

**Networked Young Citizens in China:
Exploring Cybercivic Participation and
Learning among University Students**

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DECLARATION

I, Ke Lin, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how young citizens in China engage in civic life by the use of social media. It is inspired by an understanding of young people as the digital generation and as present citizens. Previous literature has identified the rise of online civic participation as a possible solution for youth political ignorance and political apathy. However, the lack of contextualised cases and detailed investigations leads to this virtual ethnographic study, which proposes a notion of youth cybercivic participation and examines its potential for constructing a transformed public sphere and for contributing to a transformed process of Chinese democratisation.

The thesis aims to discuss the contribution of youth cybercivic participation to education reform in the digital age, especially from the perspectives of young people. The study focuses on a group of 18-24-year-old Chinese university students. Data was collected through online participant observation and offline in-depth interviews. Research findings reveal that popular civic topics that students raised online include patriotism, volunteering, social justice, lifestyle politics, local and global involvement, and other controversial issues. The forms of cybercivic engagement include lurking, announcing, promoting, and community-constructing. Various factors may trigger or hinder students' participation, such as offline civic interests, needs, sense of political efficacy, media using habits and civic capability. In terms of the influence of their participation, students reported that they felt more informed, enlightened, and powerful online, while some of them remained confused, cynical and powerless offline.

Four categories of civic identities were identified: insouciant bystanders, interested participants, good citizens and active citizens. I argue that social media have expanded and diversified youth civic awareness and knowledge, but have not automatically developed youth civic capabilities. Consequently, citizenship education should explore a new model of *reflective cybercivic learning* which integrates dutiful and actualising civic learning.

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ACRONYMS

ACL:	Actualising Cybercivic Learning
ACP:	The American-Cent Party
AoIR:	Association of Internet Researchers
BBC:	British Broadcasting Corporation
BBS:	Bulletin Board System
BERA	British Educational Research Association
BYC:	BBS.Youth.cn
CCTV:	China Central Television
CNN:	The Cable News Network
CNNIC:	China Internet Network Information Center
CPC:	Communist Party of China
CYL:	Communist Youth League
DCL:	Dutiful Cybercivic Learning
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FCP	The Fifty-Cent Party
ICCPR:	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICT:	Information and Communications Technology
MOEPRC:	Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China
NCCPC:	National Congress of the Communist Party of China
OPO:	Online Participant Observation
PRC:	People's Republic of China
RCL:	Reflective Cybercivic Learning
SI:	Student Interviewee
SNS:	Social Network Site
TI:	Tutor Interviewee
UDHR:	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UGVO:	University Graduates as Village-Officials
WVP	West Volunteering Plan
YNC:	Young Net Citizens

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

BBS: Bulletin Board System is a computer server and an electronic community, also called an *online forum*, where users read news and make conversations by posting asynchronous messages to the board.

Board: a basic component of a BBS, sometimes called sub-forums. Each board contains a great number of threads, and each thread starts with a topical post that may be followed by numerous responding posts.

Flaming: flaming is what people do when they express a strongly irritating opinion without holding back any emotion.

Tutor: the teacher or the officer working at the university, responsible for students' welfare support (辅导员, Fudaoyuan).

Lurker: social media users who only read the content but do not give active responses online.

Selfies: A photographic image taken on a mobile phone by the person of themselves.

SNS: Social Networking Site (SNS) is a web-based service that enables users to set up their online profiles and to build networks with friends and strangers.

Netiquette: A combination of 'net' (from internet) and 'etiquette'. It means a set of good manners for respecting other users and displaying common courtesy when communicating online.

Thumbnail: A small image usually inserted into a text with other contents.

Zombie users: Users who signed up with social media accounts but then never logged in again, with personal profiles left, like zombies.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Internet significantly influences young people's lifestyles and learning patterns. It has the potential to open up possibilities for a '*public sphere*' where citizens are able to voluntarily assemble and communicate as equals. There is also the potential for widening the spread of opinion and enhancing the common good. When Jürgen Habermas ([1962] 1989) elaborated an ideal model of civic participation, he had not anticipated the prospect of an internet-based public sphere nor the emergence of '*cyber-democracy*' (Tsagarousianou et al., 1998; Ferdinand, 2003; Kaczmarczyk, 2010). Therefore when addressing issues connected to a transforming public sphere, the concept of *cybercivic participation* need to be taken into account.

Young people, as navigators of the Internet, have been part of the process of constructing a transformed public sphere and enhancing cyber-democracy so that they begin to realise their capacity for citizenship (Bennett et al., 2010; McLeod et al., 2010). A widely observed phenomenon is of young people becoming 'hooked' by interactive and compulsive social media. They now have expanded opportunities of free expression and communication. Nowadays young citizens in different countries are able to observe, comment and reflect upon the events like China's National Congresses, the Brexit vote, the G20 Conference or USA Presidential Primaries through social media. The process of updating and exchanging ideas plays a part in helping young citizens understand and construct the meaning of different forms of democratic citizenship. It has been reported that the new media provide an antidote for the widespread civic apathy amongst the younger generation and accelerate youth political socialisation (Montgomery &

Gottlieb-Robles, 2006; Dahlgren, 2007b; Tapscott, 2009; Ampofo et al., 2011). Young people's experiences of *civic participation* and *learning citizenship* have become different from those of their parents and teachers, especially via information-rich media channels and networked activities.

This study explores youth cybercivic participation and learning in contemporary China, showcasing distinctive inflections of the phenomenon arising from different social and cultural contexts. When it comes to Chinese cyberspace, discussions outside of China usually focus on information filtering, censorship and control by the authorities (Tsui, 2003; Lum, 2006; J. Wright, 2014). Another commonly encountered focus is upon excessive online entertainment and consumption by young people (Hui Wang et al., 2011; Qiaolei, 2014). Laying those stereotyped views aside, the study was initially inspired by two up-to-date perspectives concerning youth culture and identity: young people as the *digital generation* (Buckingham & Willett, 2006) and as *present citizens* instead of future citizens (Osler & Starkey, 2005). This study explores the idea that Chinese young people have *agency* within the process of building cybercivic culture through their use of social media. The study also argues for the view that this process can be assisted through an innovative and sustainable educational programme.

This introductory chapter begins with personal recollections of using and studying social media for public discussions and then explaining the reasons why I initially paid attention to this research topic. Then the chapter briefly describes the theoretical background and the aims of the research. It also highlights the core elements of the thesis including research questions, methodology and main findings and contributions.

1.1. Digital Generation and Cyber Citizens

1.1.1. Growing up digitally: a brief history of youth social media in China

I am one of the members of the first digital networked generation in China who have both witnessed and been a participant in the rise of the Internet in our daily lives. We have also grown up with the experience of the first public discussions based on new forms of social media. When I look back to my teenage years I find that it has been entwined with the brief history of Chinese social media.

