

# **‘Netizen Mobs’ and Their Performance: a content analysis of participants and their political participation in Chinese online forum**

**Siyuan Yin**

University of Illinois at Chicago  
United States of America  
Syin5@uic.edu

## **Abstract**

In computer-mediated communication, the importance of civility is no less than that in face to face communication. When discussions are exchanged mainly through texts, the prevalence of civil discourse could act as a stronger factor for interpersonal evaluations, while uncivilized behaviors (e.g., rude and irrational words) detract civic engagement and political participation by impeding effective online discussions. This study analyzed cross-sectional data obtained from 588 respondents in Chinese Political online forum *Kaidi Community- Cat eyes Forum* and textual data from each respondent’s postings. The social demographic variables data of each respondent were selected from an online survey conducted by a forum participant. The study assessed the impacts of social economic status, age and engagement of online participation on the level of civility of participants’ online performance, to reveal the composition of ‘net mob’ and discuss factors that influence online performance. The study found that social classes (based on occupation) and monthly income exert no significant effect on online civilized behavior, but the specific uncivilized behavior varies with different social classes. Uncivilized behavior increases with age. The engagement of online participation did not affect the levels of civility of the participants’ online performance. The study contributed a new approach to discussing the Internet, Chinese netizens and their implications for the construction of civil society in China.

## **Keywords**

political online forum; civil performance; social economic status; age; engagement of participation

In China, the internet has provided platforms (e.g., online forums, blogs, microblogs and so forth) to enable citizens to expand their political participation, which is vital to the construction and maintenance of civil society and online public sphere especially when mass media is highly controlled by central government. Among those platforms, online forums have become the most influential ones which facilitate participatory democracy and civic engagement. (Qiang, 2004). As participants in online political discussion, citizens' online performance undoubtedly merits attention. 'Netizen mobs' refers to a specific group of online participants who express their opinions and comments with rude, irrational or extreme words, phrases and sentences on public issues or towards other netizens. In computer-mediated communication, when interaction is mainly based on text, civility of language is no less important than in face-to-face communication, the prevalence of civility could act as a stronger factor for interpersonal evaluations, while uncivil utterances used by 'netizen mobs' detract civil engagement and political participation by impeding effective online discussions. Scholars have discussed how internet impacts the way people do political participation, and some has criticized that internet is a breeding ground for extremism in political discussions (Sustein, Cass, 2001), but there is few empirical study about how netizen's online political performance is influenced by both offline social context and their online virtual life.

The author conducted an empirical quantitative study to discuss how netizens' online political performance is influenced by their social economic status and their engagement of virtual life in cyberspace. Specifically, I use demographic variables as attributes to describe netizens' social economic background, and level of their online participation in forum as a variable to analyze their engagement of virtual life. I adopt quantitative content analysis to analyze cross-sectional data from 588 participants in a Chinese political online forum *Kaidi Community – Cat Eyes Forum*, which is one of the prominent political online forums in China, textual data from each participant's postings, and their social demographic data collected from an online survey that a forum participant initiatively conducted. By analyzing the correlation and regression between participants' demographic characteristics, level of online participation and the amount as well as types of online civil and uncivil performance, the study assesses the impact of socioeconomic factors, age, and the level of online participation on the participants' civil and uncivil online performance, to analyze netizen mobs' performance in their online political discussions.

## Literature Review

### Civility and civil society

In computer-mediated communication, when interaction is mainly based on text, civility of language is no less important than in face-to-face communication, the prevalence of civility could act as a stronger factor for interpersonal evaluations, while uncivil utterances detract civil engagement and political participation by impeding effective online discussions. Civility refers to “behavior between persons and groups that conforms to a social mode (that is, in accordance with the civil society), as itself being a foundational principle of society and law.”<sup>1</sup> Incivility is a “general term for social behavior lacking in civic virtue or good manners, on a scale from rudeness or lack of respect for elders, to vandalism and hooliganism, through public drunkenness and threatening behavior.”<sup>2</sup> Study shows that Civility is not associated with gender, color and region, yet weakly associated with income and significantly associated with education, occupation, age and health (Ferriss, 2002, p.388).

