughter. That caused conflict between my family and me. Usually, I can control. If the little girl is not too sick, I will stick to my way. But, when I go to the office, and the girl is still coughing, my mom will give her medicine. I have no choice. Especially, if my*

*husband opposes to me neither”(Tao).*

She also mentioned that she is using information obtained from Wechat to “fight against “the system power”, I consider this behavior is reflecting outcomes of empowerment.

*“It is tough to persuade them not to use Chinese herb medicine. I keep on educating them about herb medicines’ side-effect...it is related with Chinese medical system. Parents consider doctors are reliable, but doctors need to be identified. Western medicine cure illness, while Chinese herb medicine is for profits. In an environment with unqualified pediatricians, I have to determine by myself to reduce the risk. I cannot see my kid to experience additional injection or prescription. I am not fighting against my family’s attitudes but the whole system. This is the most horrible thing” (Tao).*

Being empowered suggests that through learning and self-diagnosing, mothers gain the power about medicine-choosing and treatment decision, and consequently the patient-doctor relationship is challenged because mothers are supposed to suspect or distrust doctor’s profession.

*“I obtain a lot of knowledge in social media; then I can judge doctor’s diagnoses. When I asked the doctor if it is necessary to apply moisture cream on my child’s body with eczema, he answered, ‘It is useless.’ This response gave me an impression that he is not reliable. I will change to another doctor” (Chen).*

Tao also shared her struggles as well as the outcomes. Individual empowerment is impossible to generate improvement of collective decision-making or community resources until the empowerment is general. I noted that because of the limited medical resources and uncompleted health care reform, over-prescription is a common social phenomenon. The relationship between the public and health care providers is tense. New health communication in social media is a kind of empowerment that challenges the relationship between doctors and patient. Carpentier, et. al. (2013, p.7-p.8) argued that audiences’ practices in media could have an impact in the political and democratic field, and furthermore the more intensive their action, the more possible the social change might happen.

The power relationship in medical sphere has influenced the relationship in domestic life. As I introduced before, Chinese family structure has experienced transformation from nuclear structure to traditional structure, especially for young adults who have their new younger generation. In a family with three generations living together, the conflicts between the different generations are inevitable. The new mother is in a vulnerable role in the household. Findings from my interview link these factors, which means the empowerment through mothers' daily utilization of social media might influence the domestic power structure; it also makes everyday context matters in audience studies.

*"I share information that I read from smartphone applications to my family members. I installed the application in my husband's and my mother-in-law's smartphone. I don't tell my mother-in-law what she needs to pay attention to, while she knows something about how to take care of my child from the daily updating of the application. How do I know she read the message? I know, because when we have dinner together, she mentions often. I certainly know" (Hu).*

*"I intentionally delay or comment other one's post in my Weibo updates. My purpose is to let my husband see the information, for instance, how to cook for younger children or how to assure their security. Via him, his parents are informed. In the beginning, his parents declined our message, but we are insisting. Currently, we compromise to them. Because they want and need to help us with the child (Wang)."*

*"I ask my husband to transmit the baby-caring methods to his mother if I think they are important and necessary information. I won't say these things to her directly. Probably 20% percent information will be transferred (laughing) (Chen)."*

*"I have to work in the daytime, and I won't judge my mother-in-law's behaviors. But the child is with me in the evening and on the weekend. Then I will do as my way ...At first, we have many contradictions. For instance, I think use baby car seat is a principle, but she doesn't use it. I cannot change her mind and feel exhausted to persuade her always. Now, I am not so tough-minded, and she owns the power: we only use the car*

*seat when driving on the high-speed road but don't use it in downtown (Chen)."*

In the family, power relationships are influenced subtly. Social media could empower young mothers of knowledge and decision-making right, but the capacity depends on the personality of the mother and their different relationship with their family members.

*"I have confidence with my child. I am raising him not bad." (Mu).*

Her mother-in-law passed away, and she is taking care of the child herself.

