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Does the Great Fire Wall Cause Self-Censorship? The Effects of Perceived Internet Regulation and the Justification of Regulation

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## **Does the Great Fire Wall Cause Self-Censorship? The Effects of Perceived Internet Regulation and the Justification of Regulation**

### **Abstract**

#### **Purpose**

– The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of Internet censorship which is represented by the Great Fire Wall, on Chinese Internet users' self-censorship.

#### **Design/methodology/approach**

– A 3\*2 factorial experiment (N=315) is designed. Different patterns of censorship (soft censorship, compared censorship and hard censorship) and the justification of Internet regulation are involved in the experiment as two factors. The dependent variable is self-censorship which is measured through the willingness to speak about sensitive issues and the behavior of refusing to sign petitions with true names.

#### **Findings**

– The results show that perceived Internet censorship significantly decreases the willingness to talk about sensitive issues and the likelihood of signing petitions with true names. The justification of censorship significantly decreases self-censorship on the behaviors of petition signing. Although there are different patterns of Internet censorship that Chinese netizens may encounter, they do not differ from each other in causing different levels of self-censorship.

#### **Research limitations**

– The subjects are college students who were born in the early-1990s, and the characteristics of this generation may influence the results of the experiment. The measurement of self-censorship could be refined.

### **Originality/value**

– The study contributes to the body of literature about Internet regulation because it identifies a causal relationship between the government’s Internet censorship system and ordinary people’s reaction to the regulation in an authoritarian regime. Unpacking different patterns of censorship and different dimensions of self-censorship depicts the complexity of censoring and being censored.

### **Keywords**

Internet regulation, Self-censorship, the Great Firewall, Censorship justification

## 1. Introduction

The proliferation of the Internet brings tremendous impact on the society, and simultaneously shows its power in unmasking the illness of the society and challenging the authority of political regimes (Schwartz, 2005). The regulation on the Internet could be seen all around the world ( Thomas *et al.*, 1998) and China is a typical example to pierce the governance on the Internet and how people react to the regulation. The Chinese Internet market has expanded rapidly over the past decade and the Internet penetration rate in China has reached 53.2% by the end of 2016 (CNNIC, 2017). Research questions about how Chinese people use the Internet for political or civil purposes and how Chinese government regulates the Internet have garnered enormous attention internationally (e.g., King *et al.*, 2013; King *et al.*, 2014; Roberts, 2015; Kou *et al.*, 2017). The Great Fire Wall (GFW thereafter) is a well-known Internet regulation system which endorses stringent governance to filter sensitive or untrue contents and block access to Western websites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Google. Prior studies have made great efforts to explore what kind of content are likely to be censored (e.g., Hughes and Wacker, 2003; King *et al.*, 2013; King *et al.*, 2014), how the filtering system works in different place and by different censors (e.g., Dong, 2012; Lacharite, 2002), how censorship is conducted on social media (e.g., Bamman *et al.*, 2012; MacKinnon, 2009). With most of the previous research mainly focusing on the mechanism or the technical infrastructure of Internet regulation, only a few studies have explored how Chinese netizens cope with the censorship system (e.g., Mulvenon, and Chase, 2005; Guo and Feng, 2011; Yang and Liu, 2014; Roberts, 2015), and even few of them addressed the impact of Internet censorship on the public with a causation relationship. This study aims to examine the

influence of Internet censorship on Chinese users' tendency of self-censorship through a controlled experiment.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. The Mechanism of Internet regulation in China**

Scholars from various disciplines have examined the mechanism of Chinese government's regulation on the Internet (e.g., King *et al.*, 2013; Qiu, 2000; Taneja and Wu, 2014). Murdoch and Anderson (2008) offered a summary of five methods that Chinese government adopted to control the Internet: ACL control, URL and DNS blocking, BGP hijacking, and keywords blocking. Bamman, O'Connor, and Smith (2012) tracked 56 million messages from Sina Weibo (a popular Microblog Service in China), and 11 million Chinese-language messages from Twitter, and found that more than 16% of the Weibo content had been removed, and they detected a blacklist of politically sensitive terms which signaled a high possibility of being deleted. Using modern computer-assisted text analytic methods and large-scale experimental approach, King and colleagues (King *et al.*, 2013; King *et al.*, 2014) found that Internet censorship in China aimed to preclude collective actions that had occurred in the real world or might be fostered or mobilized in the cyberspace, whilst posts criticizing or sneering at officials, the government or some of the policies were retained.