Civil society stresses civic engagement of citizens and the restraint of national power. Since 1980s, along with the advancement of the social transformation and reform of political, economic and cultural system, civil society has gradually emerged in China. The awareness of citizenship and the construction of civic culture have profound impact on Chinese citizens who has experienced ‘subject consciousness’ resulted from feudal autocracy for thousand years. Scholar believes that the measurement of civility can provide the characteristics of the political and social behavior of modern Chinese citizens in contemporary China, which can be adopted to predict the tracks of their social behavior and its change (Yang, 2008).

As for media, the impact of mass media on construction of civil society in China is far less than that of the internet, for the former is highly controlled and censored by central government, while internet provides platforms for discussions and expressions by citizens which are relatively free of control and censorship. Internet plays a significant role in inspiring and cultivating the spirit of citizenship by expanding civic engagement and political participation, for example, the instance of *Zhigang Sun*, *South China Tiger*, *Sichuan Earthquake*. Citizens actively participate in public and political issues, exercise their power of participation, expression and supervision towards bureaucracy, and protect social justice (Yan, 2009, p.83).

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<sup>1</sup> Civic virtue, from Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civic\\_virtue#Incivility](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civic_virtue#Incivility)

<sup>2</sup> Incivility, from Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civic\\_virtue#Incivility](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civic_virtue#Incivility)

## Civility in virtual sphere

The internet transforms the society into a networked one, which formed a ‘grassroots’ link, whose characteristic is to provide access to expression and discussion for those who are at the bottom or margins of the society with few opportunities to get them heard to the public (Liu, 2002, p.81). In virtual sphere, discussions are mainly through texts which construct the virtual identity of participants.

Are there new civility paradigms for communication in virtual sphere (Naaman et al, 2009)? People construct new identities through texts, images and videos, and eventually establish these digital identities by interacting and discussing with other users in virtual world (Foucault, 1988, p.16). Scholar believes that new technology, especially the internet spoils public decorum. “Rather than the use of proper titles, cordial and appropriate greetings, correct punctuation and the complete spelling of words, and formal sentence structure, we witness rather selective and even terse interpersonal communication via the Internet” (Peck, 2002, p.363). The cause of these is the lack of ‘social action’ in cyberspace which is defined by Max Weber: whether interaction is considered social depends on whether one embraces a traditional orientation toward “role” and “status” in social life. Internet breaks the formation of social action, which leads to the technically sophisticated information-oriented individuals who is devoid of offline social roles and status (Peck, 2002). Study shows that civility in online communication exerts great impact on people’s perception of the credibility and authority of the information, while incivility makes discussion incredible, radical and sometimes threatening (Ng & Detenber, 2005, p13-16).

## Online Public Opinion and Group Polarization

Online public opinion is one of the influential forms for civic engagement and political participation in cybersphere. *Wangluoyulun*, referring to online public deliberation, has exerted significant impact on of China’s political and social life. Examples include online public activism for social injustice, like *Sun Zhigang Incident* and *Deng Yujiao Incident*, public criticism on sensitive political issues, like corruption and autocracy of Chinese government, public debate on moral issues, like human flesh search, and among others.

Online public deliberation is not without its limitations. Extreme opinions and emotions could be expanded through online interaction which leads to extremism and group polarization. Group polarization could facilitate consensus, while makes existed bias and prejudice extreme (Sustein, 2003, p.50). The online extremism would result in virtual violence that has exerted

negative impact on social security and stability (Peng, 2004, p.290). These netizens are referred as “the mobs with keyboards as weapons”, who uses discourses to attack and reproach specific people or events (Zhang, 2008, p.160). Irrational discourses could easily outweigh rational discourses due to the extremism and group polarization in virtual sphere (Zhang, 2009, p.196). The constitution of opinion subjects varies with different opinion objects.

### Netman and net violence

Netman, refers to people who are actively involve in virtual life and online interactions and addict to virtual sphere (Wu, 2009, p.68). One of the characteristics of netman is that their behavior in virtual life greatly contrasts with those in real life. Anonymity makes netmans’ behavior out of constraint of disciplines and orders. A gentleman could become a violent attacker while a disregarded man could gain unexpected respect in virtual sphere (Rheingold, 2004).