*"Regarding the child's health, I am the commander" (Hu).*

She is living with her mother, and her husband's parents are living in France; There is another mother who also feels satisfied with her influence in the family, saying,

*"I am more confident and having much more voice because my methods have an effect. My family and husband thus trust me now. They believe in my decisions and let me determine (Su)."*

According to Foucault's understanding of power, power does not belong to agents such as individuals or the state or groups with particular interests; rather power is spread across different social practices (Jorgensen & Louise 2002, p.18). The interviewees did not mention "power" spontaneously and directly in our conversation, maybe because of the different habit of using the word "power." In common Chinese language, power (权利) is usually related to the privileged right or belong to the particular groups, but not a neutral word. However, according to the interviewees' narration, the power structure is changed and challenged at various levels and is associated with reflection like fighting against, conflicting, quarrel disagreement and compromise. The process is filled with the time-consuming and energy-exhausting dilemmas and reflects mother's hard negotiation with the outside world.

## **6.2 Health and social media**

### **6.2.1 Influence of support**

Social media platforms offer alternative medical information to mothers, and it is especially meaningful in China's current health care system. In shortage of pediatricians

and low-profit of pediatric prescriptions (Lifetimes.cn, 2016), at children's hospital in the major cities like Beijing, each pediatrician generally sees 70 to 80 children in a working day. Because there are only 0.43 pediatric specialists for each 1,000 children in China, for the great mass of parents, access to necessary medical service is not easy. My interviewee Li complained about her encounters

*"I feel scary in the hospital. X-ray photos and biological examinations become meaningless. Familiar prescriptions and limited effect always. I went to see the doctor hopefully, but back home disappointedly. After several times, I will not choose to visit hospital" (Li).*

Under this condition, support from social media platforms is valued among mothers. Many recently emerging technologies are "empowering" in the sense that they increase the range of alternative actions available to individuals or social groups (Geser, 2004, p.241)

According to the literature review, different social media platforms are contributing to provide social support to parents and new mothers in different ways (McDaniel, et al., 2011; Gibson & Hanson, 2013; Doty & Dworkin, 2014; Palmén & Kouri, 2012). The term "social support" has "dozens of connective definitions" and specifically is targeted on addressing social stress to minimize its negative effect (Sarason, 2013, p.4). Basic categories were verified by scholars, namely emotional support, esteem support, belonging support, network support, appraisal support, tangible support, instrumental support, and informational support (ibid., p.5). I do not tend to assess the social support in the research, whereas I will discuss the supportive functions related to my specific research questions to see how the mothers feel about the social support. When I talked with the interviewees I found that it is not practical to identify the different types of support and to evaluate specific effect of each category of social support in their everyday life, because mothers' feeling about being supported is complicated and interweaved. However, social support reflected in the research can be sorted into three levels, namely, knowledge support and psychological support and relational support.

*"Doctors won't give detailed accounts, but group members in Wechat platform teach me how to take care of my toddler. What they are saying makes me calm down and think*



*of how to deal with the situation. We comfort each other and then the tense mood is released” (Chen).*

It is common sense among mothers that social media is a useful library to provide alternative parental information, although there are some shortcomings like commercial advertisements and information overload. Knowledge support is helpful to increase the efficiency of risk management related to child’s health (Lupton,1999, p.9).

Mothers value emotional support. One interviewee commented that

*“I read information in social media whenever I am alone. I feel it is a way of relaxing. There are no other channels to release depression and seek help (Pi).”*

This feeling of “be relaxing” or depression released could be sorted into emotional support getting from the social media platform. Furthermore, some mothers reported their experiencing of postpartum depression, and they think social media platforms offer opportunities to obtain peers support and help them to tackle the depression.

*“I am on the edge of depression because of endless cleaning, cooking, and feeding the child day and night. I chat with people to reduce my extreme emotion. I cannot talk to my mother. There is no way for her to understand me. I talk with friends and strangers in social media...I feel better now. I cannot live without my telephone and my Wechat” (Mu).*

*“I felt very stressful when my child was sick. I was so suffering that I almost got postpartum depression. No support. I felt like I was the only one who was enduring everything. I searched on the Internet, but it returned with few materials. Then I found some subscriptions in social media and I began to know more about this illness...gradually, I passed through” (Pi).*

I can see from these responses that emotional support including support from their peers. The communication between the mothers and other mothers they met in social media were their listeners, and talking with them was useful to solve psychological problems. The actual effect of support is various from person to person, but they all have the

similar sense of being supported. In my research, there is another kind of support that I would like to name it "the relational support". I found that mothers' engagement with social media might helpful to improve their spouse's involvement in parenting and influence their relationship with fathers.