China was officially connected to the fully-functional Internet in 1994. In May that year, the first *Bulletin Board System (BBS)* ‘Shuguang BBS (曙光 BBS 站)’ in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was launched. During the next few years, a number of BBSs sprang up and attracted more and more Chinese young people. These included influential open-to-all BBSs set up in the late 1990s, such as MOP (猫扑)¹ and Tianya (天涯社区)²; and also university BBSs created from late the 1990s to the early 2000s, such as YTHB BBS (一塌糊涂) and SMTH BBS (水木清华), which were mainly run by students at Peking University and Tsinghua University. These early forms of social media acted as online public forums where users could exchange information with others through reading and publishing news bulletins, uploading and downloading software, and chatting either asynchronously via public message boards or simultaneously via instant message applications.

A multifunctional personal online diary system called *Blog* became extremely popular in 2005 when more than 16 million blogs were opened in China,

¹ MOP <www.mop.com> was set up in 1997 and regarded as a springboard for Chinese internet culture through continuously producing internet vocabularies and symbols of popular culture.

² Tianya <www.tianya.cn> was set up in 1999 and defined itself as “Global Chinese Community”. It has become one of the most influential online platforms within China and among ethnic Chinese people all over the world, because discussion that take place can often lead public opinions.

while the number of blogs across the world was up to 100 million (ChinaLabs, 2006). This figure alone indicates the great extent to which online participation and involvement have grown in China. Though originally seen as an individualised space where individuals or organisations present aspects of their lives or thoughts, the blog exerts significant public effects because this medium encourages comments from its audience/readership and directs online interactions between different users. A blog writer actually communicates with public audiences, often bringing a small community into being. The flourishing of blogs introduced the concept of 'Web 2.0' and 'We Media' (自媒体) to Chinese people, emphasising transforming general users into participative and proactive authors, editors and publishers, instead of being rendered by the form into passive audiences who just read the news and received information in the Web 1.0 era.

Social Network Sites (SNS) represent one of the most popular Web 2.0 technologies, and these have proliferated in China in the past decade. The embryo of SNS was produced to help users find and connect with their schoolmates, like Classmates.com, created in the USA in 1995 and Friends Re-United, created in the UK in 2000. Meanwhile ChinaRen (校友录) popularised access and use of SNS in China from 1999. Early SNSs could not support users creating their own profiles, until SixDegrees.com sprung up in 1997 (Goble, 2012). SNSs really hit their stride when they were connected to smartphones, so easily-accessed SNSs like Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter have swept the world since 2004. Chinese domestic SNSs also quickly developed to serve people who mainly used Mandarin and other Chinese languages. Well known examples are Q-Zone (QQ 空间), Renren (人人网), Kaixin (开心网), Pengyou (朋友网) and Douban (豆瓣). The latest domestic report on SNS utilisation showed that the number of Chinese

SNS users had reached 244 million (CNNIC, 2012). This figure has been increased to 659 million, according to another investigation conducted by the global media research agency We Are Social (2015). The subsequent growth is likely to be considerably higher. Based on computers and mobile devices, and driven by online or offline friendships, SNSs promote communication, collaboration, and information-sharing across networks of contacts, creating an interactive and participative online culture (boyd & Ellison, 2007). The scope of SNS is continually expanding in China. Not only have new SNSs appeared, but also many previous Web 1.0 sites have been transformed with SNS functions or linked to those influential SNSs.

In 2009, *Weibo* (微博) took the lead in rapid, short statement exchanges in Chinese cyberspace. The word *Weibo* in Chinese means *microblog*. Being similar to its American counterpart Twitter, Weibo combines the idea of microblogging and social networking, in which users disseminate and read short messages from the public or among a particular circle of contacts. In the beginning, a single Weibo post only contained 140 Chinese characters, but now it allows a longer post that can transfer text posts into pictures. Weibo applications are provided by various companies (e.g. Sina, Tencent, Sohu and NetEase) in China. Sina Weibo was the first and most influential one. It has been widely used for assisting news reports, promoting marketing, stimulating public debates and launching civic campaigns, such as anti-corruption and rights protection. The campaigns, *Save Abducted Children* and *Free Lunch for Poor Children* are two examples of Weibo based citizen campaigns that have had an impact.

Since 2011, *WeChat* (微信), a free mobile communication application, has swept the country. It was developed by China's internet giant enterprise

Tencent. Before this, Tencent's star product QQ was the most popular instant message tool in China for more than fifteen years. WeChat combines many more social networking functions than QQ, such as instant messaging (e.g. text, voice, image and video message), voice calls (like mobile calls), video calls (like FaceTime), a GPS location searching and sharing service, name cards (i.e. introduce friends to add each other), group chatting, Moments (posting multimedia contents to friend networks), WeChat payment and the Red Envelop with lucky money package meaning good fortune. The number of monthly active users of WeChat was up to 806 million in June, 2016, increasing 34% from 600 million in June 2015 (Tencent, 2015, 2016). This new medium has spread so rapidly that there is very little in-depth research into its impact and influence. However, compared to the previous influential social media, WeChat has a less open and public character. For instance, it does not support direct communication between non-networked friends; also, users are not able to view and comment on the Moments of their non-networked friends, nor view full responses and discussions occurring in their networked friends' Moments. This means WeChat is a partially closed space which encourages more interaction between acquaintances instead of public communication. Therefore this research does not pay particular attention to it, although the advent of WeChat is another historical event in the development of Chinese social media.

The first time I accessed the Internet was in 1998 as a middle school student. I remember how excited I was when I sent the first email in my life, which was to an American friend who once stayed with my family as an exchange student. I started to know about and use a social medium in 2001 when several of my school friends created a BBS for students from our high school. As more and more students joined in this online school community,

our online discussions became increasingly interesting. We discussed not only our courses and homework, but also leisure interests such as films and television programmes, sports, and music. We not only talked about our everyday school lives, consisting of classroom and playground activities, but also complained about our curriculum system and the exam stress we were experiencing. We not only paid attention to local political events such as the provincial and local People's Congress elections, but also tracked international news such as the 9/11 attacks and the war in Afghanistan, which were geographically thousands miles away from us. Although I have forgotten the details of these discussions, I still remember they were intense and highly frequent. Eventually this attracted the notice of teachers who requested that we stopped using the BBS and to close it. The BBS was closed for a while but gradually student administrators re-opened our secret communication space outside the school by moving the web server from the campus network to somewhere else. The teachers' main concerns were that such online public discussion would be a waste of time and probably decrease students' academic achievement. They also worried that negative information such as online pornography and crime would mislead and harm students. In this example, we can see how one generation projected their fears about something they could not understand onto our online activity. It was a medium they felt excluded from and could not control. During several rounds of conversations and conflicts between teachers and students, the BBS was ultimately forced to close down for reasons that were never fully explained to us.