The emergence of netman has positive and negative impacts on the society. On one hand, it breaks the social hierarchy and promotes the flow of social classes. Netman could construct virtual identities and sense of belonging by participating in online discussions, which would influence their beliefs and conducts in real life. On the other hand, netman could exert violence that is constrained in real life in virtual world. The violence exerted by netizen mobs is different from that in real life, for it is a symbolic violence that is realized by discourses and texts to express opinions or emotions in an irrational way (Zhang, 2009, p. 197). ‘Netizen mobs’ refers to a specific group of online participants who express their opinions and comments with rude, irrational or extreme words, phrases and sentences on public issues or towards other netizens. Habermas put forward the concept of ‘ideal speech’ which stresses that speech acts in public sphere should be appropriate and rational (Habermas, 1985). Yet, the contemporary communication situation is filled with symbolic violence, and more and more net violence incidents appeared, for example, human flesh search, personal attack, virtual wanted posters and so forth (Wu, 2009, p.68).

Based on the discussions on the relationship between the internet, Chinese netizens and construction of civil society, I intend to analyze the impact of offline demographic factors on the civil performance of the participants in political online forums, which includes their social economic status and age; and investigate whether involvement of virtual life would influence the civility of participants’ online performance. I put forward the following research question and hypothesis:

RQ1 Is There a Relation between Levels of Civility of Participants' Online Performance and Their Social Economic Status?

H1 The Higher Social Class of The Participants are, The Higher Level of Civility of Their Online Performance is.

H2 The More the Monthly Income of the Participants are, The Higher Level of Civility of Their Online Performance is.

H3 The Older of The Participants are, The Lower of Levels of The Civility are.

H4 The Deeper Engagement of Participants' Online Participation, The Lower Level of Their Civility of Online Performance.

## Method

*Cat Eye Forum*, a forum of *Kaidi Online Community*, is one of the most popular political online forums in China. Participants actively generate discussions on political and social issues, including democracy in China, autocracy, misconducts of government, corruption, social inequality, wealth gap and so forth.

## Sample

According to an online survey conducted by a forum participant to collect the demographic information (occupation, monthly income and age) of the participants, the unit analysis is each respondent of the survey, most of who are the active participants of the forum, and the number of sample of the participants is 585. I select all the posts and correspondences posting by each respondent in *Cat Eye Forum* (till 01/15/2010), and the number of the sample is 550,000.

## Procedure

I adopt content analysis to measure the correlation between the level of the civility of the participants' online performance (posts and correspondences) and their social economic status, age and the engagement of their online participation. The data were analyzed using the *Statistic Package for Social Science Programs* (SPSS). Descriptive statistics analysis presented the frequency and percentage of the respondents' social economic status, age and level of the engagement of their online participation; and *ANOVA* was carried out to test difference which was set to a significance level of 0.05 and the correlations between the level of civility and four independent variables were analyzed.

The variables in the study were distributed between independent and dependent variables. Independent variables include social class, monthly income, age and level of engagement of their online participation (See Appendix 1). Social economic status was described by ordinal variable social class and ratio variable monthly income as two independent variables, and the other two were age and engagement of online participation which was measured by the frequency of logging in as a ratio variable. According to *Report of Social Stratification in Contemporary China* published by the Social Science Academy of China, social hierarchy in China is divided into five classes based on the distribution of organizational, economic and cultural resources, namely, underclass, lower class, middle class, middle-upper class, upper class (Lu, 2002). 74.6 % participants are distributed into middle and middle-upper class.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Social Class of Participants.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Underclass	50	8.5	14.2	14.2
	Lower Class	33	5.6	9.4	23.6
	Middle Class	164	27.9	46.7	70.4
	Mid-up Class	98	16.7	27.9	98.3
	Upper Class	6	1.0	1.7	100.0
	Total	351	59.7	100.0	
Missing	Missing	237	40.3		
Total		588	100.0		

Monthly income was categorized into nine groups depends on the personal income tax.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Policy for Personal income tax in China. <http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/256160286.html>

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Monthly Income of Participants.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	0-786	79	12.6	13.5	13.5
	787-2000	156	24.9	26.6	40.1
	2001-5000	188	30.0	32.1	72.2
	5001-20000	126	20.1	21.5	93.7
	20001-40000	17	2.7	2.9	96.6
	40001-60000	8	1.3	1.4	98.0
	60001-80000	3	.5	.5	98.5
	80001-100000	3	.5	.5	99.0
	100001-above	6	1.0	1.0	100.0
	Total	586	93.6	100.0	
Missing	System	40	6.4		
Total		626	100.0		

