

Zihan Gao

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Education

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Madison, WI

PHD CANDIDATE IN INFORMATION SCIENCE

2021 - 2026 (expected)

- Advisor: Dr. Jacob Thebault-Spieker
- Research area: Human-AI Collaboration; Location-based Computing; LLM Alignment; Geographical Bias; Human-Computer Interaction

Peking University

Beijing, China

B.S. IN INFORMATION SCIENCE, B.S. IN PSYCHOLOGY

2017 - 2021

- Advisor: Dr. Pengyi Zhang
- Graduate with Honors

Publications

PEER-REVIEWED CONFERENCE AND JOURNAL PUBLICATION

Zihan Gao*, Yinka Ajibola*, Jacob Thebault-Spieker. The Labor of Language: Auditing Dialectal Erasure and the Repair Burden in Swahili Machine Translation. *The ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency, FAccT 2026*

Zihan Gao, Jacob Thebault-Spieker. PlaceWeave: Understanding Place Through Social Video Narratives and Graph-Enhanced Local Knowledge. *In Proceedings of the 2026 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, CHI 2026*

Zihan Gao, Jacob Thebault-Spieker. Is Your Chatbot a Tourist or a Townie? Quantifying Geographic and Localness Disparities in LLM Representations of Place. *In Proceedings of the 29th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing, CSCW 2026*

Zihan Gao, Yifei Xu, Jacob Thebault-Spieker. LOCALBENCH: Benchmarking LLMs on County-Level Local Knowledge and Reasoning. *The 40th Annual AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence, AAAI 2026*

Zihan Gao, Justin Cranshaw. Jacob Thebault-Spieker. Journeying Through Sense of Place with Mental Maps: Characterizing Changing Spatial Understanding and Sense of Place During Migration for Work. *In Proceedings of the 27th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing, CSCW 2024*

Zihan Gao, Jacob Thebault-Spieker. Investigating Users' Responses to Permanent Suspension on Social Media. *In Proceedings of the 27th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing, CSCW 2024*

Zihan Gao, Jiepu Jiang. Evaluating human-AI hybrid conversational systems with chatbot message suggestions. *In Proceedings of the 30th ACM International Conference on Information & Knowledge Management, CIKM 2021*

PREPRINTS

Zihan Gao, Justin Cranshaw, Jacob Thebault-Spieker. A Turing Test for “Localness”: Conceptualizing, Defining, and Recognizing Localness in People and Machines. *Under Revision at TOCHI, Preprint*

WORKSHOP/POSTER/DEMO

Zihan Gao*, Mohsin Yar Khan Yousufi*, Jacob Thebault-Spieker. Collective Narrative Grounding: Community Coordinated Data Contributions to Improve Local AI Systems. *The 39th Annual Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems Workshop on Algorithmic Collective Action, NeurIPS 2025*

Zihan Gao, Jiaying Lizzy Liu, Yifei Xu, Jacob Thebault-Spieker. From Clips to Communities: Fusing Social Video into Knowledge Graphs for Localness-Aware LLMs. *Companion Publication of the 2025 Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing, CSCW '25 Companion*

Zihan Gao, Jacob Thebault-Spieker. From Fact-Checking to Narrative Grounding: Toward Local Narrative Infrastructures for Epistemic Justice. *The 27th Acm Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing Workshop on Beyond Information, CSCW 2025*

Jieli Liu, **Zihan Gao**, Pengyi Zhang. 2020. Exploring how topic characteristics influence online discussion quality. *In Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology 2020, ASIS&T 2021*

Other Research Activities

RESEARCH CAMPS

- 2025 CSST: Summer Research Institute for the Science of Socio-Technical Systems, CSST2025, Indian Lake, NY
- 2025 Oxford—Berkeley Summer Doctoral Programme, Oxford Internet Institute & UC Berkeley School of Information

Awards, Fellowships, & Grants

- 2025 Student Research Grants Competition (\$1500), University of Wisconsin-Madison
- 2025 Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship (\$3600), University of Wisconsin-Madison
- 2021 SIGIR Travel Grant, SIGIR
- 2021 Graduate with Honors, Peking University
- 2020 Annual Excellent Student, Peking University

Services

PEER REVIEW

- Reviewer ACM CHI conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, 2024,2025*
 - Reviewer ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing, 2022,2023,2024*,2025*
 - Reviewer ACM Symposium on User Interface Software and Technology, 2025
 - Reviewer ACM Conference on Intelligent User Interfaces, 2026
 - Reviewer ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency, 2026
- * means Special Recognition of Outstanding Reviews,

SERVICES

Student ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing,
Volunteer 2022

Presentations

10/2021. Evaluating human-AI hybrid conversational systems with chatbot message suggestions. Paper presentation: CIKM2021, virtual.

11/2024. Investigating Users' Responses to Permanent Suspension on Social Media. Paper presentation: CSCW2024 San José, Costa Rica.

11/2024. Journeying Through Sense of Place with Mental Maps: Characterizing Changing Spatial Understanding and Sense of Place During Migration for Work. Paper presentation: CSCW2024 San José, Costa Rica.

Teaching Experience

2025 Introduction to Web Development, UW-Madison, Teaching Assistant
2022 - 2023 Data and Algorithms: Ethics and Policy, UW-Madison, Teaching Assistant
2020 - 2021 Information Retrieval, Peking University, Teaching Assistant

Mentoring

2025 - now Sanyukta, Undergraduate Student, Computer Science, UW-Madison
2025 - now Xuancheng Tu, PhD Student, Computer Science, UW-Madison
2024 - 2025 Haiyi He, Undergraduate Student, Computer Science, UW-Madison
2024 - 2024 Jingwen Pan, Undergraduate Student, Computer Science, UW-Madison
2023 - 2024 Tara Awate, Undergraduate Student, Computer Science, UW-Madison
2023 - 2025 Rushali Dinesh Bhudeka, Graduate Student, Information School, UW-Madison
2022 - 2023 Xinze Liu, Undergraduate Student, Computer Science, UW-Madison