In addition to the government who imposes regulation on the Web, domestic Internet content providers are also important subjects that implement Internet censorship. To comply with their license conditions, Internet service/content providers (ISPs/ICPs) in China are required to follow the legal rules to screen online information, and delete hazardous or untrue information, including those threatening the security of nation, the unity of ethnic groups and

the stability of the society, and those spreading rumor, pornography and violence (Qiu, 2000). Violating the rules can jeopardize their operating licenses (Levy, 2011). Social media services such as Sina Weibo encourage the users to report each other for releasing untrue or dangerous information or disseminating rumors (Fu *et al.*, 2013). Search engines should also obey the policy of Internet regulation (Ng, 2013). The Search Monitor Project (Villeneuve, 2008) compared the search outcomes of Google, Microsoft, Yahoo and Baidu, all of which located their servers in China at the time. The project revealed that users' queries to Google were filtered by the GFW and Baidu's results linking to foreign content also had to pass the GFW. Jiang (2014) compared the accessibility, overlap, ranking, and bias patterns of query results from Baidu and Google, finding that three-quarters of Google's links were blocked, which were much more than the links provided by Baidu.

Furthermore, studies have found that the location and the specific time points also influence the implementation of Internet control. The intensity of control is more stringent in Beijing and nearby provinces, while the east coast enjoys more freedom (MacKinnon, 2009; Qiu, 2000); the regulation is much tougher during special dates such as June 6<sup>th</sup> (the Tian'anmen Event burst out on June 4<sup>th</sup> in 1989) (Brady, 2009; Zhao, 2008) or the spring of each year when the annual meeting of the National People's Congress is held (Stern and Hassid, 2012).

This study introduces three patterns of regulation according to the three scenarios that Chinese netizen may encounter in their daily usage of the Internet. The first one is called "soft censorship" referring to the condition that people have limited access to online information because the GFW has blocked some western websites or some sensitive local

websites, although a lot of people may not realize the function of the GFW. For example, the local search engine could not provide all of the results that people searched, or the links to some websites are broken. The second is “compared censorship” which describes the scenario that some people circumvent the GFW to access blocked content and find the difference between the information within and outside of the wall. The third one is “hard censorship”, which refers to the possibility that sometimes when an individual posts something sensitive or untrue, the censor will delete the content, or the ID account of the person might be shut down. Under such circumstances, the individual may feel direct censorship on himself/herself, rather than general censorship on the whole population.

## **2.2. Chinese Internet Users’ Reactions to the Censorship**

A fundamental question arises after the mechanisms of Internet censorship are clarified: how Chinese Internet users react to the control on the Internet? Prior studies have found two typical strategies that Chinese Internet users take to cope with Internet regulation: bypassing the Great Firewall or censoring themselves.

To obtain online resources that are not available in mainland China, some Web users resort to various types of software to cross over the GFW (Mathieson, 2006). Guo (2005) found that the majority of users that were able to evade the GFW were students trying to apply for foreign universities or learning English. However, as Yang and Liu (2014) found, bypassing the GFW always led to harder controls and more sophisticated filtering method. The game of censorship and anti-censorship becomes an “arms race” that when the censor implements governance, those who are censored will figure out technical approaches to circumvent the GFW, then the censor will adopt stronger measures to keep the control effective (Yang and Liu,

2014).

Self-censorship is another strategy that Chinese organizations and individuals carry out to cope with the regulation system. Cook and Heilmann (2013) unpacked self-censorship as public self-censorship referring to the fact that individuals internalize some aspects of the public censor and censor themselves, and private self-censorship that an individual suppresses his or her own attitudes where a public censor is either absent or irrelevant (p. 179). Das and Kramer (2013) defined “last-minute self-censorship” on social media as filtering one’s own thoughts or expression before shared it to the community. Self-censorship in the current study has a strong connection with politics. Scholars have studied self-censorship among lawyers, journalists (Stern and Hassid, 2012) and media organizations (Lee and Lin, 2006; Lee and Chan, 2009) in China or Hong Kong. For example, Lee (1998) focused on self-censorship of media institutions and defined it as “a set of editorial actions ranging from omission, dilution, distortion, change of emphasis, to choice of rhetorical devices by journalists, their organizations, and even the entire media community in anticipation of currying reward and avoiding punishment from the power structure” (p. 57). Self-censorship reflects people’s disposition of bending to the power holders (Lee and Chan, 2009), accepting censorship and avoiding punishment or political risk to keep themselves safe (Simons and Strovsky, 2006). Loury (1994) elaborated that the underlying mechanism of self-censorship was the sake of political correctness. Political correctness exists because a community may need to assess whether the beliefs of its members are consistent with its mainstream values, and the surveillance on public expression is an efficient approach to pursue political correctness. Ferreting out deviants creates the fear of ostracism, increases the possibility of



self-censorship and causes the silence of discrepant opinions.

