

# **Gauging Slacktivism in China: Taking Micro-blog Users as an Example**

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## ABSTRACT

Taking Chinese Weibo and Twitter users as examples, this exploratory study aims at gauging the relationship between social media use and online/offline participation. Demographic factors, political efficacy, political cynicism, perceived political risk and self-censorship are also included to predict online/offline civic and political participation. Based on a sample of 430 effective respondents, the study found that intensity of micro-blog use indeed has a positive relationship with online participation. Although micro-blog use intensity may not directly spur offline participation, online civic and political participation are highly related. The study also discovered that apart from political attitudes, self-censorship also has significant effect on online and offline participation. To sum up, slacktivism is too broad and general to describe Chinese internet sphere. Instead, the study illustrated some of the participation patterns of Chinese micro-blog users, paving the way for more representative research in the future.

**Key Words:** Slacktivism, Political efficacy, Self-censorship, Political Participation

## INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of social media age, many scholars have hailed the arrival of a new form of democracy. Social media is regarded as a liberation technology (Diamond, 2010) which “empowers individuals, facilitate independent communication and mobilization, and strengthen an emergent civil society.” As Lievrouw (2011) has pointed out, new technologies serve as both the communication channel for activists and the actual “field” of activism itself. The successful mobilization of Arab Spring and global Occupy movement further confirmed some optimistic presumptions that dictatorship is doomed in front of the new technology.

As is always the case, every new form of technology will bring in utopian, dystopian and syntopian views and liberation technology is no exception. The criticism for social media as a liberating force can mainly be divided into two categories. One is that authoritarian states are increasingly adept at using new technology to manipulate the public opinion and Internet sphere, begetting the rise of “Networked Authoritarianism” (MacKinnon, 2011; Pearce & Kendzior, 2012). The other is that in some cases social media even has a detrimental effect to offline participation by creating the opportunities for “clicktivism” and “slacktivism” (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011; Van de Donk et al., 2004).

According to UrbanDictionary.com, slacktivism is “the act of participating in obviously pointless activities as an expedient alternative to actually expending effort to fix a problem” (Butler, 2011). Many examples illustrated the existence of slacktivism as a unique online culture. In 2010, Facebook initiated an online campaign of “the fight against child abuse”. Activists encouraged users to change their Facebook profile pictures to a cartoon or hero

from their childhood. People responded to this request positively with millions of changed profile photos. However, the seemingly massive online campaign actually accomplished nothing more than an online spectacular.

Slacktivism in China is an interesting yet ignored issue. Because of the ubiquitous censorship and coercive political power, it is highly possible that Internet users' discontent is expressed exclusively online. Therefore, forms of slacktivism in Chinese Internet community may be more diverse and complicated. Slacktivism in China not only appear in public welfare campaign such as disaster relief and children's aid, but also include vast discrepancy between users' online and offline political behaviors.

According to the 31<sup>st</sup> CNNIC report (China Internet Network Information Center, 2013), Chinese Weibo users reached 309 million by the end of 2012, among which 65.6% access Weibo through mobile phones. With an annual user increase of more than 20%, it goes without saying that Weibo has become an undeniable force in the development of ICT in China. Although Chinese Twitter community only has around ten thousand active users, it represents a highly political network which cannot be overlooked. In both Sina Weibo and Twitter, one can easily observe by netnography that quite a lot of users actively engage themselves in online political debates, but they still score surprisingly low in real-life political participation, which even themselves made little effort to conceal it. Some cynical Chinese netizens created words like "Keyboard Democracy" and "Empty Talk Party" to refer to those who advocate democracy without resorting to any practical effort.

The level of discrepancy between online and offline participation and the relationship between social media use and participation determine whether or not there's a Slacktivism

culture on Chinese virtual sphere. As such, this study uses the concept of “Slacktivism” as a starting point to look specifically at Chinese micro-blog users, and gauges the possible discrepancy between their online and offline political and civic participation. In examining the relationship between various independent and dependent variables, the study aims to design a model which can predict offline political and civic participation.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Activism and Slacktivism**

Being a portmanteau of the words slacker and activism, the term “Slacktivism” first appeared in 1995 when Fred Clark and Dwight Ozard combined the two words in a seminar series. However, in their usage, the term had an absolute positive connotation, referring to “bottom up activities by young people to affect society on a small personal scale used” (Christensen, 2011).

Early adoption of the term stresses the fact that thanks to the new media platform, many new forms of activism emerge out of complex social and political histories via small-scale endeavors and informal networks. However at the same time, people are also witnessing an era of easy-come, easy-go politics where people are only one click away from finishing an online petition (Freedman, 2012). Wary of the latter trend, in a 2002 New York Times article, Barnaby Feder cited Barbara Mikkelson’s different understanding of slacktivism, saying that it is “the desire people have to do something good without getting out of their chair” (Feder, 2002).

Although many people had also adopted this concept in the past years, it is Evgeny Morozov who made it famous by revealing how little some online activism had actually achieved (Morozov, 2011). Morozov pointed out that because “digital activism provides too many easy ways out”, “lots of people are rooting for the least painful sacrifice, deciding to donate a penny where they may otherwise donate a dollar.” Shirky (2009) also touched on slacktivism and defined it as “ridiculously easy group forming”. In his famous article written for the *New Yorker*, Gladwell (2010) expressed similar ideas that high-risk offline revolutions will not be generated by social media political participation. These perspectives all emphasize the discrepancy between people’s online and offline behaviors, presuming that people being active in online activities are not necessarily have the same degree of participation in offline activities.