A similar story about students' online discussion happened in a primary school in 2009 where I conducted a research for my Master's dissertation. This time the end of the story was different. Social media had become so

pervasive that it was not unusual for a six-year-old student to have started his or her SNS surfing. By then, teachers in that school had established a BBS to invite and encourage students and parents to discuss school affairs and assist with school management. It also provided users with blog services and allowed them to link the BBS contents with their SNS profiles. This solution made stakeholders in the school feel that social media had promoted participation and openness in their educational environment (Lin, 2010). At that time, I wondered to what extent the ideas of this case could be implemented in a wider educational circumstances, because the primary school was innovative in the field. This illustrate just how new ways of public engagement have opened up for schools or broader communities, and how rapidly attitudes towards BBSs have changed.

In the ten years since the innovation of the Internet, such applications social media have become commonplace across the country. These experiences which happened during my school time stimulated my original interest in the processes of how social media has helped young people to build relationships with others and with the outside world through accessing the World Wide Web.

1.1.2. Young citizens in the age of social media in the world

Compared with the read-only web, social media consists of more interactive and participative internet-based applications and services, such as wikis, blogs, microblogs, message boards, image and video sharing platforms, podcasts, and social network sites (Langmia et al., 2014). These new forms of communication have provided the younger generation with more opportunities for free expression and voluntary participation in public life than

ever previously experienced or even imagined. This has enabled them to understand and respond to social and political issues in diverse ways.

The development of digital technologies was regionally unequal in the world so that not all young people had access to the Internet. The digital divide initially isolated many rural, poor, minority and technologically illiterate young people. However, the possibilities of youth civic participation have increased notably since the spread of availability and the advent of social media, especially since the universalisation of the smartphone. This happened first from 1998 in South Korea (e.g. Samsung) and 1999 in Japan (e.g. DoCoMo), then moved into Canada and the USA in the mid-2000s (e.g. Blackberry) and slightly later via Nokia into Europe by the late 2000s. The iPhone, which first arrived in June 2007 from Apple, intensified smartphone-use by the younger generation. Due to the popularisation of smartphone, the digital divide has gradually collapsed in parts of the world (Holderness, 2006; Loo & Ngan, 2012; J. James, 2014), while there remain places where it still persists and becomes more complicated (Fuchs & Horak, 2008; Holley & Oliver, 2011; Katie et al., 2011). Nowadays, the divisions facing young citizens are not only digital, but relate to a wider range of socioeconomic, political and cultural capital commonly shaped by the social structures and social media where they live.

A number of studies have explored whether and how young people as citizens employ social media to sustain interactive and participative engagement and to make contributions to their local communities and to wider civil society. Optimistic findings reported that young people are likely to use social media for gathering information, expressing themselves, sharing interests, building trust relationships, promoting discussion and debates,

practising collective decision-making and problem-solving, and exercising power (Livingstone, 2009a; Martínez-Alemán & Wartman, 2009; Kear, 2011). They began to realise their roles as citizens online, before attaining their full legal status as citizens. Many of them actually participate in political and social activities, such as online voting, volunteering, philanthropy, protesting, demonstrating, signing petitions and boycotting products (Kann et al., 2007; Bachen et al., 2008; Childnet International, 2008; Montgomery, 2008; Banaji & Buckingham, 2010; Ward, 2011; Loader et al., 2014a; Theocharis, 2014; Thorson, 2014; Warren et al., 2014; Middaugh & Kirshner, 2015). However, the counterarguments lean to not overstate the effect of social media. Such new media cannot entirely compensate for a perceived disengagement from traditional politics that is often characterised as youth apathy towards civic involvement and duty (Valenzuela et al., 2009; Baumgartner & Morris, 2010). Young people have lower levels of civic interests, political involvement and capabilities of civic participation for the reason that they lack support in acquiring knowledge, values and skills to enhance their online participation (Dahlgren, 2007b; Bennett, 2008b; Selwyn, 2008; Langmia & Mpande, 2014). Such issues will be discussed in greater detail in Section 3.2 in the literature review. Previous research has paid more attention to the American, Australian, British and other European experiences. This emphasis is also surprising in view of the prominence of Korea and Japan in the history of internet use across the population (Chang, 2005; Hadl, 2010). A lesser number of academic studies have probed into China, where there is a potential for broadening enlightened civic literacy and for accelerating political and social democratisation through cybercivic participation.

There are massive numbers of young people operating online in China. According to figures calculated by the China Internet Network Information

Centre (officially abbreviated as CNNIC), there were 287 million *young net citizens* (YNC) under 25 by the close of 2015 (CNNIC, 2016a). This figure accounts for approximately 40% of the total number of Chinese Internet users, which has reached 710 million by 2016 (CNNIC, 2016b). The internet penetration rate among YNC is up to 85.3%, much higher than the national average figure of 50.3% at the same period. When I was about to begin the present research, there were 212 million YNC (CNNIC, 2011). These figures indicate that 75 million YNC newly gained access to the internet between 2011 and 2016, and the youth internet penetration rate has increased 35.3%. YNC who are aged between 19-24 years old account for the largest proportion - up to 48.1% (=138 million) (CNNIC, 2016a). The reports also reveal young people's preference of using social media. Taking the group of university students as an example, the usage rates of different social media among them are shown in Table 1-1. These figures reveal the increasing dominance of IM systems and the relative decline of other previously popular forms. The figures also illustrate the rapid expansion of Weibo and internal shifts of different social media platforms within this field of study.

Table 1- 1: The Usage Rate of Social Media among Chinese University Students

Types of Social Media	Year 2010 (CNNIC, 2011)	Year 2013 (CNNIC, 2014a)	Year 2015 (CNNIC, 2016a)
Instant Message (IM)	94.9%	97.7%	98.3%
Weibo	32.9%	76.7%	61.9%
SNS	86.4%	60.0%	-
Online Forum/BBS	60.4%	30.6%	30.5%

The meeting of social media with civic engagement has been noticed by Chinese scholars, who have begun to draw conclusions that Chinese young

citizens are gradually influencing the social, political and educational atmosphere across the country through their online engagements (C. Ye & Xie, 2002; Dong & Han, 2008; Fang, 2011). The approaches towards civic engagement have become increasingly diverse. The Chinese examples of cybervic participation can be found in offline political and social events, such as the 2011 protests against local corruption, land seizures and police abuses of power in Wukan, and the 2011 high-speed train crash near Wenzhou. Both events have triggered massive topical posts on Weibo. These fierce online discussions have influenced the offline solutions for these events. Democratic participation can also arise incidentally such as voting through entertainment-based viewing of the popular reality television show *The Super Girl*, which is a singing contest for female performers (Bondes & Schucher, 2014; Tong & Zuo, 2014; Wu, 2014). These significant changes have been the stimulus for the interest that inform this study.