Although the conceptualization of self-censorship is fully discussed in prior literature, very few scholars have provided a valid and reliable way to operationalize it. Hayes and associates (2005) developed a measure of “willingness to self-censor” which was defined as the withholding of one’s true opinion from potential audience who might disagree with that opinion. However, the scale is not politics-oriented and it highlights the tendency of silence one’s own voices in a hostile opinion climate. According to Hayes and colleagues’ further study (2006), the hard core of the “willingness to self-censor” scale is non-participation. They argued that in a polarized, hostile political climate, some people would decide to keep away from public forms of opinion expression because it might set themselves up for scrutiny, criticism, or even social ostracism. Thus, rejecting to participate in public discussion or other political activities is actually an act of self-censorship, in which a person censors himself/herself for not delivering or doing something that might bring risk to self. Empirically, Hayes *et al.* (2006) found that dispositional self-censors were less likely to engage in public political activities than those who showed lower tendency of self-censorship, controlling demographics, frequency of political discussion and psychological variables such as political ideology, ideological extremity, political efficacy, and dispositional shyness. Hayes *et al.* (2006) also cited the piece of Rosenberg (1954–1955) which noted that the reason that some people chose non-participation attributed to the worry about negative social costs. Based on the literature reviewed above, we posit that self-censorship in the current study is related to the political environment in an authoritarian regime, specifically, it refers to Chinese netizen’s response to the Internet censorship system; keeping oneself away from political participation

is a typical performance of self-censorship. Since political discussion and signing petition are two important dimension of political engagement (e.g. Cruickshank *et al.*, 2010), this study operationalizes self-censorship as self-silencing one's opinion expression about political topics and refusing to sign petitions about political issues.

### **3. Hypotheses and research questions**

Although Chinese Web users' reaction to of Internet censorship has been addressed in a few of the prior studies, some questions remain unsolved: Is there a causal relationship between Internet censorship and Web users' self-censorship? Will the impact of Internet censorship vary on different people who experience different patterns of regulation? Will the justification of censorship from the point of view of social stability and national security influence people's perception of Internet controls?

#### *3.1 The Effects of Censorship on Self-censorship*

Although censorship is a great threat to speech freedom, as Lambe and Reineke (2009) revealed, people have different standpoints about the proper role that the government should play with regard to speech freedom. Some people are likely to tolerate government restriction on expressive freedom under a broad range of circumstances; some people emphasize the harmful outcome brought by speech freedom and view government intervening as necessary and important; the other people prefer the government staying out of free expression. Ozkan and Arikan (2009) drew on a student sample to investigate citizens' attitudes towards online censorship in Turkey, and found that "[w]hile the percentage of participants in favor of legal regulation of web access is 43.5%, this ratio decreases to 16% when the opinions about the court decision related to YouTube are questioned" (p.53). Mishler and Willerton (2003) found

that Russian public expected the state to take the responsibility for decent media content and therefore tended to support censorship, even if this meant governmental control over the media (p. 114-115). A survey in Russia (Pietiläinen and Strovsky, 2010) discovered that the fear of new things and a high need for protection by a strong government contributed to Russian people's support for censorship; elderly, women, people with low education, low social status, and people living in rural areas were inclined to support moral censorship, while elites and people on the upper levels of the managerial hierarchy were more likely to support political censorship.

A variety of studies revealed that many Chinese people were either unaware of the GFW, or unconcerned by it (Damm, 2007; Liu, 2010). The survey conducted by the Internet Society (2012) reported that 89% of Chinese Internet users agreed or strongly agreed that they “have full access to all of the information that is available on the Internet”, compared with a global average of 85%. As a huge number of Chinese users surf on the Internet for the purpose of entertainment, shopping or socialization (CNNIC, 2015), rather than browsing/seeking for political information or visiting blocked websites, most of them may not encounter Internet censorship or realize the filtering function of the GFW. As China is characterized by high level of collectivism and the GFW is located in everybody's computer, people may have a perception that “everybody lives within the wall so I have nothing to complain about”. Prior studies have provided empirical evidence that even though some people are aware that there is a cyber Iron Curtain that separates them from the global landscape of the Internet world, their tolerance of Internet censorship runs relatively high (Guo and Feng, 2011; Li, 2009). Cook and Heilmann (2010) noted that acceptance was one of the censees' expressed attitudes

toward censorship. Dong (2012) revealed that nationalism and cynicism were two backbones of the self-regulation embedded in Chinese Internet users' online discussion. On the one hand, when there are natural disasters or confrontations with other countries, an atmosphere of nationalism will spread over the cyberspace in China, because nationalism brings an illusion of "political correctness" (Dong, 2012). On the other hand, cynicism can be seen everywhere in the cyber world because Chinese netizen tend to talk about social problems in a jocose or irony way when they perceive that serious discussion may bring risk (Yalkin *et al.*, 2014). Roberts (2015) elaborated that in an environment where censorship is rampant, people may realize which topics are off-limits from the signals released by the cases of other people who are censored, and perceive that expressing opinions about such topics may bring troubles. As a result, the fear of government retribution is very likely to cause self-censorship and stop further expression about the sensitive topics. Thus, a hypothesis is proposed:

*H1: Perceiving Internet regulation will lead to Chinese Internet users' self-censorship.*