Income: ¥

Age was classified by five groups, under18, 18-27, 28-44, 45-59, 60-80, which represent children and adolescence, young adults, middle-aged, middle-old aged, old aged.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Age of Participants.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	below-18	1	.2	.2	.2
	18-27	64	10.9	12.4	12.6
	28-44	320	54.4	62.1	74.8
	45-59	109	18.5	21.2	95.9
	60-above	21	3.6	4.1	100.0
	Total	515	87.6	100.0	
Missing	Missing	73	12.4		
Total		588	100.0		

Dependent variable was the level of civility of participants' online performance which was calculated as the percentage of the civil posts and correspondences (see Appendix 1). Civility policy for standards of conduct of *Wikipedia* users was adopted to measure the posts and correspondences of the participants.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Civility>

## Intercoding Reliability

Reliability for all content analysis variables was calculated using the Perreault and Leigh (1989) reliability index:  $Ir = \{[(Fo/N) - (1/k)][k/(k-1)]\}^{0.5}$ , for  $Fo/n > 1/k$ , where  $Fo$  is the observed frequency of agreement between coders,  $N$  is the total number of judgments and  $k$  is the number of categories.

This index accounts for coder chance agreement and the number of categories used and is sensitive to coding weaknesses. Reliability scores can range from 0 to 1, with higher scores indicating greater intercoder agreement.

The interceding reliability between the ten coders was 0.9 which reached a significant level.

## Results

RQ1 Is There a Relation between Levels of Civility of Participants' Online Performance and Their Social Economic Status?

H1 The Higher Social Class of The Participants are, The Higher Level of Civility of Their Online Performance is.

Empirical results rejected the h1. A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of social class on levels of civility. Participants were divided into five groups according to their social class (Group1: underclass; Group2: working class; Group3: middle class; Group4: middle-upper class; Group5: upper class). There was no statistically significant difference at the  $p < .05$  level in levels of civility for five social class groups:  $F(4,335) = 1.6, p = .16$ . Post-hoc comparison using the Turkey HSD test indicated that the mean scores for the five groups were not significantly different from each other. Table 4 presents the results of analysis from one-way ANOVA, which demonstrates the relations between the level of the civility of participants' online performance and their social class.

Table 4: Correlation between Levels of Civility and Social Class  
Dependent variable: Levels of Civility

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2143.804	4	535.951	1.651	.161
Within Groups	108745.273	335	324.613		
Total	110889.077	339			

H2 The More the Monthly Income of the Participants are, The Higher Level of Civility of Their Online Performance is.

Empirical results rejected the h2. The relationship between levels of civility and monthly income was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. There was no significant correlation between the two variables,  $p > .05$ . Table 5 presented the results of Pearson Product-moment correlation coefficient. A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of monthly income on levels of civility. Participants were divided into nine groups according to their monthly income (Group1: 0-786; Group2: 787-2000; Group3: 2001-5000; Group4: 5001-20000; Group5: 20001-40000; Group6: 40001-60000; Group7: 60001-80000; Group8: 80001-100000; Group9: 100001-1000000). There was no statistically significant difference at the  $p < .05$  level in levels of civility for nine monthly income groups:  $F(8,559) = .9, p = .51$ . Post-hoc comparison using the Turkey HSD test indicated that the mean scores for the nine groups were not significantly different from each other. Table 6 presents the results of analysis from one-way ANOVA, which demonstrates the relations between the level of the civility of participants' online performance and their monthly income.

Table 5: Pearson Product-moment Correlations Between Levels of Civility and Monthly Income  
Dependent Variable: Levels of Civility

		monthlyincome	Levels of civility
monthlyincome	Pearson Correlation	1	-.079
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.062
	N	585	567
Levels of civility	Pearson Correlation	-.079	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.062	
	N	567	570

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 6: Correlation between Levels of Civility and Monthly Income  
Dependent Variable: Levels of Civility

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2557.260	8	319.658	.911	.507
Within Groups	196138.203	559	350.873		
Total	198695.464	567			

Thus, since social class and income are two factors that determine the social economic status, there was no significant correlation between the levels of civility of participants' online performance and their social economic status.

H3 The Older The Participants are, The Lower of Levels of The Civility are.