1.2. The Importance of the Research

1.2.1. Exemplifying youth cybervic participation in China

One of significant values of this research is to present Chinese examples in the global tendency youth cybervic participation. The number of people involved in the transformations of China is massive when compared to other countries. What happens within the current young generation living in China is likely to have a major and lasting impact on the rest of the world. The expansion of production capacity in China of computer and internet-based technologies could have major significance for research and development, with a decisive shift having taken place from places like California to the production belt of southern and eastern China. It is likely that China will achieve its goal of becoming a modernised nation by 2020, and one

contributing element in this progress will be constructing a modernised education system, including growing universalisation of new technology across the population (MOEPRC, 2010). However, the mission of a modernised education system cannot ignore the issues of computer use and online practice for a more democratic and justice society. The present study therefore focuses upon this challenge faced by young people which is connected to even broader social and political development in China.

The research undertook an empirical project to describe the extent to which social media enables Chinese young people to participate in civic activities. The aim was not to provide an overall statistical picture about how many people were participants in a certain number of civic activities, but to provide real-life narratives about how young people engaged in online political debates, social campaigns and cultural exchanges led by themselves. This investigation has established a preliminary framework about *youth cybervic participation*, based on the Chinese political, social and cultural environment, which could enrich theories of citizenship and youth culture. The research also intends to facilitate the development of thinking in relation to Chinese 'cyber-democracy' through a lens of education studies. This might help educators and youth workers, schools and universities, internet companies and governments to further understand young citizens' roles in constructing a democratic community, assisting the stakeholders in reflections on what they can do for improving young citizens' cybervic literacy.

1.2.2. Reflecting on the Chinese context of civic participation stated in policies and taught in universities

The concept of citizenship education in China has expanded to include includes political, ideological and moral education (Lee & Ho, 2008).

Chinese citizenship education in relation to practical concerns within schooling also includes legal education, psychological and mental health education, sex education and environmental education (Tan, 2008, 2011). However, citizenship education in most Chinese universities has not been identified as an independent field of study nor has it been taught as a specialised course. In the formal discourses within higher education, civic participation is not perceived as being significant within teaching and learning programmes.

Since the opening out policies of the late 1970s, the overall aim of Chinese citizenship education has passed through politics-centred, economy-centered and human-centred periods (X. Zhu & Feng, 2008). Before 1978, the major task of citizenship education was to cultivate successors of the proletarian political revolution and class struggle. From the 1980s, China transferred its developmental goal into economic construction, which required citizenship education to deliver the values of the market economy, such as “democracy, equality, law-based governing, rights and contracts”, and to cultivate citizens with “lofty ideal, virtues, knowledge and a sense of discipline” (X. Zhu & Feng, 2008, p. 8). In the 21st century, China has begun to support citizenship education based on national policies, laying emphasis upon political participation, human rights, citizen consciousness and civic morality. For example, the Report to the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (NCCPC) was required to

... expand citizen’s participation in political affairs in an orderly way, and ensure that people go in for democratic elections and decision making, exercise democratic management and supervision according to law and enjoy extensive rights and freedoms, and that human rights are respected and guaranteed (Jiang, 2002).

The report to the 17th NCCPC highlights the importance of

...strengthening citizen consciousness education and establishing ideas of democracy, rule of law, freedom, equality as well as justice (J. Hu, 2007).

The latest national policy, contained in the report to the 18th NCCPC, reaffirms the task of intensifying education for strengthening ‘core socialist values’³ and for advocating ‘socialist morals’⁴ (J. Hu, 2012). These policy statements are regarded as guidance for schools and universities to improve their curricula related to citizenship education. Although citizens’ participation has been addressed, it is often defined within the political realm, as we shall discuss in Chapter 2.

Based on national policies, most universities in China provide students with a set of compulsory courses to deliver basic knowledge about Chinese and Socialist citizenship. There are five main courses that students have to learn:

- ‘Cultivation of Ideology and Morality and Basic element of the Law’ (思想道德修养与法律基础)
- ‘The Outline of Chinese Modern History’ (中国近现代史纲要)
- ‘Principles of Marxism’ (马克思主义基本原理)
- ‘Introduction to Maoism and the Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’ (毛泽东思想和中国特色社会主义理论体系)⁵
- ‘Situation and Policy’ (形势与政策)⁶

These courses introduce the understandings of citizens’ participation in theory, with a focus on ‘orderly political participation’ (See Chapter 2 for

³ China’s twelve core socialist values in three aspects:

(1) for state: *prosperity, democracy, civilization, harmony*;

(2) for society: *freedom, equality, justice and the rule of law*;

(3) for citizens: *patriotism, dedication, honesty, friendliness*.

⁴ The full explanation of Chinese socialist morals can be found in *Section VI. Developing a Strong Socialist Culture in China*. See the report to the 18th NCCPC on:

<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012cpc/2012-11/18/content_15939493_7.htm>

⁵ This course introduces core thoughts of Presidents Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, which lead China’s reform and development.

⁶ This course focuses on discussing the current political situation in China and in the world, and introducing policies for national and international development.

more details). The teaching approach is mainly through one-direction demonstration, in which university lecturers and instructors tend to transmit official knowledge. Reviewing some teaching sessions, Zhang and Fagan (2016) have summarised seven themes of political participation currently being taught in universities, including voting in national elections, contacting government officials, participating in political campaigns, pursuing equality and justice via public events, joining community-based and voluntary activities, donating for disadvantaged people and discussing public affairs (p.125). Their research has shown that ideological and political curricula taught in universities have little effect on improving students' political participation. In other words, formal citizenship education would be insufficient for cultivating citizens who understand and practise civic morality and socialist democracy. This argument has also been supported by other researchers (See Chapter 3), which indicates possibilities for reforming formal citizenship education.

Nowadays, although Chinese university students have little opportunity to learn about civic participation in the formal curriculum system, they have found out and taken part in many informal learning modes. They are acquiring knowledge, skills and values of civic participation through the practice of student activities, not only in the field of political participation. For instance, they are involved in the Communist Youth League at the university level, voluntary organisations, local community and student societies, working for improving public welfare and pursuing equality and democracy. However, these activities have not been officially named as a part of civic participation and citizenship education. As many student activities rely on social media for publicity and progress, this study focuses more on students'

autonomous activities online and explores the new ways of learning civic participation informally.