### *3.2 The Effects of Different Patterns of Regulation on Self-censorship*

Nevertheless, people do not always succumb to dominant structures, they may resist these structures under certain conditions (De Certeau, 1984). Reactance theory (Brehm, 1966; Bushman and Stack, 1996) states that when a person perceives a threat to or a loss of freedom, he or she will experience a negative psychological state which motivates him/her to restore the freedoms that are threatened or taken away from himself/herself. There are "two manifestations of the occurrence of reactance: actual attempts to restore freedom, and increased perceived attractiveness of the lost or threatened option" (Brehm, 1989, p. 72). Worchel and colleagues (Worchel and Arnold, 1973; Worchel *et al.*, 1975) conducted a series

of experiments to test reactance theory and the results were consistent with the theory. Furthermore, Brehm (1989) noted that a specific threat on freedom causes two types of implications, one is that the threat applies to the same freedom on future occasions; the other is that other freedoms of the same general nature may be threatened. However, all the reactance is aroused by the explicitly threatened freedom, and it does not spread out over the freedom that is threatened by implications (Brehm, 1989, p. 73). And, the more freedom has been threatened, the greater should be the magnitude of reactance and consequent resistance (Brehm, 1989, p.75). With the help of big data approaches, Roberts (2015) tracked the bloggers whose post had been removed and found that experiencing with censorship did not prevent them from writing about political topics, instead, some of them continued to repost similar topics or even posted more sensitive content.

Therefore, Internet censorship may yield different outcomes, complying with the authority and censoring self is one possibility, but taking actions to resist the filtering infrastructure is another choice. This study proposed that different outcomes might be caused by different patterns of censorship. As stated before, there are three typical scenarios in which an ordinary Chinese web user may encounter Internet regulation: soft censorship, compared censorship and hard censorship. Soft censorship brings equal regulation to everybody within the GFW, compared censorship gives more manifest comparison about the information within and outside the GFW to those who evade the wall, whilst hard censorship directly threatens a specific person and may initiate emotions of fear, anxiety or anger. Previous studies have shown that a lot of Chinese Internet users are living within the GFW comfortably, even though some of them realize that the government have endorsed control on the Internet (Fallows, 2008;

Webster, 2011), because what they want to obtain is mostly entertainment services (Guo, 2005), the information about economy and living standards other than politics (Dong, 2012). Therefore, people who are obedient to the Internet regulation should be differentiated from those bypassing the GFW or those going through hard censorship by themselves. We are curious about whether different patterns of Internet censorship may elicit different impact on the web users, thus, we attempt to answer the following research question:

*RQ1: Will the relationship between perceived Internet censorship and users' self-censorship vary depending on different patterns of censorship?*

### *3.3 The Effects of Censorship Justification on Self-censorship*

Reactance theory also suggests that the threats to or elimination of a freedom can elicit reactance of varying strength, depending on various factors such as perceived legitimacy or justification of the threat (Brehm, 1966). Li and colleagues (2016) noted that the development of Internet requires data confidentiality, privacy, and trust. But one of the most significant obstacles in the future of the Internet is security on sensing layer, network layer, service layer and application layer, which calls for new security infrastructure based on new technical standards. From the point of view of governance, the global computer network is highly dangerous (Cox, 2003). At the early stage of the Internet diffusion in mainland China, the regulatory measures on the Internet became a challenging problem because there were no regulatory precedents and it was difficult to evaluate its potential influence on the society (Wang, 1999). With the rapid expansion of the Internet across China, it constitutes a complicated field of opinions in which objective expression are mixed with untrue information and irrational comments, as a result, the Internet has been regarded as a powerful

threat to the regime (Feng and Guo, 2013). The netizens' discussion about sensitive political events, their attempts to organize or mobilize collective actions, the rumors or untrue information disseminated across virtual communities and a wide range of western websites are viewed as harmful to the security of the nation and the stability of the society. In addition to the fact that power holders perceive the Internet as dangerous, a lot of ordinary users also do not trust it. Guo (2007) reported that only about 30% of survey respondents considered general information online reliable, more than 80% of the users applauded the governance on the Internet (86.1% in 2003, 82.4% in 2005, 82.7% in 2007), and 84.8% of the respondents in 2007 believed that the government should be the main body to regulate the Internet. Chua (2009) acknowledged that appropriate regulation actually contributed to the solidarity of collective identity and helped to purify the virtual sphere. Westphal and Towell (1998) conducted a survey on 510 Internet providers from 40 countries and asked their attitude toward Internet regulation, the results indicated that the majority of the Internet providers agreed that the Internet should be regulated, especially the indecent content and potentially criminal materials. Furthermore, Chinese citizens trust and support their government more than their counterparts in Western democracies do (Chen and Dickson, 2008). The justification of Internet censorship may work together with the potential trust in government, and stimulate the subjects to obey the rules of Internet regulation, therefore increases the likelihood of self-censorship. Hence the following hypotheses are proposed:

*H2: The justification of Internet regulation will increase Web users' tendency of self-censorship.*

*H3: The justification of regulation will positively moderate the effects of censorship on*

users' self-censorship. Specifically, when users are exposed to the justification of regulation, the positive effects of censorship on self-censorship will be strengthened.