## **Political Participation and Civic Participation**

Political participation has become one of the central points in political science study. The most frequently cited definition of political participation is created by Verba and his associates in the 1970s, which has been held by most of the scholars to date. According to their perspective, political participation is “those legal acts by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions that they take (Verba, Sidney & Norman, 1972)”.

Due to its authoritarian system, political participation in China should be examined on a case by case basis. According to Shi’s (1997) revised version, political participation in China should be defined as “activities by private citizens aimed at influencing the actual results of governmental policy.” The border between political and nonpolitical participation lies in the

type of decisions participants are trying to exert influence rather than by the locale where these acts take place.

Since the channels for participation are multiple, the concept of political participation “is nothing more than an umbrella concept which accommodates very different forms of action constituting differentiated phenomena, and for which it is necessary to look for explanations for different nature (Huntington & Nelson, 1976)”.

In its operational definition, Teorell et al. (2006) suggested the most extensive typology of five dimensions. First of all is basic electoral participation, which is the selection of governmental personnel. Consumer participation covers donating money to charity, boycotting and political consumption, as well as signing petitions. In a manner of speaking, it taps the role of citizens as critical consumers. The third dimension is party activity, which means being a member of, active within, do voluntary work for or donating money to a political party. Protest activity is the fourth dimension, which covers acts like demonstrations, strikes and other protest activities. Contacting organizations, politicians or civil servants constitute the last dimension: contact activity.

In general, civic participation, also known as civic engagement, usually refers to “Individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern (APA, 2012).”

However, Gibson (2000) pointed out that there’s a lack of consensus on what constitute civic engagement. According to Putnam who popularized the concept, civic engagement is a broad and all-encompassing concept which can “describe activities ranging from bowling in leagues to watching political television shows, writing checks to political advocacy groups,

and participating in political rallies and marches. (Berger 2009, 335; cf. Putnam 1994; 2001)". However, there are still several "more confined definitions that restrict civic engagement to apply to very specific action." Diller defined the concept as "an individual's duty to embrace the responsibilities of citizenship with the obligation to actively participate, alone or in concert with others, in volunteer service activities that strengthen the local community" (Diller, 2001). Benschoten regarded civic engagement as a collective action, referring to "the means by which an individual, through collective action, influences the larger civil society (Van Benschoten, 2001)". Some definitions even encompass a political participation perspective. For example, Minnesota Vital Aging Network maintains that "civic engagement involves active participation and leadership in public life (Civic Engagement, n.d.)."

However in this study, in order to draw a clear distinction between civic and political participation, civic participation is confined to volunteer works in different levels from community service to nationwide fundraising campaign either by oneself or in the form of a group.

## **Social Media and Participation**

Cognitive engagement theory proposed by Dalton (2002) contends that political participation results from an "individual's access to information and his ability and willingness to use that information to make informed choices" (Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley, 2003). As information-rich platforms, social media offers incentives and opportunities for participation. However, mixed results are provided in the research of social media use and various forms of participation.

By examining 1000 longest modified MoveOn.org-generated e-mails sent to the



Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) about its 2004 mercury rulemaking, Shulman (2009) found that such mobilization endeavor only generated low-quality, high-volume participation, which means that “only a tiny portion of users’ public comments constitute potentially relevant new information for the EPA to consider.” Although the author didn’t focus on social media content, his findings did cast doubt on the hypothesis that online participation is conducive to offline policy making. By comparing the offline Lebanese Forces (LF) thirty years ago and the online LF resistance community now, Jaoude (2011) concluded that “social media turns former dissident members from past-offline-activists into present-online-passivists; The outcome is slacktivism.” However, he failed to rule out the possibility that time plays a more important role in the decline of resistance than the essence of platform.

More research findings bolster the positive relationship between social media usage and other forms of participation. Charles (2010) discovered that Internet is significant in increasing online participation. While there is no evidence of the Internet’s direct facilitating effect on offline participation, “Internet use indirectly increases offline participation through interpersonal mobilization that is positively related to external efficacy, online information sharing among friends and telephone conversations.” Although Charles’s focus is Internet usage, it offers tremendous insights into the relationship between social media usage and participation. In response to Shulman’s article, David Karpf analyzed the email activity in a new dataset—the Membership Communications Project (MCP). His research findings revealed that there are several flaws with the “clicktivism” critique: firstly, mass emails are functionally equivalent to other forms of offline activism, and represent a

difference-of-degree rather than a difference-in-kind; secondly, low-quality, high-volume action is merely one of many mobilizing tactics in the strategic repertoire of advocacy groups; thirdly, “the empirical reality of email activation practices has little in common with the dire predictions offered by common critiques (Karpf, 2010)”. The study of Valenzuela and colleagues (Valenzuela, Park & Kee, 2009) reveals a positive relationship between students’ use of the application of Facebook groups and engagement in political activities. What’s more, Valenzuela found that civic participation was associated with Facebook intensity. However, the author further added that although “the results are positive and significant, the effects are very modest, suggesting that social networking sites are not the new panacea to increase political engagement among the younger generations (Vissers & Stolle, 2012)”. Similarly, research by Zhang et al. (2010) showed that reliance on social networking sites has a positive relationship with civic participation, but not with political participation. Furthermore, Vitak and colleagues (2011) made an endeavor to examine whether political activities on SNS affect political participation in a broader sense. The results revealed a strong positive relationship between political activity on Facebook and other forms of political participation.