1.2.3. Rethinking education for networked citizens in China

The present research has also contributed to re-thinking about the meaning and direction of education in the age of new media, especially in relation to what should be taught in curriculum areas such as citizenship, social affairs and politics. When education equals *schooling*, students are regarded as objects to be taught and cultivated. Their general process of learning includes attending classes, listening to teachers' instructions, doing homework, passing examinations, and then finding a job in the labour market. Given that so much learning is now taking place through youth online experiences this requires a new relationship between educators and learners and an undergoing transformation of education. This transformation implies a shift in educational aims from drilling skilled individuals in preparation for them to play functional roles in society towards the aim of cultivating their capacities to become and to act as responsible and self-directed citizens.

The education system in China is undergoing a new period of transformation since the promulgation of the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*, a ministry level comprehensive strategic plan for the whole system. Among a variety of educational goals, two aspects are of particular relevance for the present study: firstly, the call by the government to nurture *capable users of information technology*; secondly, there is an explicit intention to cultivate *qualified socialist citizens* (MOEPRC, 2010). Both of these contain a number

of distinct challenges for the Chinese context. The former implies a shift of learning from teacher-centred modes towards student-centred modes that:

...encourage students to make use of information technology as a means for study in order to become more capable of analysing and solving problems (p.41).

The latter refers to more complex activities that promote socialist concepts of unity and mutual assistance, honesty, trust, discipline, being law-abiding and hard-working. There is therefore, an explicit link between the purposes of education and fostering the values of socialist citizenship. There is also mention of a stepping up of:

...education about citizenship and establishing socialist concepts of democracy, the rule of law, freedom, equality, equity and justice for the students (p.10).

While examining these policy goals, we can see two directions of Chinese educational transformation. One is to encourage students more generally to embrace new technologies so that they can develop self-driven learning. The other is to strengthen students' civic values thereby they become an active part of the social spheres that exist locally, nationally and indeed globally. Therefore, the research has been designed for a combination of two goals, in the hope of exploring young people's use of the new technology for citizenship purposes. It has shown a tendency of digital citizenship and a potential innovation of educational programme, which may help educational policymakers, teachers, parents and students themselves to understand the complex changes and conflicts in the transformation. In order to realise the policy aims and to help the stakeholders keep pace with such an educational transformation, China requires extensive and detailed applied research in the field of youth digital engagement and digital citizenship. This is why the present empirical research was so necessary.

1.3. Key Definitions

1.3.1. Young people

There are various ways to define “young people” or “youth”, as they are a heterogeneous group. One of the internationally applied definitions proposed by the United Nations (UN) recognises young people as “those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years”⁷. UNESCO reminds researchers and youth workers in social and human sciences to consider contextualised definitions, as “the experience of ‘being young’ varies enormously across regions and within countries”⁸. Research into youth online civic participation applies different age ranges. Ekström et al. (2014) took a longitudinal study on 13-17-year-old young people’s public orientation and argued that youth life time (13-20) is a critical period for political socialisation. Both the CIRCLE survey⁹ and the CivicWeb project¹⁰ focused on young people aged 15-25 years old. The former investigated the use of Internet for youth political campaigns in the USA (Levine & Lopez, 2004); the latter examined the potential of Internet to promote civic engagement across seven European countries (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013). In China, the term ‘young net citizens’ (青少年网民) refers to citizens at the age between 6 and 25 who have used Internet in the past 6 months (CNNIC, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a).

This study takes the definitions above as references and targets young people aged between 18 and 24 years old. Since I locate the study in an educational discipline and consider the possibility that young people take part in political and social activities as independent citizens, I do not apply a

⁷ <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/youth/about-youth/>

⁹ The CIRCLE survey was led by The Centre for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement and The Council for Excellence in Government and released on January 15, 2004.

¹⁰ CivicWeb was an international research project funded by the European Commission, conducting across seven European countries, including Hungary, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and the United Kingdom between 2006 and 2009.

demographic definition which involves all of youth under 25 years old. Rather, I choose such an age range because Chinese young people usually enter into higher education at 18. Due to the popularization of higher education and the increasing enrolment of postgraduates, more and more young people will not leave universities until completing their master degree around the age of 24. Meanwhile, Chinese young people's legal voting age starts from 18, which enables them to have full civic rights and responsibilities, take actions and make decisions as individual citizens. This lifetime (above 18 and under 25) is the initial and important period for Chinese young people to evolve from young citizens into mature citizens. The reason I focus on this group will be further explained in Chapter 3 and 4.

1.3.2. Social media

The meaning of social media is changeable, related to several terminologies. Social media are technologically supported by the Internet, a worldwide transmission network of computers facilitating exchange and distribution, which is the core of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Web is the content a page runs on the Internet (Gauntlett, 2004). While Web 1.0 refers to the read-only sites or pages, social media are called Web 2.0 media consisting of *interactive* and *participative* internet-based applications and services, such as wikis, blogs, microblogs, message boards, BBSs, picture and video sharing platforms, podcasts, and SNSs (Selwyn, 2008; Langmia & Mpande, 2014; O'Brien, 2014). It appears that self-expressions and networked dialogues on social media would be accelerated to build an interactive and participative cyber culture.

Since China has entered the era of social media, the terms 'cyberspace' and 'the Internet' mentioned in this study mostly refer to their forms of social

media. One of the most popular social media forms in China is IM, including QQ, Fetion and WeChat. But they are more likely used for private or small-group communication instead of public conversations. For this research, I have chosen the social media holding public features as virtual communities, which are BBSs and SNSs. *BBS* is a computer server and an electronic community, also called an online forum, where users read news and make conversations by posting asynchronous messages to the board (O'Brien, 2014). *SNS* is a web-based service that enable users to set up their online profiles and to build networks with friends and strangers (boyd & Ellison, 2007). When I started designing the research in 2011, BBSs in China still occupied most university students and SNSs just witnessed their noontide.

The public nature of BBS and SNS has been discussed by scholars. O'Brien (2014) outlines three main functions of the early versions of BBSs, which are: informing members about meetings, posting announcements to members and sharing interesting information. As technology developed, BBSs have increased their social interactivity. The evolved version of BBSs include multiple functions, such as enabling users to upload and download contents, run their personal profiles and exchange synchronous messages. Social media have shown the potential of encouraging public expressions and increasing civic concerns which was seen as a starting-point for a new grassroots politics (Cassell, 2002; Bers, 2008). boyd and Ellison (2007) have commented upon the semi-public feature of SNSs, that

...allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (p.211).

However, the nature of SNSs may vary from site to site. The extent that SNSs can support civic culture depends on how young people actually use them for civic participation.

1.3.3. Civic Participation

The use of the term *civic* implies the notions of ‘the public’ or ‘publicity’, which refer to the community of citizens. The term also refers to social and political issues concerned by the public, administrative issues relating to a city/town, or the duties/activities of people in relation to their town, city, or state. The notion of ‘participation’ means the actions involved in something. Civic participation can be literally understood as the action of people taking part in the public activities and shared concern in their local, regional, national, or indeed global, communities (Montgomery et al., 2004; Bennett et al., 2006). In other words, it implies not only individual freedoms to be fulfilled but also the capacities of citizens to work together for common aims.