Empirical results supported the H3. The relationship between levels of civility and age was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. There was a weak, negative correlation between the two variables,  $r = -.089$ ,  $n = 502$ ,  $p < .05$ , with low levels of civility associated with older age. Table 7 presented the results. A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of age on levels of civility. Participants were divided into five groups according to their age (Group1: 0-18; Group2: 19-27; Group3: 28-44; Group4: 45-59; Group5 60-80). There was a statistically significant difference at the  $p < .05$  level in levels of civility for five age groups:  $F(4,496) = 3.5$ ,  $p = .009$ . Post-hoc comparison using the Turkey HSD test indicated that the mean scores for the Group2 ( $M = 76.67$ ,  $SD = 14.71$ ) was significantly differently from Group4 ( $M = 68.51$ ,  $SD = 20.38$ ). The mean scores for the other groups were not significantly different from each other. Table 8 presents the results of analysis from one-way ANOVA, which demonstrates the

relations between the level of the civility of participants' online performance and their monthly income.

Table 7: Pearson Product-moment Correlations Between Levels of Civility and Age  
Dependent Variable: Levels of Civility

		Levels of Civility	age
Levels of civility	Pearson Correlation	1	-.089*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.046
	N	569	502
Age	Pearson Correlation	-.089*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.046	
	N	502	514

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 8: Correlation between Levels of Civility and Monthly Income  
Dependent Variable: Levels of Civility

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4443.985	4	1110.996	3.448	.009
Within Groups	159811.300	496	322.200		
Total	164255.286	500			

#### H4 The Deeper Engagement of Participants' Online Participation, The Lower Level of Their Civility of Online Performance

Empirical results rejected H4. The relationship between levels of civility and engagement of participants' online participation was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. There was no significant correlation between the two variables,  $p > .05$ . Table 9 presented the results of Pearson Product-moment correlation coefficient.

Table 9: Pearson Product-moment Correlations Between Levels of Civility and Age  
Dependent Variable: Levels of Civility

		Levels of Civility	Online Engagemen
Levels of Civility	Pearson Correlation	1	-.005
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.906
	N	569	563
Online engagement	Pearson Correlation	-.005	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.906	
	N	563	568

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

## Discussion

The goal of this study is to explore the constitution of netizen mobs in virtual sphere and the factors that influence their performance, by analyzing the relations between the levels of civility of participants' online performance and their social economic status, age, and engagement of online participation.

According to the results, participants' social economic status exerted no impact on the levels of the civility of their online performance. In cyberspace, middle and upper classes who are well-dressed and well-behaved in real life did not perform more civility than lower class and underclass stereotyped as lack of manners and self-control. Even in some heated discussions, so-called social elites showed abundant extremism and rudeness, for example, "in China, even ass knows power means everything", "damn it...", "curse party members", "we can't live in such a country" and so forth. Up to 74.6% of the participants were distributed into middle and middle-upper class, most of whose occupations were managers, teachers, technicians, engineers and so forth; while lower class and underclass counted 23.6%, including manual workers, the unemployed, the homeless among others; very a few of them were upper class: government officials, presidents of corporations, etc. Middle and middle-upper class did not perform enough civility as expected, instead, they tended to complain and criticize the reality in an irrational way. Although they earned good education and social resources, they were burdened with more stress: compared with upper class, they were faced with fierce competition from peers to gain more social resources and higher social status; compared with lower class, they were more sensitive to realize the defects of the government and political system. As with some issues related to social inequality, like the privilege of the authorities and

legal injustice, they expressed resentment and anger with provocative or antagonistic discourses, for example, “is there any responsible officials in China?!” , “no political leaders can be trusted in China”, “it’s too dark to live there”, etc. No one can deny that it is one of the forms of civic engagement and political participation, yet the irrationality would not lead to democracy in China.

As stated, internet breaks down the formation of offline social roles and status, which leads to the technically sophisticated information-oriented individuals (Peck, 2002). The group characteristics set by occupations were weakened or even abandoned in virtual sphere. A worker and a college teacher could express the same rage towards a controversial social issue in online discussions, due to a certain overlapped standpoint. When participants had easy and equal access to sharing, exchanging and discussing ideas in cyberspace, extreme opinions and uncivil discourse would destroy the maintenance of cybersphere and construction of civil society by impeding the order of rational discussions.