Most recently in a two-wave panel design, Vissers and Stolle (2012) investigated the mobilizational power of Facebook political participation on online and offline political action repertoires. They found that Facebook participation does evolve into other types of online and offline participation over time, manifesting a spill-over effect.

It’s worth noticing that all previous research adopted only western SNS such as Facebook and YouTube to analyze the relationship between social media and participation. However, since Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are all blocked by Great Firewall of China,

Chinese social media users mostly use China-based services such as Weibo, Renren and Tudou. In addition, belonging to the East Asia, China is regarded as a Confucian country whose values are drastically different from western world (WVS, 2009). This may lead to a different mobilization process, which is of academic value.

To operationalize the concept of slacktivism, the central research question is adopted from Vissers and Stolle's (2012) Facebook paper: whether social media participation evolves into other types of participation over a period of time or whether it remains the simple and easy entrance to political participation without further consequences?

In addition, since civic and political participation in China entail different levels of risk, civic participation is gauged to make a comparison with political participation.

Consequently, hypotheses H1a and H1b regarding to the relations between micro-blog use intensity and online participation are proposed as follows:

H1a: Micro-blog use intensity in China is positively associated with online civic participation.

H1b: Micro-blog use intensity in China is positively associated with online political participation.

In addition, hypotheses H2a and H2b regarding to the relations between micro-blog use intensity and offline participation are proposed as follows:

H2a: Micro-blog use intensity in China is positively associated with offline civic participation.

H2b: Micro-blog use intensity in China is positively associated with offline political participation.

## Political Efficacy and Political Cynicism

Political efficacy is the “feeling that political and social change is possible and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change” (Campbell, Gurin & Miller, 1954, p.187). Political efficacy has long been proven by previous research to be an important indicator for political participation (Finkel, 1985; Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). It is also deemed as a determinant of political behavior, meaning that without feelings of competency and beliefs that one’s actions are consequential, one has little incentive to participate in politics (Abramson & Aldrich, 1982).

Generally, political efficacy contains two distinct but related dimensions: a personal sense of efficacy, commonly known as internal efficacy, and a more system-oriented sense of efficacy, known as external efficacy (Finifter, 1970; Balch, 1974; Kenski & Stroud, 2006). Internal efficacy is about one’s own competence to understand and participate in politics, while external efficacy reflects beliefs about the responsiveness and effectiveness of government (Craig, Niemi & Silver, 1990).

In this study, political efficacy is included to refine the whole model to better predict the political participation. H3a, H3b, H3c and H3d are proposed as follows:

H3a: Internal political efficacy is positively associated with online political participation.

H3b: Internal political efficacy is positively associated with offline political participation.

H3c: External political efficacy is positively associated with online political participation.

H3d: External political efficacy is positively associated with offline political participation.

Political cynicism is closely related to political efficacy, which is usually perceived as a reflection of low external efficacy (Hoffman & Thomas, 2009; Semetko & Scammell, 2012).

It is the “extent to which people hold politicians and politics in disrepute, the extent to which these words symbolize something negative rather than something positive” (Robert, Marshall & Stanley, 1961, p.477). It is defined as “the degree of negative affect toward the government and is a statement of the belief that the government is not functioning and producing outputs in accord with individual expectations”(Miller, 1974, p.952). In the context of China, political cynicism may be quite common due to widespread corruption and low accountability, wreaking havoc on people’s political participation.

H4a: Political cynicism is negatively associated with online political participation.

H4b: Political cynicism is negatively associated with offline political participation.

## **Self-censorship and Perceived Political Risk**

Apart from political efficacy, self-censorship and perceived political risk have their special meanings in authoritarian context, offering another psychological perspective in estimating people’s probability of participation in a certain event.

Similar to political participation, the definitions of self-censorship may also vary in different socioeconomic circumstances. From the interpersonal communication perspective, self-censorship is defined by Hayes, Glynn, and Shanahan as “the withholding of one’s true opinion from an audience perceived to disagree with that opinion (Hayes, Glynn, & Shanahan, 2005, p.298).” The authors created the Willingness to Self-Censor (WTSC) scale, finding that people differ in their willingness to self-censor.

While most studies concerning self-censorship in China focus on the media self-censorship in front of sociopolitical pressure (Lee, 1998; Lee & Chan, 2008; Tong, 2009), the relationship between ordinary people’s self-censorship and political participation is

seldom studied. In a two-year research (Hayes, Scheufele, & Huges, 2006), a negative relationship was found between willingness to self-censor and political participation. Similar patterns may be observed in the mainland China context. Therefore, the hypotheses H5a and H5b are listed as follows:

H5a: Self-censorship is negatively associated with online civic participation.