Inspired by Habermas’ framework of the public sphere, this research defines civic participation as citizen’s open *discussion* or *activities* occurring in a public sphere, normally relating to social and political dimensions. Since the concept of civic participation keeps changing, the study provides a theoretical clue to clarify relevant elements contained in the concept so that it can be compared with its meaning in the digital age. Additionally, the study regards that civic participation contains a set of *rights*, *responsibilities* and *capabilities* (See Chapter 2 for details). These three aspects can also be applied to examine how young people understand and practise their roles of participatory citizens in cyberspace.

1.3.4. Cybercivic participation

The term *cybercivic participation* is a key concept being constructed through this study. The notion of *cyber* is an adjective relating to the culture of computers, ICT and virtual reality. The preliminary working definition focuses on *discussions* and *actions* linked to political and social dimensions, either *online* (on social media) or *offline* (through social media), and taken for the improvement of community and public good. It is not a simple combination of cyberspace and civic participation. Rather, I argue that most youth civic participation becomes cybercivic participation, because young people increasingly rely on social media in every aspect of their lives. The notion is related to several existing concepts which can be further enriched, such as digital citizens (Ohler, 2010), digital citizenship (Ribble, Bailey and Ross, 2004), networked citizens (Loader et al., 2014a), cyber citizens (Hairon & Hawkins, 2004) and cyber citizenship (Oakley & Salam, 2012).

The concept of *cybercivic participation* has been implied in my two published papers (Lin & Starkey, 2014a, 2014b) where I initially use “social network-based” or “networked” civic participation. The notions of *cyber citizenship* and *digital democracy* have been seen in a number of studies addressing the digital change in citizenship and democracy (Vandenberg, 2000). In this thesis, I decide to create ‘cybercivic’ as one word, instead of ‘cyber civic’ or ‘cyber-civic’, because I believe that this particular notion will become more common and universal in the future, just like the format change from ‘electronic mail’, ‘E-mail’, ‘e-mail’ and now to just one word: *email*.

Furthermore, I see cybercivic participation as not only a form of changing governance but also a culture being constructed that is of benefit to its citizens. The use of cybercivic participation will be an innovation within

educational discourses and research, as youth subculture, and maybe one day as mainstream culture.

Care should be taken not to assume a fixed idea of cybercivic participation, as this new phenomenon is continually and rapidly evolving. Certain concepts may have commonly understood uses and meanings in one place/state/context, but come to mean something distinctive elsewhere, so it should not be simply translated from one country to another, or from one language to another. The process requires interpretation and contextualisation. When citizens are connected with common or similar contexts by social media, there might be opportunities to break through the boundaries that exist between countries and across borders.

1.4. Research Questions

The previous studies on youth cyber civic participation have not paid much attention to Chinese youth. Enquiring about the daily practice of one of important youth groups in China, I proposed the key research question: *how do Chinese university students employ social media for their civic participation?* The ethnographic character of this research led to a critical focus upon active social processes, which then produced a series of sub-questions (SQ):

- SQ1: What *civic issues* are concerning them most?
- SQ2: *In what ways* do they participate in civic activities?
- SQ3: What are the key *factors* that affect their civic participation?
- SQ4: What *impacts* do they feel their participation have achieved?
- SQ5: What are the *educational implications* of their participation?

1.5. Research Methods

The approach adopted for addressing the research questions is *virtual ethnography*, a recent developing methodology that is appropriate for describing and interpreting the interaction that happens within the online community with social and cultural significance. Since the main purpose of the present research is to discover and describe young citizens' daily experiences and behaviours online, it was necessary to consider an approach which identified and gained access to first-hand data and to living examples. Both Hine (2000) and Gatson (2013) regard virtual ethnography as an approach particularly suitable for internet-based research into youth culture. Thus I selected this methodology to examine online youth culture of civic participation in relation to its pedagogical implications.

Applying the research methods of *online participant observation* and *offline in-depth interviews*, I collected data and shared stories which came from events in the youth cyber community. The sample of young people for this research was a group of Chinese university students aged between 18 and 24. The field sites for a nine-month observation were located on two BBSs and two SNSs, which were reported as popular and frequently-visited sites by respondents in the pilot study. The interviews were conducted in a face-to-face and semi-structured way, with 55 participants in six universities. These included 47 students and 8 tutors. Information was accessed relating to students' interests, strategies, attitudes and the influence that their civic participation had upon their lives and outlook. Findings are mainly based on qualitative content analyses of BBS posts, social networking conversations, and interview transcripts. Raw data were coded according to topics and then related topics were categorised into one theme.

1.6. Main Arguments

Through analysing the potentials and problems that Chinese university students encountered in their cybercivic participation and cybercivic learning, I address four main arguments: firstly, social media like BBSs and SNSs do promote youth civic participation, but do not necessarily nurture active citizens who are well-prepared with citizenship literacy and thus able to make positive contributions to their community. The Chinese students who currently perform as insouciant bystanders or interested bystanders are potentially learning to be good citizens or active citizens.

Secondly, the notion of *reflective* cybercivic participation in China should include the elements of *active* and *responsible* participation, which emphasises the capabilities of rational spirits, critical thinking and sense of responsibility. The apparent non-participation or passive participation could also be deliberative and active actions as citizens might have carefully analysed the situation and civic dialogues, evaluated the result of their own actions, and eventually decided not to participate. In this case, adopting the role of lurkers might be viewed as a form of active and responsible cybercivic participation, resisting the irrational and avoiding outraged participation.

Thirdly, students have acquired capabilities for civic participation, and have the potential to be active citizens online as well as offline. However, they still face a number of confusions and challenges due to the lack of appropriate digital communication skills, restrictions of internet ethics and limitations with their citizenship-related knowledge, skills and values.

Finally, unlike learning from textbooks, learning from one-way instruction and learning in classrooms, cybercivic learning as a new form of citizenship

education emphasises learning from and through online practice and lived experience, namely discussing and doing. It implies a shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred education. This in the current Chinese context is an issue that has major implications, which I will explore later.