According to further analysis, participants’ uncivil performances differed with different social classes. Although there was no relationship between levels of civility of participants’ online performance, and their social economic status, their online uncivil performance had revealed the characteristics from their own class. Cyberspace reduced the constraints of performance from real world for participants, yet they failed to get rid of the influence of disciplines and boundaries totally. Lower class preferred direct rudeness and personal attack, while middle and upper class preferred exaggerated irony and extreme statements. Lower class and underclass were encountered the direct pressure for surviving and the most serious exploitation and oppression, which lead to their extreme emotional outbursts with resentment and vilified words. Lack of education and knowledge, they tended to express the direct rudeness and emotional words.

Another finding was that the levels of civility of participants’ online performance were negatively associated with their age. In this study, 62.1% participants were between middle-aged participants, who were not only responsible for supporting family but burdened with pressure to get promoted at work. It’s highly possible for them to be discontent with the injustice and unfairness of various social issues due to their frequently direct contact with the society. They were more likely to be provoked by criticism and reproach about the society in the forum and produce a strong desire to express and communicate themselves. Yet, these criticism and accused were often beyond the rational discussions and became extremist or provocative

discourses and opinions with great anger, for example, “hope he takes bombs at Beijing”, “you are pretty silly”, “be against stupid Chinese”, etc.

Last, there was no relationship between the levels of civility of participants’ online performance and the engagement of their online participation, which revealed that online performance in political forum was more influenced by experience of real life than virtual environment. It is not the cyberspace that nurtures the extremism but the dissatisfaction with the reality that lead to the resentment. This implies that online performance is more influenced by offline factors and ought to be analyzed and interpreted within specific social context.

The performance of Netizen mobs has no associations with netizens’ social economic status and their engagement of virtual life. As the opinion subjects vary with the different opinion objects, the constitution of netizen mobs is issue-oriented whose extremism are due to the dissatisfaction of social inequality and injustice. The emergence of netizen mobs reflects the profound social conflicts and contradictions. In contemporary China, when citizens finally get the access to speaking to the public via internet, the irrationality is inevitably coming with rationality. It is a long and difficult period leading to the democracy, which is at least practiced by Chinese netizens through civic engagement and political participation in virtual sphere. (Yang, 2009)

## **Conclusion**

The study had several limitations. First, in the discussions of the impact of social economic status, the absence of education as the variable would affect the precision of the results. Second, online surveys and interviews could be adopted in the future research to investigate other factors that would influence the levels of civility of participants’ online performance, like personal experiences, social events within specific period of time and so forth. Third, the forum I studied was a political forum whose atmosphere of discussions was rather radical and critical, which would limit the application of the results.

Future research could compare different online forums or social network sites, to discuss the impact of different characteristics of the virtual sphere on the participants’ online performance. In addition, I intend to analyze the relationship between the different categories of discussion topics adopted by the participants and their social economic status, to investigate the constitution and formation of groups of opinion subjects through internet in China, to discuss the role of the internet that plays in the facilitation of civil engagement and the construction of civil society.

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## Appendix 1

### Codebook

**Coder:** Check the appropriate name

\_\_\_\_ SIYUAN \_\_\_\_ SHIHUI \_\_\_\_ WENJIE \_\_\_\_ ZEXI \_\_\_\_ XINCHEN \_\_\_\_ TIAN \_\_\_\_ HEXIN  
\_\_\_\_ XIAO \_\_\_\_ NAN \_\_\_\_ JIE

### URL, data accessed

Write down the complete URL of the site of each blog visited. Mark down the page of each comment post by followers of each blog.

### Measurement of level of civility of participants' online performance

This section measures 'civility' attributes of the participants' posts and correspondence in online forum. We adopt code of conduct set for Wikipedia editors and users to measure the civil performance of the forum participants. The operationalized definition of 'civility' is whether the participants behave politely, calmly and reasonably, even during heated discussions. 'Incivility' consists of personal attacks, rudeness, disrespectful comments, and aggressive behaviours. All of the posts and correspondence of each participants will be coded as civility or incivility according to different categories of each concept, and then the calculated percentage of the civil ones will be serving as the level of civility of the participants' online performance. Different categories of civility and incivility will be recorded for further analysis.