H5b: Self-censorship is negatively associated with online political participation.

H5c: Self-censorship is negatively associated with offline civic participation.

H5d: Self-censorship is negatively associated with offline political participation.

Unlike other democratic societies, political fear still constitutes an important factor in the logic of political activities in China. As Shi (2001) has pointed out, since Chinese authorities “still do not hesitate to suppress unauthorized political expression, respondents may not dare to reveal their true opinions in surveys for fear of political persecution.” Therefore, respondents may deliberately misled interviewers during the survey. In order to measure the magnitude of political fear in the society, it is advisable to ask additional questions.

For similar reasons, perceived political risk is created as a new variable according to the uniqueness of China. In this study, it is likely that when users perceive high level of political risk, they will refrain themselves from participating in political activities, affecting the relationship between social media use and political participation. H6a and H6b associated with perceived political risk are proposed:

H6a: Perceived political risk is negatively associated with online political participation.

H6b: Perceived political risk is negatively associated with offline political participation.

Last but not least, two research questions are proposed to examine the whole quantitative model.

RQ1: How do demographic variables, political efficacy, political cynicism, perceived political risk, self-censorship, micro-blog use intensity and micro-blog use purpose collectively predict (a) online civic participation and (b) online political participation?

RQ2: How do demographic variables, political efficacy, political cynicism, perceived political risk, self-censorship, micro-blog use intensity, micro-blog use purpose and online political and civic participation collectively predict (a) offline civic participation and (b) offline political participation?

## **METHODOLOGY**

Being a typical method for measuring media use patterns and their relationships with other attitudinal and behavioral variables, survey is the main research method of this study. To bypass internet censorship in mainland China, questionnaires created on American-based survey website surveygizmo.com are administered to mainland Twitter and Sina Weibo users. The questionnaire was first piloted on a group of twenty postgraduate students. They are encouraged to comment on clarity, logical flow, Chinese translation of the questionnaire items, and average length of time required for finishing it. Since time and budget were limited, snowball sampling was adopted to collect samples and each respondent was encouraged to send links to additional users for the survey.

Among the 665 respondents gathered at surveygizmo.com from March 8 to March 29,

2013, a sample of 430 was effective. The low completion rate may be due to connection problems and people's fear of persecution since some of the questions were quite politically sensitive. The sample consisted of 60.7% males and 39.3% females. 5.6% people were younger than 20 years old, 72.8% in 20–29, 17.2% in 30–39, 3.7% in 40–49, and only 0.7% were 50 or older. Of all the respondents, 7.9% were below college degree, 50.9% had obtained or finishing a bachelor degree, and 41.2% were master and doctoral degree. Because students formed the largest occupation group, answers were recoded into students and non-students with respective percentages of 49.1% and 50.9%. Among 430 respondents, 74.4% were party members, 25.6% were non-party members, 37.2% lived in mainland China's top 3 cities Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, 10.5% were located overseas and the remaining 52.3% were from other cities or villages. In terms of family income, the mean fell into the income bracket of 9000–10999RMB a month, with 21.4% earning less than 5000RMB a month, 15.8% between 5000-6999RMB, 14.0% between 7000-8999RMB, 14.4% between 9000-10999RMB, 6.3% between 11000-12999RMB, 7.2% between 13000-14999RMB, and 20.9% no less than 15000RMB a month.

## **MEASUREMENT**

### **Independent Variables**

Intensity of micro-blog use alone may not be a single predictor of online and offline participation in that people's motivations and behavioral patterns in using online platforms also matter. Therefore, micro-blog use was divided into two dimensions: Intensity and Purposes.



*Micro-blog Use Intensity:* Some items in the “Facebook Intensity scale” by Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe (2007), “Weibo Intensity scale” by Chan et al. (2011), and the Facebook measurement by Reynol Junco (2012) were revised to measure intensity of micro-blog use. The term “Facebook” was replaced by “Micro-blog”. Respondents were asked to offer the average time spent on micro-blogs and average checking times. In addition, they were encouraged to report their frequency of the following activities: “browsing, commenting, personal chatting, posting original contents, reposting or retweeting contents.” The Cronbach’s alpha was .748 (M=3.26, SD=0.63).

*Purposes of Micro-blog Use:* The classification of purposes of micro-blog use was partially adopted by Charles Man Chi Wai’s PhD dissertation about digital inequality on civic and political participation (Charles, 2010). It consisted of “information seeking, entertainment, study or work, expand social network and discussing or participating in public affairs”.

## **Dependent Variables**

Because of the similarity of research questions, Vissers and Stolle’s (2012) political participation scale was partly adopted. Several questions were revised to adapt to the special condition of mainland China.

*Online political participation:* Online political participation was measured by two dimensions: self-expression and online movement participation. Self-expression was measured by frequency of sharing and tweeting political opinions, commenting on political statuses, and creating online political groups. Movement participation included activities such as “signed or collected signatures for an online political petition”, “contacted a politician or

government official online”, “boycotted or bought products and services for political reasons online”, and “donated or raised money for a political purpose online.” The Cronbach’s alpha was .84 ( $M=2.04$ ,  $SD=.69$ ).