#### 4. Method

##### 4.1 Design and Measures

This study designed a 3 X 2 factorial experiment to test the hypotheses. The factors (independent variables) are Internet censorship with different patterns and the justification of Internet censorship. To initiate different patterns of Internet censorship, we used the local search engine in China: Baidu.com. As discussed before, to comply with the Internet regulation policy and guarantee its dominant market share in Chinese search engines, Baidu often blocks or filters sensitive search inquiries. If a user inputs a sensitive keyword in the search engine, either the system warns "According to specific law and regulation, the content that you want to search cannot be shown", or it automatically filters the content without any notification. We asked the participants to complete two tasks through the search engine: 1), find how many people took part in the Occupy Central protest and how many people took part in the Anti-Occupy Central campaign in Hong Kong; 2), find the third sentence that Jing Chai said in her documentary film *Under the Dome*.

Occupy Central was an important social movement that took place in Hong Kong in 2014, intending to push the central government of China into granting an electoral system which "satisf[ies] the international standards in relation to universal suffrage" in Hong Kong Chief Executive election in 2017(OCLP, 2014). Anti-occupy Central is another campaign that people gathered to show their opposition against the protestors of Occupy Central and demonstrate



support for the government, because they thought that Occupy Central had brought negative impact on the economy, transportation and security of the Hong Kong society and it was harmful to the future of Hong Kong. The reports about the Occupy Central rally was censored in news media of Mainland China, while the reports about Anti-Occupy Central were encouraged and the media did a lot of propaganda that the number of participants in Anti-Occupy Central was much higher than the organizers' anticipation. Chinese Internet users could find out how many people joined in the Anti-Occupy Central rally on Baidu, but could not find the number of participants in the Occupy Central rally. However, Google provided both of the numbers.

*Under the Dome* is a documentary film about environment pollution in China, released by the well-known Chinese reporter Jing Chai. The film tried to find out the sources and solutions of air pollution in China, as well as unmask the regulation loopholes. The film had garnered over 150 million views in China in a few months, provoking national discussion about pollution and environmental policy in the nation (Tran, 2015). The film was blocked on Chinese websites by early March 2015 and people could not see it within the GFW, neither Baidu nor local video-sharing websites could provide the video. However, the video is available outside of the GFW and people could find it on YouTube easily.

If we ask the subjects to search for the number of participants in Occupy Central and Anti-Occupy central, and the third sentence that Chai Jing said in her film, the subjects could not accomplish the task if they do not bypass the GFW. Thus, we designed three scenarios to control different patterns of censorship. The subjects in the first scenario were asked to

complete the search task on Baidu. It cost them several minutes to search but they could not find all of the answers. Baidu gave warnings about the sensibility of Occupy Central if people input it as a search inquiry. Although it did not provide a notification when the keywords of “Under the dome” or “Chai Jing” were input in the search engine, the search results displayed a lot of information about why the film was blocked. Therefore the subjects in the first scenario would perceive the existence of the GFW, even though some of them might not necessary notice the warning. We called this pattern of censorship as “soft censorship” in terms that everybody in the nation was constrained by the GFW.

In the second scenario, the experimenter suggested the subjects to circumvent the GFW when they could not find the answers, and we provided a VPN service on the computers for them to access to Google and YouTube. Thus, the subjects in the second scenario would perceive a “compared censorship” because they got to know explicitly that the information within and outside of the GFW was different and they could find the answers if crossed over the GFW.

We brought “hard censorship” in the third scenario. When the subjects were bypassing the GFW to watch the documentary film as the subjects in the second scenario did, the experimenter pretended to receive a phone call from the Internet Supervision Department of the university and told the subjects that the flow to overseas websites were detected and not permitted in the campus, so they had to shut down the oversea lines and stop their tasks. As a result, the subjects in the third scenario would experience “hard censorship” that directly pointed to themselves.

The second factor in the experiment is the justification of censorship. We found some articles about the reasons of Internet censorship and modified it as an academic literature. We showed it to some subjects but did not show it to other subjects, thus we had two levels of the justification of censorship. The following paragraphs are what had been shown to the subjects about the “justification of censorship”:

*“Censorship is the restriction endorsed to speech and information freedom, often on the grounds that an act of expression harms or offends the public. Many countries around the world practice Internet censorship. Every country has its own reason to endorse censorship, in most of the cases, is to protect the stability of the regime (Lee, 2001).*

*One of the reasons of endorsing censorship is that expression or information has the potential to hurt the rights of other people or the interest of the country. On the individual level, Internet censorship is necessary to protect people’s privacy. On the country level, when information or expression lurks the secret of the nation and influences the security of the nation, censorship is a more necessary issue (Bimber, 2003).*

*When the expression aims to criticize the regime or the government, or when the information is untrue or irrational, it is likely to be censored. The government can hide some information and prevent it from being distributed to more people, as a result, protect the regime and power. Thus, for the sake of long-term stability, censorship is justified by the government (Boczkowski, 2008) .”*

A control group was involved in the study to make a comparison with the experimental groups. The subjects in the control group were asked to search for two pieces of economic news which were not sensitive and could be found within the GFW, therefore they did not

experience any censorship.