1.7. The Structure of Thesis

The study begins by providing background information on youth civic participation in different social and cultural contexts and outlines the main purposes and arguments of my research. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 looks at the historical understandings found in different political, sociological and educational theories and constructs a preliminary framework for defining civic participation for the rest of the study. Chapter 3 reviews previous studies that have been conducted in the internet age and describes significant characteristics and trends in youth internet-based civic participation. Chapter 4 explains why and how I designed the research and also discusses the ethical issues involved in this study. Chapter 5 reviews the ethical dilemmas involved in internet-based research and educational research, and discusses possible solutions. Chapter 6 starts reporting research findings and focuses on describing the atmosphere of the fields and the civic topics discussed online. Chapter 7 reveals forms and strategies that students apply for cybercivic participation, explores motivations and factors that influence students' behaviours of participation, and also discusses outcomes and impacts of Chinese youth cybercivic participation. Chapter 8 considers the educational implications of citizenship education, presenting three paradigms of civic learning within the context of China: *dutiful*, *actualising* and *reflective cybercivic* learning. It is expected to stimulate further discussions about the innovation of citizenship and media literacy education at university level. Chapter 9 concludes the thesis with my

exploration of four categories of digital citizen: *insouciant bystanders*, *interested participants*, *good citizens* and *active citizens*, who are all potentially or actually helping construct a public sphere at different levels.

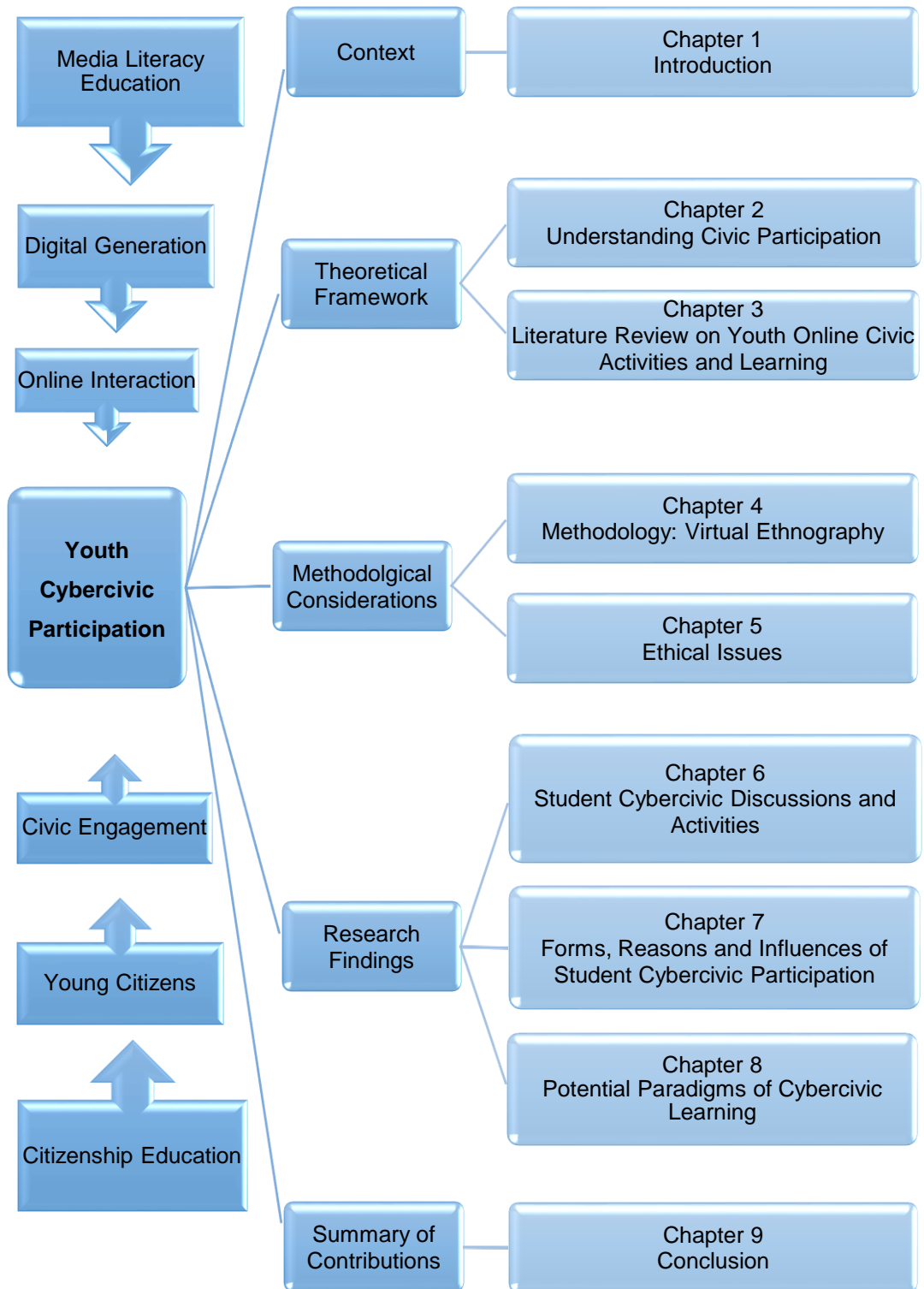


Figure 1- 1: A Mind Map of the Research

CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN THE WEST AND IN CHINA

This chapter introduces the notion of civic participation and discusses how it has been historically conceptualised in Europe and the USA ('the West') and in China. Although the term 'the West' is now old-fashioned as relations between countries and regions have changed in the digitised and globalised world, the discourse that distinguishes China from countries allied politically and militarily with the USA has an enduring place in literature.

The first four sections review classical theories related to citizenship and citizenship education in the West. Priority has been given to Habermas' framework of public spheres. Ideas from various theories have been also discussed, including: Liberalism, Neo-liberalism, Communitarianism, Civic republicanism, Cosmopolitanism and human rights, Marxism, Post-modernism, Feminism, and Multiculturalism. On this basis, I argue that civic participation can be understood as citizens taking part in public affairs in a public sphere, striving for their various *rights, responsibilities, and capabilities* to be informed, empowered and equipped.

The last two sections present the debates in contemporary China about how civic participation is constructed in political, legal and cultural discourse. Focusing on the element of civic participation, I compare several categories of citizenship, such as passive, good and active citizenship, which have different meanings in Chinese contexts and can help to understand and classify cyber citizenship.