*Offline political participation:* Offline political participation was measured by other five activities: “boycotted or bought products for political reasons offline”, “signed or collected signatures for a paper political petition”, “donated or raised money for a political purpose offline”, “contacted a politician or government official in person”, and “took part in an offline march or demonstration”. The Cronbach’s alpha was .85 ( $M=1.60$ ,  $SD=.69$ ).

*Online civic participation:* Online civic participation included the same questions as online political participation except that all the words “political” have been replaced by “social”, and the “contacted a politician or government official online” question has been changed to “contacted the officials of a NGO or other social organizations online.” The Cronbach’s alpha was .85 ( $M=2.20$ ,  $SD=.69$ ).

*Offline civic participation:* Offline civic participation was measured by two dimensions: community level participation and societal level participation. Community level participation included questions concerning the frequency of community activity participation such as attending owners’ meeting, joining owners’ committee, and engaging in community service. Societal level participation included the same questions as offline political participation except that all the words “political” have been replaced by “social”. The Cronbach’s alpha was .84 ( $M=1.69$ ,  $SD=.63$ ).

## **Control Variables**

As political participation is closely related to one's political opinions and perceived need

and risk for participation, four important psychological variables were taken into consideration to enhance the conceptual maps.

*Political efficacy:* Statements from Mou, Atkin and Fu's (2012) study of Chinese netizens' online political discussion were adopted to measure the two dimensions of political efficacy: *Internal Efficacy* and *External Efficacy*. The former included "I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics", "I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country", and "I think that I am as well-informed about politics and government as most people." The latter consisted of two items: "Most public official are truly interested in what the people think" and "Official are supposed to be the servants of the people, but too many of them think they are the masters." The Cronbach's alpha for *Internal Efficacy* was .71 (M=3.08, SD=.83), and *External Efficacy* was .61 (M=1.82, SD=.75).

*Political Cynicism:* Three items were adopted from Mou, Atkin and Fu's (2011) paper: "It seems like our government is run by a few big interests who are just looking out for themselves", "It seems like politicians only care about themselves or special interests," and "Politicians are not interested in people's opinions." The Cronbach's alpha was .853 (M=3.68, SD=.91).

*Self-censorship:* To measure the self-censorship, all eight items on the willingness to self-censor scale (Hayes, Glynn, & Shanahan, 2005) were adopted. "(1) It is difficult for me to express my opinion if I think others won't agree with what I say; (2) There have been many times when I have thought others around me were wrong but I didn't let them know; (3) When I disagree with others, I'd rather go along with them than argue about it; (4) It is easy

for me to express my opinion around others who I think will disagree with me; (5) I'd feel uncomfortable if someone asked my opinion and I knew that he or she wouldn't agree with me; (6) I tend to speak my opinion only around friends or other people I trust; (7) It is safer to keep quiet than publicly speak an opinion that you know most others don't share; and (8) If I disagree with others, I have no problem letting them know it. Respondents will be asked to answer one additional question: "(9) It is safer to keep quiet than publicly speak an opinion that might get you into political trouble". The Cronbach's alpha was .72 (M=2.93, SD=.58).

*Perceived Political Risk:* Perceived political risk included four items. The first statement was adopted and revised from Shi's (2001) comparative study of cultural values and political trust in PRC and Taiwan: "If I criticized the party and state leaders in conversations where I live or work, I'm concerned that someone would secretly record my words and behavior". Other three items were created by the author to include more online situations: "If I criticized the party and state leaders online, I'm concerned that my comments will be secretly recorded"; "I believe that the state exerts harsh political control over people", and "I believe that the state know everything that I do on the Internet." The Cronbach's alpha was .74 (M=3.69, SD=.76).

Except for the basic information section of the questionnaire, all the above questions will use a 5-point Likert scale. Micro-blog use intensity, Purposes of micro-blog use, Online political and civic participation, Offline political and civic participation were measured with "1 = never and 5 = very often". All the control variables were measured by "1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree".

## RESULTS

### Hypotheses Testing

According to the results generated from the bivariate correlation in Table 1, micro-blog use intensity is positively related to both online civic ( $r = .27, p < .01$ ) and online political participation ( $r = .24, p < .01$ ), confirming both H1a and H1b. The more people engage themselves into micro-blog, the more they will participate in online civic and political activities.

(\* Insert Table 1 about here \*)

There's no relationship between micro-blog use intensity and offline civic participation, which is reasonable because of the limited channels for citizens to participate in offline civic affairs. Therefore, H2a is not supported. The correlation between micro-blog use intensity and offline political participation is positive but very weak ( $r = .11, p < .05$ ). Although H2b was supported, the effect of micro-blog use on offline political activities was not so strong and direct.

When it comes to hypothesis 3, it's noteworthy that contrary to the usual findings in the western society, internal efficacy and external efficacy is negatively correlated ( $r = -.13, p < .01$ ) in the Chinese context. Due to the blockage of usual political participation channels, people tend to become more disappointed about the government once they gain a deeper understanding about Chinese politics. In the study, internal political efficacy was positively associated with online political participation ( $r = .38, p < .01$ ) and offline political participation ( $r = .30, p < .01$ ). However, external efficacy was only negatively related to online political participation ( $r = -.12, p < .01$ ). Thus, H3a and H3b were largely supported

while H3c and H3d were not supported.