The dependent variable in the study is self-censorship. Based on Hayes and associates' (Hayes *et al.*, 2006) argument about non-participation as a form of self-censorship, we unpacked it into two dimensions. The first dimension is the willingness to speak about sensitive issues. Ten issues were listed to measure the extent to which the subjects wanted to express opinions, including cultural topics and three sensitive issues: the Tian'anmen Event, the protest of Occupy Central and the fact that Google is blocked in China. The subjects were invited to rank the ten issues with a scale of 1 to 10 (1= highest willingness, 10= lowest willingness). The scores represented the average willingness to express about each issue, with low score indicating low willingness to express and high level of self-censorship.

We measured the second dimension of self-censorship by observing whether or not the subjects signed a petition about opening up access to Google Scholar for the development of academic research. Refusing to sign the petition with true names was seen as self-censorship.

Considering that individual differences also predict a person's willingness to speak their opinions in public setting (Willnat *et al.*, 2002) and may confound the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variables, we included political efficacy (Niemi *et al.*, 1991), attitude toward the government, interest in public affairs and experience of bypassing the GFW as control variables.

#### *4.2 Pilot Study*

A pilot study was done to test whether the classification of different patterns of censorship produced the same perception of being regulated. 52 students in a comprehensive university in Southern China were invited to join in the pilot study and randomly distributed

to three groups. The first group was exposed to the condition of soft censorship, the second group was exposed to the condition of compared censorship and the third group encountered hard censorship. A questionnaire tested their feeling of being censorship with a scale from 1 to 7, controlling demographic variables, political efficacy, attitude toward the government, interest in public affairs and the experience of bypassing the GFW. The results of ANOVA showed that there was no difference in the feeling of being censored among the three groups ( $F = .09$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p = .91$ ) and other control variables, indicating that the three groups perceived the same strength of Internet regulation but differed in the scenarios of being censored. Thus, our design to initiate different patterns of censorship is valid.

#### *4.3 Procedure*

The subjects in the formal experiment were enrolled from Higher Education Mega Center in Guangzhou, where located ten universities. The enrollment introduced that the study aimed to investigate college students' abilities to use search engines and each subject would be paid 10 Chinese dollars for the participation. 315 students participated in the experiment and 45 subjects were randomly assigned to each group, 37.5% of the subjects were male ( $n=118$ ), 61.6% of them were female ( $n=194$ ), 1% of them did not report gender ( $n=3$ ). The age of the subjects ranged from 17 to 29 ( $S.D=1.70$ ,  $Mean=20.21$ ). We did not select the students with a background of psychology, journalism, communication and political science in case they might guess the real purpose of the experiment.

Considering research ethics, when the subjects arrived at the experimental room, an agreement was given to them and the experimenters explained the detailed process of the experiment. Then the subjects were told that they could leave at any time when they wanted

to leave, and they would still get paid even if they gave up in the middle of the experiment. Furthermore, all of the data obtained in the experiment was anonymous and would only be used for academic purpose. The subjects needed to sign on an agreement if he/she still wanted to continue the experiment after they knew the procedure of the study. At the beginning of the experiment, the subjects were invited to fill in a questionnaire which included questions about demographic variables, attitude toward the government, political efficacy, experience of bypassing the GFW and interest in public affairs. Then the subjects were randomly assigned to the seven groups shown in Table 1. Group 1, 3 and 5 were asked to complete the two search tasks without receiving any justification about the reason of censorship; group 2, 4 and 6 were exposed to the reading material about the justification of censorship before they began the search tasks. Group 1 and group 2 experienced soft censorship by searching the sensitive keywords on Baidu but could not get full answer to the questions. Group 3 and group 4 were helped to bypass the GFW and completed the task successfully, consequently had a clear comparison about the difference within and outside the GFW and experienced compared censorship. Group 5 and group 6 were also suggested to bypass the GFW but several minutes later the experimenter pretended to receive a call from the university's Internet Supervision Department which notified that the VPN process must be turned off, bringing hard censorship to the subjects. The control group was asked to search for two pieces of economic news without any political sensitivity. After the search task were finished or interrupted, all of the subjects were invited to rank their willingness to express opinions about ten issues, with three sensitive topics mixed in the list. Then the experimenter showed a petition about opening Google Scholar. The subjects were asked whether they were

willing to sign for the proposal, if yes, they could sign with real names to show their support. When the experiment was completed, the experimenters explained the real purpose of the study to the subjects and told the group of people experiencing “hard censorship” that the phone call from the university was untrue, they did not have to worry about being watched by the university.

Insert Table 1 Here

## **5. Data Analysis**

To check whether the process of randomization was effective, a series of ANOVA were run and the results showed that there was no significant difference in the distribution of age ( $F = .75$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p = .61$ ), gender (Chi-square = 17.65,  $df = 12$ ,  $p = .13$ ), political efficacy ( $F = .66$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p = .66$ ), attitude toward the government ( $F = .68$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p = .67$ ) and history of bypassing the GFW ( $F = .67$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p = .67$ ) among the seven groups. Thus the randomization process was successful.