*"When I read articles in the applications, I purposely pay attention to postpartum depression. I knew I am sensitive to harmony-changing. I have read about it, and then I can prepare for that. I also suggested to my husband to avoid quarreling with me. That helps" (Li).*

*"I continue to send what I have read to her father to emphasize how he is important in the child's life. I always want to remind him that although our daughter is a baby, father is important. He had slow feedback, but now he has begun to feel something. I think he can realize the importance of being a father now. I believe he opened the links I sent to him" (Tao).*

*"Maybe we could not communicate effectually, or I could not express my thoughts clearly. He was passive about learning parental knowledge and would not like to participate. I send messages to him to let him read. He is reading what I sent to him now" (Chen).*

This is an interesting finding in my research. Social media offers information as well as the communicational avenue in the family. When mothers inform fathers through the mobile phone, the messages are likely to be "no longer ignorant" and it might make fathers more responsible for actually actions (Katz, 2003,p.17). Fatherhood is socially constructed as motherhood, and how it is represented in social media platforms is likely to affect how mothers' cognition of them. The family information-sharing behavior has two sides effects, on the one hand, fathers are passively involved in the parenting practices; on the other hand, the stereotypes of fatherhood are challenged. Researcher (Li,2016) analyzed the popular reality show airing in China and found that in urban China fathers show their desire to take part in childrearing and "liberal, emotionally warm fathering style" is valued in the popular culture. Lupton addressed that Fatherhood is a political issue, which is relating to gender and intimate relationships in

western societies (Lupton & Barclay, 1997, p.3). Thus the mothers' social media practices to some extent are challenging Chinese traditional masculinity ideology. Additionally, regarding the technological facet of this issue, the "domesticated technology" (Green & Holloway, 2013) make it possible for consuming communicational technology in people's home and the outside world is imported to the family. Instant and mobilized person-to-person communication begins to influence the traditional face-to-face communication and changes the connection of social networks. However, at home, the spouse use smartphone to share links randomly rather than read the information to each other or watch the news together. Personal media are independent of time and location, the new forms of "person-to-person connectivity means that households lose some of their importance a snore of social networks" (Tuomip, 2004, p.230), and the home and family will be transformed.

### **6.2.2 Surveillance and consumerism**

Foucault (1978) critiqued that the body of the child is under surveillance from the beginning of his life by "an entire watch-crew of parents, nurses, servants, educators and doctors" (Foucault, 1978, p.98). The emergence of m-health potentially reconfigures the subject of surveillance and complicates the concept of the panoptic gaze (Lupton, 2012, 2013). Lupton argues personal information is gathered via the use of surveillance technologies, through which individuals can be sorted into different categories and subjected to assessments and people even voluntarily use technologies to exert self-surveillance on themselves. Interviewees voluntarily involved in the surveillance activities through using various functions of social media platforms.

*"Starting from the pregnancy, the application tells me what I should eat, use, and prepare every day. There are also pieces of knowledge associated with the different periods of baby's development. Just like an invisible ruler" (Hu).*

Seale discussed that extremely strong interest in childhood is attributing to the surveillance (Seale, 2007, p.121). Media has lots of influence on shaping the surveillance by giving advice, setting up examples and erecting the standard of health (ibid.). Because health is always a socially constructed concept, in the medical context, health is dynamically shaped by the actively communicational interaction between

health providers, patients, and other related groups (Lupton, 2012, p.2). Medical surveillance exists both in macro-level and micro-level (Lupton, 2012). In the study, different sources of information discursively frame a template of normal children, then parents reflect on the discourse and carry out surveillance. If the surveillance process is commercially related, the standard will become a system to exploit children. The direct influence of this surveillance is that the social divide is widened.