Because of similar reasons, political cynicism was positively related to internal efficacy ( $r = .23$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and negatively related to external efficacy ( $r = -.66$ ,  $p < .01$ ). People who think they are capable of understanding Chinese politics or people who are disappointed by public officials are more likely to become cynical about the reality of China, which leads to the interesting positive but not negative correlation between political cynicism and online political participation ( $r = .24$ ,  $p < .01$ ) as well as offline political participation ( $r = .10$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Therefore, H4a and H4b were not supported.

In addition, self-censorship was significantly related to online civic participation ( $r = -.26$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and online political participation ( $r = -.27$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Similar negative correlations were also found in offline civic participation ( $r = -.25$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and offline political participation ( $r = -.26$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Therefore, H5a, H5b, H5c and H5d were all supported.

Last but not least, perceived political risk had a weak positive correlation with online political participation ( $r = .11$ ,  $p < .01$ ) but not offline political participation, which is very different from the hypotheses. It is likely that more political risk one perceives, the more likely that s/he will participate in exclusive online activities without involvement into any offline behaviors. Perhaps engaging into more online activities means a good way to express oneself without high political risk. Consequently, both H6a and H6b were not supported.

## **Predicting Online Participation**

RQ1 examined how demographic variables, internal and external efficacy, political

cynicism, perceived political risk, self-censorship, micro-blog use intensity and micro-blog use purpose predict online civic and political participation of micro-blog users in China. A hierarchical regression was conducted and the results are shown in Table 2.

(\* Insert Table 2 about here \*)

According to the results, in predicting online civic participation, micro-blog use purpose was the strongest predictor. Information Seeking ( $\beta = -.14, p < .01$ ) was negatively related to online civic participation, which implies that the more one regards his/her micro-blog behavior as seeking information, the more likely that s/he will become a lurker who does not contribute much to the online knowledge production. Social network ( $\beta = .17, p < .001$ ) and public affair ( $\beta = .32, p < .001$ ) purposes were both positively related to online civic participation. The former means that people who aim at expanding their social network are more likely to join online civic activities, and the latter implies that people who have intentions to engage in public affairs are more likely to have higher levels of online civic participation. In block 3, self-censorship ( $\beta = -.30, p < .001$ ) was negatively related to online civic participation, which is reasonable that people who self-censor their own words will contribute less in online civic activities. Among the four political attitudes in Block 2, internal efficacy ( $\beta = .24, p < .001$ ) was the strongest predictor followed by perceived political risk ( $\beta = .11, p < .05$ ), indicating that a higher personal sense of efficacy and perceived political risk are conducive to online civic participation. Micro-blog use intensity ( $\beta = .22, p < .001$ ) was positively associated with online civic participation, which has been confirmed in the hypotheses testing part.

In predicting online political participation, regression results showed that micro-blog use

purpose in block 5 accounted most of the variance at 17%. Information seeking ( $\beta = -.09$ ,  $p < .05$ ) purpose had negative relationship with online political participation, and people's propensity to become an internet lurker may partly explain this. In line with daily observations, entertainment ( $\beta = -.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ) purpose was negatively related to the dependent variable. "Work & study" ( $\beta = .10$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and "Public affair" ( $\beta = .44$ ,  $p < .001$ ) purposes had positive relationship with online political participation. In block 1 demographic factors, only gender ( $\beta = .13$ ,  $p < .01$ ) was significant, certifying that males are more active than females in online political activities. Block 2 political attitude accounted 14% of the variance. Internal efficacy ( $\beta = .32$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and political cynicism ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $p < .001$ ) both had positive relationship with online political participation, which has been explained in the hypotheses testing section. Like online civic participation, self-censorship ( $\beta = -.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was also negatively associated with online political participation.

## Predicting Offline Participation

RQ2 explored how demographic variables, internal and external efficacy, political cynicism, perceived political risk, self-censorship, micro-blog use intensity, micro-blog use purpose and online civic and political participation predict offline civic and political participation of micro-blog users in China. Similar hierarchical regression was conducted and the results are shown in Table 3.

(\* Insert Table 3 about here \*)

In predicting offline civic participation, the strongest predictor was online civic participation ( $\beta = .42$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and online political participation ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and the



same strong correlation can be observed in bivariate correlation test, indicating that people who engage themselves in online activities are also more active offline. Similar to online civic participation, internal efficacy ( $\beta = .21, p < .001$ ) was positively related with offline civic participation while self-censorship ( $\beta = .21, p < .001$ ) was negatively associated with it. In block 5, entertainment ( $\beta = -.12, p < .01$ ) purpose was negatively related to offline civic participation while social network ( $\beta = .11, p < .05$ ) purpose was positively related to it. There are some interesting findings in demographic factors. Firstly, females ( $\beta = -.15, p < .01$ ) were more likely to engage into offline civic activities probably because they are more avid at community service. Secondly, comparing with other people, students ( $\beta = .13, p < .05$ ) were more active in offline civic activities, which may be explained by their more independent economic status. Thirdly, family income ( $\beta = .13, p < .01$ ) and offline civic participation was positively related, confirming that the more one earns, the more likely s/he will devote time and money to offline civic activities.