To test H1 which proposed the main effects of perceived censorship on self-censorship, a series of T-tests were run to compare the tendency of self-censorship among the control group and the experimental groups. The results of T-tests in table 2 showed that there were significant differences in participants' willingness to discuss the Tian'anmen Events, and Google being blocked, but the comparison between the control group and the experimental groups was marginally significant when it came to the topic of occupying Central. The second measurement of self-censorship was signing petition about opening Google Scholar with true names, however, we found that some of the subjects chose to sign with a name that was different with the name signed on the experiment agreement. Therefore, we coded the measurement of signing petition with three dimensions: refusing to sign, signing with a true

name, and signing with a fake name. The results of Chi-square test showed that there was significant difference between the control group and the experimental groups (Chi-square= 5.88,  $df=2$ ,  $p=.05$ ), and the experimental groups encountering different patterns of Internet censorship were more reluctant to sign with true names and more likely to refuse petition signing. Thus, H1 was generally supported.

Insert Table 2 Here

The research question (RQ1) raised by the current study addressed the moderating effect of different patterns of censorship on the relationship between perceived Internet censorship and users' self-censorship. To answer RQ1, a series of ANOVA were run to compare the tendency of discussing sensitive issues among the groups that were exposed to different patterns of Internet censorship. However, for all of the three sensitive topics, the results of ANOVA tests were not significant, indicating that experiencing different patterns of Internet censorship did not lead to different levels of self-censorship in terms of talking about sensitive topics. With regard to petition signing, the result of Chi-square test (Chi-square=7.47,  $df=4$ ,  $p=.11$ ) showed that there was no significant difference among the groups that encounters soft censorship, compared censorship or hard censorship.

H2 proposed the main effect of the justification of censorship on participants' self-censorship. Independent t-tests were run to examine whether providing a justification about the reason of censorship exerted significant effect on the willingness to speak about the three sensitive issues. The results showed that the difference only existed for the topic of the Tian'anmen Event ( $t=-1.97$ ,  $df=313$ ,  $p=.05$ ), however, the negative coefficient of t test indicated that the subjects that were primed by the justification reported more willingness to



talk about Tian'anmen Event and showed lower level of self-censorship, which was out of our expectation. The analysis of cross-tab was run to test the effects of censorship justification on petitions signing and the results showed that, there was significant difference in the behavior of signing petition between the groups who read the materials about censorship justification and the subjects who were not exposed to the justification (Chi-square=9.12,  $df=2$ ,  $p=.01$ ). People who are primed by censorship justification were more likely to refuse petition signing, but those who were not primed by censorship justification were more inclined to sign with fake names, therefore H2 was partially supported.

H3 proposed that the positive effects of censorship on self-censorship would be strengthened given the presence of censorship justification. To test the moderating effects, a series of two-way ANOVA were run for the experimental groups, with the willingness to talk about sensitive topics as the dependent variables, different patterns of Internet censorship and the justification of Internet censorship as fixed factors and their interaction involved in the model. However, as table 3 reported, the interaction effects were not significant for all of the three topics. Neither did the cross-tab analysis show a significant difference in the likelihood of petition signing among the six experimental groups (Chi-square=15.02,  $df=10$ ,  $p=.13$ ). Thus, H3 was not supported.

Insert Table 3 Here

## **6. Discussion and Conclusion**

The Internet regulation policy in China has attracted world-wide research interest. Without penetrating deeply in different people's reactions to the censorship under different conditions, it is difficult to understand how the censorship policy is perceived by the public

and exerts influence on the public. The current study identified a causal relationship between Internet censorship infrastructure endorsed by Chinese government and Chinese Internet users' tendency of self-censorship, which was measured by the willingness to speak about sensitive topics and the behavior of signing petition for information access freedom. Although self-censorship of journalists, activists and scholars had been studied in prior literature, very few efforts had been made to explore how ordinary people react to the censorship system, even fewer research tried to build a causation link between censorship and self-censorship. As Tai (2014) discovered, Chinese government's regulation on new media is tougher and more sophisticated than that over traditional media. The finding of this study suggests that Chinese government has successfully induced self-censorship in not just the elite but also the general public, especially well-educated young people, consequently, will silence discrepant opinions and deteriorate the environment of speech freedom. However, the insights from Roberts' (2015) study showed that total information blackouts may inspire rivalry and undermine government legitimacy efforts. It is possible that someday self-censorship may be converted into or replaced by resistance. Future study may need to explore the relationship between self-censorship and resistance, as well as the conditions under which the two consequences of censorship will take place and transform to each other.