*“Some posts suggest appropriate menus of the different age of children, but I cannot follow these directions. I just cannot. I must consider our financial status and buy this uncommon but expensive food only for my child. Other recommendation of toys or products...I can just afford some of them” (Mu).*

Seale remarked it as the “commercial exploitation of childhood”, which starts with distinguishing one child from others (Seale, 2007, p.122), thus what mothers are doing is likely have an influence on the children’s identity.

The other consequence of this surveillance is the spreading of globalized consumerism. Mother Su expressed her thirst of western style of child-caring

*“I want to know what the kindergarten look like in developed countries? How do they cultivate child’s personality? Are there any scientific methods? My child doesn’t have a chance to experience, but I want to know. Thus, I can influence him in our daily life” (Su).*

Her aspiration of comparing with western standard shown the efforts of globalization in mothering market and the cultural bias of Chinese parenting and educational ideology. Other mother talked about the same need of western parental or medical knowledge, from my point of view, which reflects their lacking self-confidence and demand of setting up their identities.

Health information in social media is frequently connected with privacy and personal data utilization (Lupton). In my interview, however, mothers don’t care about their privacy and their children’s privacy. They said that they seldom or not often publish

their children's photos in social media except for several special moments like pregnancy, baby's first walking or other special events.

*"I update my friend's circle in social media when my child is sick. Sometimes I am blue...publishing makes me feel better. It is a way to relieve my feelings...and my mood will become indescribable peaceful" (Su).*

### **6.3 Motherhood and social media**

Researchers, particularly sociologists have widely discussed the ideology of motherhood. Being an expert is what the mothers are doing, and their practices of keeping up with the knowledge are the process of the internalization of the ideology of motherhood in their daily media behaviors. In my interviews, mothers did express their aspiration for knowledge and said they are keen to learning.

*"I need to learn parental scientific knowledge urgently through social media channels, books, and online courses. I don't know if it is a good thing or a bad thing" (Su).*

*"Why I must learn more? Too much information and it might be because the updating speed of knowledge is too fast" (Pi).*

*"The application helps me keep up with...I did not know about children... push myself learn quickly...I read books every night in the evening, but that is very slow. Reading the information in applications is like eating fast food" (Hu).*

Firstly, they are influenced by the ideology of "expert mothers" and want to make their best to be an expert mother through continuing learning. Researchers have analyzed the ideology of expert parenting from Foucauldian perspectives and attributed the parenting practices to "expert knowledge systems" measuring, monitoring and regulating of individuals to manage populations, which means the families are colonized by expert discourse (Lupton & Barclay, 1997, p.35). As I discussed in health and surveillance, different stakeholders and interest owners act upon families through discourse practices. In such a discursively structured society, mothers' reception of various forms of ideology is influenced by different factors. They have autonomy to

select and follow from different ideologies of mothering. Hall (1973) asserted that any message sent would prompt one out of three possible readings in the receiver. The “dominant” reading was the communication intended by the message sender; a “negotiated reading” was one where some elements of the dominant reading were accepted, and some rejected; and an “oppositional” reading occurred when an audience member rejected a reading in its entirety (cited in Holloway and Green, 2013, p4). Secondly, in their replies, scientific is a highly frequent word presenting their standard of themselves and to differentiate with others, and of course, self and others are important notions of understanding mothers' practices and social media's influence on motherhood. They want to be consistent with scientific motherhood ideology, but they show anxiety of learning. Although they want to learn as much as they can to fulfill the children's need for their particular development period, it is a dilemma that sometimes they are not sure about the credibility of the information, and the learning process is likely to produce new anxiety. One interviewee Zhang talked about the paradox that *“The more I read, the more I am nervous. I don't know what is correct. In each month, I worry about different things, and I turn to seek new knowledge. But the problem is not solved. The good thing is I learned how to analyze and won't lose my head. I can prepare medicine in case my child catches a cold”* (Zhang).

About the complexity of mothers' behaviors, there appears another finding. Previous research supported that usage of social networking sites is helpful to increase mothers' self-confidence and strengthen them to be “more than a mother” through their information-seeking or assurance on their decisions (Gibson, 2013). Mothers tend to accept the ideology of “good mother” in social media and continuously endeavor to be “intensive mother” through comparing with the ideal mothering represented in social media (Chae, 2015). I would like to extend the result of these researches a bit and discuss the complex identities. In my interview, intensive mother like Tao has not stopped after informed, but continue to disseminate her knowledge.