In predicting offline political participation, online political participation ( $\beta = .67, p < .001$ ) was again the strongest predictor, meaning that people who take part in online political activities are more likely to expand their actions offline. Micro-blog use purposes were still strong predictors with entertainment ( $\beta = -.13, p < .01$ ), work & study ( $\beta = .14, p < .01$ ), and public affair ( $\beta = .28, p < .001$ ) all being significant. In block 2, only internal efficacy ( $\beta = .29, p < .001$ ) was significant predictor. Similar to previous findings, self-censorship ( $\beta = -.25, p < .001$ ) was again negatively associated with offline political participation. Contrary to offline civic participation, demographic factors in this case were all insignificant.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of the above study is to examine whether or not there is a slacktivism culture in China's internet sphere where users are active online but passive offline. Using quantitative methods to test the hypotheses and predict the online/offline civic and political participation of micro-blog users in China, the results reveal some of the participation logic and usage patterns of Chinese netizens.

First and foremost, the key hypotheses focus on the relationship between micro-blog use intensity and online/offline participation. The results show that on the one hand, micro-blog use intensity is positively associated with both online civic and political participation, confirming the fact that the use of micro-blog encourages users to be more active in online civic and political affairs. On the other hand, there's no significant relationship between micro-blog use intensity and offline participation. However, it may be too hasty to jump to the conclusion that slacktivism is very prevalent in China. In fact, online participation is strongly related to offline participation, meaning that if people are active in online civic and political activities, it is highly probable that they will also be taking initiative in offline civic and political activities. Therefore, the effect of micro-blog use intensity on people's participation behavior may be contingent. If people are already motivated to partake into online civic and political activities, it is likely that they will continue to extend their behaviors to offline affairs.

Secondly, complicated relationships can be discovered between political attitudes and

civic/political participation. Internal efficacy is positively related to online/offline civic and political activities, which accords with previous studies. Nevertheless, contrary to the usual findings in the western context, internal and external efficacy are negatively related, vividly illustrating the special logic that under authoritarian China, the more confident users feel about their political ability, the more disappointed they will feel about the functioning of the current government. In addition, the study also reveals that internal efficacy is positively related to political cynicism. Actually, it's somewhat misleading to assume that cynicism will discourage citizens to express opinions and to take actions. In fact, political cynicism is positively related to both online and offline political participation. The reason why such seemingly contradictory results may occur is the differences in content of political participation between democratic and authoritarian regimes. In democratic societies, free and competitive elections ensure that the majority of citizens can make use of an array of institutionalized political channels such as voting, petitions and social movements to express opinions and take actions. In authoritarian state like China, almost all traditional political channels are unknown or unavailable to ordinary people. Therefore, the more cynical people are towards the Chinese government, the more frequent they will resort to alternative ways such as internet to voice their discontent. To some extent, political participation in the western context mainly includes partisan politics and electoral politics, while political participation in the Chinese context involves much more unofficial channels.

Thirdly, self-censorship is negatively related to all the above four kinds of participation. Being more like a psychological variable itself, self-censorship significantly hinders people's willingness to participate in civic and political activities, which is a relatively new finding of

this kind of study since previous analyses mainly focus on the relationship between political attitudes and participation. In Chinese society, some activists and scholars believe that raising people's public awareness can drastically facilitate the cultivation of critical citizens (Norris, 1999). This study reveals that apart from direct empowerment, people's personality can also play important roles in their civic and political behaviors. That is to say, people's unwillingness to participate in civic and political activities may be seen as both reflections of their low efficacy and individual characters.

Fourth, the study went beyond the gender stereotype that males are always more active in civic and political affairs than females. In fact, this study reveals a more complicated pattern. On the one hand, difference in gender can only be observed in online but not offline political participation, implying that males are only more active in online expression but not offline action. The majority of Chinese people, both male and female, seldom engage themselves into offline politics due to suppressive political environment. On the other hand, in offline civic participation, showing more concern over community issues, actually females are more active than males.

Fifth, micro-blog use purposes are also strong predictors for civic and political participation. Entertainment purpose is negatively related to online political participation, offline civic and political participation, indicating that too many entertainment activities will indeed curtail the time and energy people can be used for civic and political purposes. Public affair purpose is positively related to online civic and political participation, offline political participation, implying that a purpose to talk about politics will serve as a motivation to partake in other civic and political activities.

Thanks to the advent of social media, time and space have ceased to become restrictive factors to instant and effective communication. Against this background, the concept of slacktivism emerged out of a wave of global activism, representing the concern over the actual influence of digital technology. Since it first appeared, various critics adopt it to illustrate the discrepancy between internet users' online and offline participation. While previous research generated mixed results about social media use and political participation, the present paper contributes to the related study by focusing on the contentious Chinese internet sphere. It partly demonstrates that although micro-blog use intensity may not directly facilitate offline participation, the online participation and offline participation is significantly correlated, which encourages us to take a deeper look at different participation logic of micro-blog users. It's also noteworthy that non-political factors such as self-censorship can also have effects on civic and political participation, implying us to drawing bigger picture of new media and participation in China.