*Civility 1: Originally publish or share posts of political, economic or cultural issues, events, opinions or criticism without irrational or provocative discourses. Coded 1*

Examples of civility 1 include: topics about corruption, national image, freedom, cultural revolution, welfare, socialism and capitalism, autocracy, Olympic games, Spring festival ceremony, government administration and so forth. Rational or constructive criticism and comments on immoral or illegal issues. "Political Privilege is too pervasive to be forbidden in China", " the government should serve the citizens not be served by the citizens", "corrupt officials and dishonest traders are the most serious problems in China", among others.

*Civility 2: Publish posts seeking for suggestions and help. Coded 2*

Examples of civility2 include: "look for children in Sichuan Earthquake", "can pension be returned?", "ask for advice: how to obtain legal guns in China?" and so forth.

*Civility3: In discussions, actively interact with other participants; respect different opinions: disagree without being disagreeable; be forthright and reasonably cooperative, responsible for good-faith questions; to avoid personal attack, avoid to make spirited discussions into personal argument; to stop uncivil behaviors in an appropriate way. Coded 3*

Examples of civility3 include: "It's OK to apologize if you have attacked others", "I disagree with your point,

for...”, “Your opinion is reasonable, but...”, “I didn’t judge on you....”, “In your case, you can contact local government.”and so forth.

*Incivility1: Direct rudeness, “insults, name-calling, gross profanity or indecent suggestions; personal attacks, including racial, ethnic, sexual, gender-related and religious slurs, and derogatory references to groups such as social classes or nationalities; ill-considered accusations of impropriety, belittling a forum administrator” (cited from Wikipedia<sup>5</sup>). Coded 4*

Examples of incivility1: “ta ma de (damn it),” “cao (fuck),” “fangpi (your word is ass),” “gun (滚),” “zhaosi (找死),” “quan jia si guang guang (curse your family),” “nongmin mei jian shi” (disregard peasants), “Islamic have no good people”, “party=ass (党=裆)”, “pen fei (喷粪)”, “useless brain (脑瘫)”, “forum administrator is a crazy dog biting everyone”, “silly forum administrator”, “forum administrators are all zou gou (网管都是走狗)”, etc.

*Incivility 2: Other uncivil behaviors: taunting or baiting; harassment; sexual innuendo; lying; quoting another editor out of context to give the impression they hold views they do not hold, or to malign them; meaningless posts; Coded 5*

Examples of incivility2: “Can’t you read?”, “mark here (到此一游, 路过, 打个酱油, 冒个泡)”, publish issues contrary to facts, etc.

Levels of civility of participants’ online performance \_\_\_\_\_%

#### Measurement of the social class of the participants

According to *Report of Social Stratification in Contemporary China* published by the The Social Science Academy of China, social hierarchy in China is divided into five classes based on the distribution of organizational, economic and cultural resources, namely, underclass, lower class, middle class, middle-upper class, upper class.

Underclass:	the unemployed, the half unemployed, and farmers in poverty	Coded 1
Lower class:	servants, workers, and farmers	Coded 2
Middle class:	primary professional or technical personnel, small business owners, and junior staff for corporation or government	Coded 3
Middle-upper class:	leading cadres, senior staff in large enterprise, managers in small and medium-sized enterprise, advanced professional or technical personnel and the medium business owners	Coded 4
Upper class:	leadership cadre, managers in large enterprise, and large private business owners	Coded 5

#### Measurement of the monthly income of the participants

<sup>5</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Civility>

The monthly income is divided into nine groups according to the national standards of personal income tax and the absolute poverty line set by Chinese government.

0- ¥ 786	coded 1
¥ 787- ¥ 2000	coded 2
¥ 2001- ¥ 5000	coded 3
¥ 5001- ¥ 20000	coded 4
¥ 20001- ¥ 40000	coded 5
¥ 40001- ¥ 60000	coded 6
¥ 60001- ¥ 80000	coded 7
¥ 80001- ¥ 100000	coded 8
¥ 100001 and above	coded 9

### Measurement of the age of the participants

Age is classified into five groups which respectively represent children and adolescence, young adults, middle-aged, middle-old aged, old aged.

Below 18	coded1
18-27	coded 2
28-44	coded 3
45-59	coded 4
60 and above	coded 5

### Measurement of the engagement of the participants' online participation

The engagement of online participation is measured and presented by the numbers of the logging in of the forum by each participant with their forum ID. \_\_\_\_