This study contributes to the body of literature about Internet control by considering the justification of Internet governance. A lot of Chinese Internet users view the cyber world as unreliable, which justifies the call for Internet regulation (Guo, 2007; Dong, 2012). However, the outcome of this study shows contradictory results regarding the influence of censorship justification on self-censorship. On the one hand, priming the subjects with the reason of

censorship increased the willingness to talk about the Tian'anmen Event, which was inconsistent with the hypothesis. On the other hand, when the necessity of censorship was present, significantly less subjects signed the petition with true names than when it was absent. The conflict is caused by the different measurements of self-censorship and makes it important to take a closer look at the dimensions of self-censorship. The self-reported willingness to discuss off-limits topics does not guarantee real actions, neither does it require the subjects to show their true identities. As Roberts (2015) noted, although Internet censorship and the GFW are known to many Chinese, punishments to the violation of online information regulation are ambiguous and unevenly administered. In most instances, the offending posts are removed; in more severe cases, the ID accounts of the actors would be shut down. The extreme case is that a few people are sentenced for words, but most of them are professionals such as lawyers and journalists or a small group of rumor makers, rather than ordinary web users. Hence, people may have an idea in mind that even though they post something sensitive online, the worst consequence is that the post will be deleted and their account will be closed, as long as they do not do it with high frequency or cause baneful influence to the society. However, signing petition is an important form of political participation (Cruikshank *et al.*, 2010) and an attempt to resist against authority (Shi and Cai, 2006). As King and colleagues (King *et al.*, 2013; King *et al.*, 2014) found, Chinese netizens were individually free but collectively in chain because the online posts criticizing the state, the government or officials were kept, whereas the posts that aimed to spur collective activities were curtailed. Therefore, signing petition with true names may be perceived as more politically risky than verbal expression about sensitive issues, because it leaves evidence of

political behavior to public scrutiny and may bring troubles to self, thus the subjects chose to protect themselves when they were mobilized by the experimenter, either by rejecting to sign, or signing with fake names.

Although this study clarified different patterns of Internet regulation that Chinese Internet users often encounter, the experiment did not find different impact elicited by soft censorship, compared censorship and hard censorship. One possible explanation is that the three scenarios produced the same level of perception about being censored, as it was shown in the pilot study. Put another way, the subjects in the hard censorship condition might not feel greater fear or did not have a stronger feeling of being threatened than the subjects in other groups.

## **7. Limitations**

The subjects in our experiment are college students who were born in the early-1990s, the post-90 generation grows up with high life quality and the Internet has been embedded deeply in their daily lives, thus, their close connection with the Internet and their identity as college students may stimulate many of them to sign the petition about opening Google Scholar. Further study may want to address the same research questions with another sample pool, for example, people living in the rural areas and urban citizens living in the developed areas may hold diverse attitude toward the GFW and react differently to different patterns of Internet censorship.

The operationalization of self-censorship could be improved. The self-reported willingness to express about sensitive topics may not be a valid and reliable way to measure self-censorship, because different issues or topics differ from each other in the level of

sensitivity or have quite complicated backgrounds, thus may bring confounding factors and lead to inconclusive results. Signing petition about unlocking Google scholar is somewhat artificial and has a close connection with the experimental stimuli (search Baidu or Google), which may cause more subjects choose to sign. To refine the experiment, future study could simulate an online community and observe subjects' reactions to censorship in a more natural way.

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Table 1. The Description of the Groups in the Experiment

	With Justification of Censorship	Without Justification of Censorship
Soft Censorship, using the local search engine within the GFW	Group 2	Group 1
Compared Censorship, bypassing the GFW	Group 4	Group 3
Hard Censorship, the process of bypassing the GFW was interrupted	Group 6	Group 5
No censorship		Control group

Table 2. The Difference among the Control Group and the Experimental Groups in the Willingness to Talk about Sensitive Topics

Sensitive Topics	Groups	N	Mean	S.D.	t	df
Tian'anmen Event	Control Group	45	7.10	2.36	2.22*	313
	Experimental Group	270	6.09	2.89		
Occupy Central	Control Group	45	5.32	2.35	1.81 #	313
	Experimental Group	270	4.69	2.15		
Google Being Blocked	Control Group	45	4.32	2.13	2.84**	313
	Experimental Group	270	3.37	2.08		

\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .005$ , #  $.05 < p < .1$

Table 3. The Results of Two-way ANOVA about the Interaction Effect on the Willingness to Talk about Sensitive Issues

Independent Variable	Tian'anmen Event			Occupy Central			Google Being Blocked		
	F	df	Partial Eta Squared	F	df	Partial Eta Squared	F	df	Partial Eta Squared
Patterns of Censorship	0.67 n.s.	2	0.01	0.70 n.s.	2	0.01	0.46 n.s.	2	0.01
Justification of Censorship	8.47**	1	0.03	0.01 n.s.	1	0.01	5.76**	1	0.02
Patterns of Censorship* Justification of Censorship	0.85 n.s.	2	0.01	1.18 n.s.	2	0.01	0.57 n.s.	2	0.01
Adjusted R Square	0.02			0.01			0.01		

\*\* p&lt;.01, n.s. non-significant