## **LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Although the above study adopted well-developed theoretical variables, it is still an exploratory research because of the lack of empirical study on slacktivism. Therefore, the first limit of this study is that no solid theoretical assumptions have been made about users' participation. Secondly, the study took micro-blog, including Sina Weibo and Twitter users as examples to portrait Chinese netizens' participation patterns, which can hardly be generalized to all social media channels. In fact, because of ubiquitous censorship and different target users, people on different social media platforms can be quite different. Thirdly, because

some of the items in the questionnaire are politically sensitive, a lot of respondents failed to finish all the questions, which are excluded in the data analysis. It's probably that those who completed the survey are different from others, making the survey a biased self-selection process. Last but not least, because of China's special socio-political conditions, the concept of political participation turns out to provide more implications for Chinese micro-blog users. In conclusion, further study ought to expand the scope of research to include more diverse and representative samples. At the same time, it should be super careful about applying existing concepts to current socio-political situations in China which is both fascinating and perplexing.

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**Table 1. Correlations between Independent, Dependent and Control Variables**

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Micro-blog Use Intensity									
2. Online Civic Participation	.27**								
3. Online Political Participation	.24**	.61**							
4. Offline Civic Participation	.04	.55**	.41**						
5. Offline Political Participation	.11*	.50**	.72**	.53**					
6. Internal Efficacy	.06	.23**	.38**	.17**	.30**				
7. External Efficacy	-.09*	-.01	-.12*	.05	-.05	-.13**			
8. Political Cynicism	.15**	.05	.24**	-.04	.10*	.23**	-.66**		
9. Perceived Political Risk	.05	.11*	.10*	-.03	.04	.11*	-.28**	.40**	
10. Self-censorship	-.09	-.26**	-.27**	-.25**	-.26**	-.14**	.02	.07	.21**

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

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

**Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analysis of demographic factors, political attitude, self-censorship, micro-blog intensity and micro-blog purpose on online civic and political participation**

Predictors	Online Civic Participation		Online Political Participation	
	$\beta$	$\Delta R$ Square	$\beta$	$\Delta R$ Square
<b>Block 1: Demographic Factors</b>		.02		.04
Gender (M=1,F=0)	-.05		.13**	
Age	.03		.07	
Education	.03		.01	
Occupation (Student=1)	.09		.04	
Location <sup>a</sup>	-.02		.01	
Family Income	.09		.10	
Political Status <sup>b</sup>	.02		-.09	
<b>Block 2: Political Attitude</b>		.07		.14
Internal Efficacy	.24***		.32***	
External Efficacy	.01		.05	
Political Cynicism	.00		.21***	
Perceived Political Risk	.11*		-.02	
<b>Block 3: Self-censorship</b>		.08		.05
Self-censorship	-.30***		-.25***	
<b>Block 4: Micro-blog Intensity</b>		.05		.03
Intensity	.22***		.18***	
<b>Block 5: Micro-blog Purpose</b>		.18		.17
Information Seeking	-.14**		-.09*	
Entertainment	-.02		-.13***	
Work & Study	.10		.10*	
Social Connection	.17***		-.02	
Public Affair	.32***		.44***	
<b>R Square</b>		.36		.44
<b>Adjusted R Square</b>		.33		.41

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; N=430

a. Location means people's current living place, and it is recoded as 1=Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou which are top three cities in mainland China; 2=Other mainland places; 3=Overseas

b. Political status reveals whether one is a Chinese Communist Party member or not. 1=Party Member, 0=Non-party member

**Table 3. Hierarchical Regression Analysis of demographic factors, political attitude, self-censorship, microblog intensity, micro-blog purpose and online participation on offline civic and political participation**

Predictors	Offline Civic Participation		Offline Political Participation	
	$\beta$	$\Delta R$ Square	$\beta$	$\Delta R$ Square
<b>Block 1: Demographic Factors</b>		.07		.02
Gender (M=1,F=0)	-.15**		.05	
Age	.04		.03	
Education	.06		.03	
Occupation (Student=1)	.13*		.04	
Location <sup>a</sup>	-.07		-.04	
Family Income	.13**		.08	
Political Status <sup>b</sup>	-.01		-.08	
<b>Block 2: Political Attitude</b>		.04		.08
Internal Efficacy	.21***		.29***	
External Efficacy	.00		.02	
Political Cynicism	-.04		.07	
Perceived Political Risk	.00		-.01	
<b>Block 3: Self-censorship</b>		.06		.05
Self-censorship	-.25***		-.25***	
<b>Block 4: Micro-blog Intensity</b>		.00		.00
Intensity	-.01		.07	
<b>Block 5: Micro-blog Purpose</b>		.06		.11
Information Seeking	-.02		-.03	
Entertainment	-.12**		-.13**	
Work & Study	.09		.14**	
Social Connection	.11*		.05	
Public Affair	.13		.28***	
<b>Block 6: Online Participation</b>		.18		.28
Online Civic Participation	.42***		.06	
Online Political Participation	.18**		.67***	
<b>R Square</b>		.40		.55
<b>Adjusted R Square</b>		.37		.53

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ;  $N = 430$

a. Location means people's current living place, and it is recoded as 1=Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou which are top three cities in mainland China; 2=Other mainland places; 3=Overseas

b. Political status reveals whether one is a Chinese Communist Party member or not. 1=Party Member, 0=Non-party member