*“I give suggestions to other mothers, such as my colleague. When she complained about bad sleeping of her baby, I reminded her that was because she was too nervous. To address the problem, she needs to relax herself. She took my advice and told me that my saying made their sleeping better than before”* (Tao).

Another interviewee Su also had the similar comment

*“I used 2 hours to write down my experience and shared it in social media platform. I even stopped strangers on the road if I saw their baby has eczema on the skin. I would like to communicate with them. I have successfully helped my colleague to diagnose her child. I made my efforts, and that was wonderful” (Su).*

Corresponding with mothers’ self-confidence from being informed, they are proud of spreading what they learn and want to influence more people. Firstly, associating with the concept of transforming audiences, when the mothers diffuse what they obtain from the social media platforms, they change from passive users to active producers. In the encoding/decoding process, they devote labor, such as seeking, reading, interpreting and digesting to make the communication a circle. Secondly, their identity is not only determined by what they learned from others but also completed when they give out. In the different periods of consuming and producing, the identities presented in the procedure might transform. Not all interviewees embrace the second phase of sharing, and some reported that they seldom participate in publishing their experiences or leaving their comment in social media platforms because of their personality, and there is no apparent connection between their self-confidence as an intensive mother and their confidence as an active message publisher.

In my interviews, a mother probably feels confident when her family recognizes that her decision is correct, but she will not like to tell others about her experience and try to maximize the confidence. Hill (2014, p.145) connects a paradigm of “circuit of spectacle and narcissism” with reality TV and extends the notion of identity and performance from psychology to audience studies. Inspired by Hill, I link Goffman’s concept of “performance of the self” to analyze the behaviors of these sharing-loving mothers. They are individual case by case, and their performance of themselves make their identities fragmented in the media environment; their strategies to maintain or renew their identities are diversified as well. Concerning their cognition of ideal mother, they replied:

*“I have no idea what kind of mother I am” (Wang).*

*"I am a mother who is thirsty for knowledge. I am always enquiring, but I am also impatient. I don't know how to describe...I hope my child is growing up healthily and happily...Concerning other things, like early education or body examination, I will not ask more. Even if the doctor suggested that my child was not able to say, mom and dad, I was not anxious...the reason might be I learned more of information" (Chen).*

### **Summary**

In this part, I analyze the rich empirical data collected from my interviews and sort them into relevant themes, namely audience, health, and motherhood. By linking mothers' narration to the theories and concepts of media studies and cultural studies, their social media practices are situated in the critical social studies. I argue that in the fluid and mobile society, mothers are active audiences with diverse identities in current health communication. Through analyzing their daily use of social media, I explore the domestic relationship between family members and health communication in social media together to present the power structure in the household. Concerning society level, empirical data of the interviews supports the theories that health information in social media could empower the mothers in different formats, and furthermore, I find that it might have an influence in challenging the systematic power in China.



## **Chapter 7. Conclusion**

This research is a cross-disciplinary study based on the ethnographic methodology focusing on Chinese new mothers' health-related information practices in social media. The research situated in social science applies theories from cultural studies and media studies to theorize mothers as transforming audience in a new media environment; thus their personal experiences and sense are valued. By employing semi-structured interview to collect empirical data, the aim of the research is highlighted as understanding mothers' everyday media behaviors to explore the influence of social media on motherhood in individual and social aspects.

Previous studies offered a universal viewpoint that social media is playing a significant role in benefiting mothers by providing social support, empowerment and shapes the identity of mothers. My research emphasizes that mothers in the health communicational environment should be viewed as transforming audiences and their behaviors, their cognitions and their engagement with social media present the characteristic of complex individualization. It is the responsibility of the qualitative research to verify, supplement, amend and move forward the relevant theories. Based on this viewpoint, I use the empirical data to reflect the classic theories or concepts in media and cultural studies to offer diverse reading. There exists challenge of connecting diffused concepts including active audience, transforming audience, intensive mothers, health and surveillance spanning different areas. I start from cultural studies but not limited in that field, media and audiences are my interest and focus. In my study, young Chinese mothers were an optimal group of audiences that they commonly actively engage with social media to obtain information related to childrearing, while their individual preferences present their diversified identities. In their daily media use, they negotiate with themselves and outside world to express their voices. The study provides a vivid description of the group of audiences.

The value of the research could be divided into two aspects, namely methodological value, and theoretical contribution. The quantitative research approach is widely used in reporting and depicting the user's behavior in various kinds of surveys targeted internet users or social media users. The methodology benefits outlining of mass audiences but neglects the diversity of the reality and complexity of humanity. Lupton

(1999) asserted empirical research on audiences is important because audiences are less predictable, more fragmented or more variable in their engagement with media. My research relies on the methodology to display the mothers' daily media practices and use theoretical methods to understand the dynamic relationships behind their behaviors. Current qualitative research concerning women's usage of social media in medical related issues mainly focuses on western society which makes mass uses in developing countries marginalized, and my research fills the gap by providing a Chinese case.

Concerning theories, I started from displaying a dynamic understanding of social media and considered the particular situation of the media in China. In my research, social media is viewed as a combination of different platforms and applications instead of an individual tool or a function. I am trying to reflect the previous theories and then offer the original data to illustrate the ideas through my analysis. Firstly, I combine concepts of active audiences and transforming audience together to lead the discussion of mothers' role in health communication. Instead of simplifying their role as information or technologies consumers, I view them as a department in health communication with compound identities and individual characteristics. Their identities are associated to illustrate their use of social media, their behaviors of reception and their actions related with maintain well-being. Contrary to previous studies, issues existing in general research are slightly discussed, such as privacy protection, digital divide, and information inaccuracy, because my interviewees seldom reflected on these matters.

The findings of the thesis concentrate on mothers and their relationships within the family and the changes of power structure influenced by their media engagement. Firstly, I find from the research that well-acknowledged social support assumption in social media studies could be extended to a new dimension of support, namely relational support. I argue that social media has become an avenue of domestic communication and fatherhood is influenced. In previous studies, fatherhood and motherhood are dichotomous in the family, but when mothers use social media platform to gain knowledge and then to transfer information to their spouse, the stereotype of fatherhood is strengthened, and the interaction between father and mother might change the format of the family.

Secondly, through analyzing the ideology of motherhood, I connect the ideal mother, motherhood and social media together. I read from the interviewees' responses that social media might shape an ideology of mothering, while mothers' individualization plays a more important role in their decoding of this ideology. In other words, the influence of structured ideology is limited when different audiences take various participating strategies. Thus, there appears another finding that in the new media area, new audience's engagement with media might be more complicated than before, and the relationship between media, technologies, audience and society is re-shaped.

Thirdly, the research offers an opportunity to consider the issue of power structures affected by mothers' participation. Young mothers are empowered with knowledge to challenge the current systemic power in China, although the fight between individuals and health care system is impossible to accomplish. Their status in the family variously depends on their negotiation with the symbolic power in the family. Their efforts of making their voice heard and respected are limited.

Besides, the research centers on Chinese society and introduce the contextual background of the study, which makes it possible for my research to offer a valuable original data of the specific setting. China has a huge population of internet users and is becoming the top one mobile country beyond other developed countries, while corresponding sociological research is scarce in current academia. My study focus on mothers, mothering is not only a natural activity but also a political and social activity, thus research targeted on them is likely to have a profound influence in various sections including social, economic, cultural and political.

Although I am endeavoring to map the relationship between media and audiences in a selected context, the limitation of the study is inevitable. Firstly, The language barrier as I mentioned before risks the considerable loss of meaning during translating and coding process; Secondly, the sampling has some limitation. The ideal criterion of the interviewee is the mother who has the new child younger than one-year-old. However, in my practical interviewing, I changed the standard to mothers whose child is younger than three years old. The changing of the sampling might influence the result of the research somehow.

The research provides a sociological angle to understand today's media and communication environment in developing countries. Further research is necessary, especially for researchers who concern about gender, social media, and everyday context. In the research, the relationship between domestic technologies and family power structure is analyzed in the Chinese context. I think with the development of smartphone and social media application, this issue should be paid more attention also in the developed countries in the soon future, because our family, our life, our way of raising offspring will all transform.

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## **Appendix**

### **1.Consent form**

Hello, my name is Qimei Chen, and I am a student at Lund University. I am doing a master thesis research about Chinese mothers' usage of social media to obtain health-related information. To collect empirical data for the research, I plan to interview Chinese mothers. If you agree to participate the interview, I am going to interview you through the Wechat audio telecom and ask you several questions. Our conversation will be recorded and will last approximately 40 minutes.

The information provided by you in the interview will be used for research purposes. I will change your name into code to protect your personal information, and any information appears in the research report will not allow identification of your individual information.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can decide whether take part in the study or withdraw as your wish. However, I may contact you to double check if it is necessary.

The final paper may be published in Lund University. Once again, I would like to thank you for agreeing to take part in this study. If you have any questions about the research at any stage, please do not hesitate to contact me:

Qimei Chen

Email [cch7mm@gmail.com](mailto:cch7mm@gmail.com)

### **2.Interview guide**

Thesis title:

An audience study: Chinese young mothers' usage of social media to obtain health-related information

Part 1. Media using

/Source

- 1)What media do you use often?
- 2)What kind of media do you rely on obtaining information of child-caring?
- 3) What kind of function in social media do you usually use?

/Time

- 1)How many minutes do you use media daily?
- 2)How long do you use social media each time?
- 3)When do you use social media?
- 4)When do you never use social media?

/Scene

- 1)Where do you use social media?

/Frequency

How often do you use social media daily? How many times do you log into the social media platform in a day?

/Preference

- 1)Which social media do you like?
- 2)What kind of content are you interested?
- 3)Why do you choose that social media?

Part 2. Value and feedback

- 1)Do you recommend the social media to others? Who ? How? What theme?
- 2)How do you judge the value of the social media? (supportive/informative/fun but useless/careless)
- 3)Does the content in social media change your thoughts? Behavior? How?
- 4)How do you use the information you get from that source?
- 5)How do you compare the social media and other traditional media formats in credibility? Function?

Part 3. Social media and social relations

- 1)Do you share children related information in your family? To who? When? How often? About what? Do you spouse also do the same thing?
- 2)Does anyone inside /outside of your family influence your contacting of social media? How?
- 3)How do you choose from the similar or conflicting information both from social

media and from social relations (like from friends/parents/peers/spouse, etc.?)

#### Part 4 Social media and mothering

- 1)What is important to you as a mother?
- 2)How do you learn to be a mom?
- 3)What role does social media play in your motherhood?
- 4)How your usage of social media has changed since your pregnancy to delivering and mothering?

#### Part 5 Social media and health issue

- 1)Does social media change your understanding of health? of health child? How?
- 2)Does social change your relationship with medical experts or specialist? How?
- 3)Does the social media increase/decrease your expense on medical service? How?

### 3.Interviewees background

	Name	Age	Profession	Education	Location	Child's age	Interview time
1	Li	27	Housewife	undergraduate	Chongqing	7 month	20 minutes
2	Wang	32	Teacher	postgraduate	Lanzhou	4 month	42 minutes
3	Chen	30	Software engineer	undergraduate	Wuhan	1 year	34 minutes
4	Zhang	28	Teacher	undergraduate	Beijing	10 month	40 minutes
5	Bo	30	Public servant	undergraduate	Beijing	2 year	50 minutes
6	Su	29	Teacher	undergraduate	Chendu	2 year	34 minutes
7	Tao	36	Editor	Master	Beijing	1 year	78 minutes
8	Hu	33	HR Manager	Master	Shanghai	5 month	55 minutes
9	Mu	29	Mother at	High-school	Yangquan,	1 year	32 minutes

			home				
10	Pi	31	Engineer	Master	Hefei,	2 year	44 minutes
11	Ying	35	Engineer	Master	Shanghai	3 year	45 minutes