2.1. Public Spheres to Foster Civic Participation

To understand civic participation, I apply the theory of 'public sphere'¹¹ developed by Habermas ([1962] 1989) addressing that democracy needs a place valuing 'openness' and 'publicity'. He pointed out that the ancient Greek agora was such a place where citizens came together and took part in the public affairs of a city or a state. The core of agora is not only an open market-place, but also a certain assembly place for exchanging opinions and making common decisions, which stimulated the birth and development of direct democracy (Carey, 2000; Kirk & Schill, 2011; Habermas, [1962] 1989). Highlighting the role of public discourses and actions, Habermas developed the idea of agora into the public sphere, arguing that:

The public sphere was constituted in *discussion* (*lexis*), which could also assume the forms of consultation and of sitting in the court of law, as well as in common *action* (*praxis*), be it the waging of war or competition in athletic games. (p.3)

Habermas (1989 [1962]) delineated the transformation of "Bourgeois Public Sphere" between the 17th and the 19th century. This public sphere existed in the gap between the "Private Realm" and the "Authority Realm" (p. 30). When the bourgeois came out of their private realms, acting as public bodies for "non-government opinion making", and then to "exercise their political power", they begin to help construct such a public sphere (Habermas, [1964] 1974, pp. 49-50). However, there is a tension between the public sphere and the other two spheres. Firstly, the private sphere overlaps with the public sphere, as publicly relevant activities such as the exchange of commodity and social labour can be seen in both. Meanwhile, the public sphere is oppressed by, and seeks to oppose, aspects of the state/official authority

¹¹ This theory was also discussed by Alexis de Tocqueville ([1838-1840] 2000) and Hannah Arendt (1965) when they studied on French and American political reforms. Yet, this thesis focuses on Habermas' framework.

which sought to limit their freedoms. For example, the publications of bourgeois intellectuals might be regulated or censored by the authorities, but the authors would endeavour to make political critiques in other ways or to speak directly to the authorities. The shift between spheres depends on the extent of civic participation. In other words, a good model of the public sphere requires a universal space where citizens engage in public affairs via voluntarily coming together, freely expressing opinions, and deliberatively discussing public issues based on equality, in order to make decision for the common good. The structure of the public sphere and its related spheres can be understood from Figure 2-1.

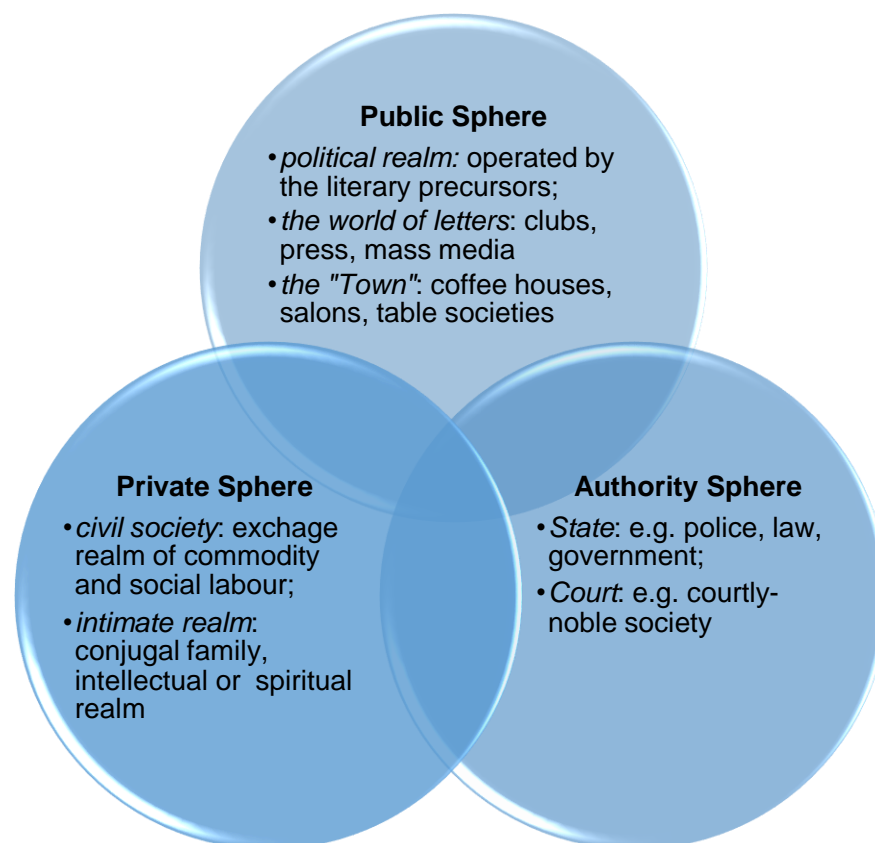


Figure 2- 1: An Explanatory Structure of Habermas's Definition of the Public Sphere

The diagram above indicates that the public sphere is constituted not only through geographic meeting places, but through a variety of communicative communities, integrating discussions with practices, connecting private realms with public realms, and bringing authoritative governing issues into social and cultural life. The most important function of the public sphere is to foster democracy, since it empowers citizens with rights to know, rights to free speech and rights to deliberative discussion.

Following Habermas, Benjamin Barber ([1984] 2003) synthesised previous opinions and insisted that democracy requires local participation and cannot stand up without public discourses. He gave more examples of public spheres for democracy, including

...a market place, a public square (like the ancient Greek agora), a country store, a barber shop, a school board, or a town meeting...[a] local talk shop, [and] neighbourhood parliament (pp. 267-268).

Barber also highlighted an educational significance embedded within a public sphere, which is “to create the conditions for the exercise of power” (p.268). One of the conditions is civic competence instilled and trained through citizens’ agora-based discussions and actions. Applying these perspectives, I tried understanding a youth-driven public sphere and studied the possibilities that young people identified and improved their civic competence, particularly when operating within the virtual, non-geographical public sphere.

Within media studies, questions have been raised concerning whether the meaning of civic participation changes due to the transformation of the public sphere, especially in terms of the shift from offline to online platforms (Gimmler, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005; Lunt & Livingstone, 2013). It is notable that mass media forms like newspapers, journals, radio, and television have also

been regarded as forms of the public sphere, playing a vital role in stimulating public discussions between ordinary citizens and authorities. Habermas' theory can be applied to examine the existence or transformation of the media-based public sphere during a period increasingly dominated by the Internet. In this case, the cyberspace built up through computer networks has been regarded as a new form of public sphere, since it makes information exchanges and social interaction among its users quicker, easier and more open. However, online interaction does not necessarily empower citizens (Gimmler, 2001; Livingstone, 2005; Dahlgren, 2012). These developing debates have inspired me to investigate how the Internet as the public sphere contains an educational potential to promote young people's civic involvement and competence.

2.2. Civic Participation and Rights

2.2.1. Limited rights in pre-modern Europe

Initial understandings of civic participation can be related to a set of rights to legitimise citizen status. As Bernard Crick (2000) referred back to Greek and Roman citizenship, he found that the concept of civic participation contained two elements: rights to *opinion-expression* and right to *decision-making*.

Citizens were those who had a legal right to have a say in the affairs of the city or state, either by speaking in public or by voting, usually both (p.4).

At that time, however, the right of civic participation only belonged to a legal citizen, namely a male adult who owned property and rational ability. Non-citizens like slaves, women, immigrants and children had fewer rights to have a *say* or *act* in public affairs.

During the European Middle Ages, it was harder to guarantee the rights to civic participation because only members of the nobility had participative rights, which represented a wide range of privileges above commoners (Crick, 2000; Heater, 2004). Although some citizens had chances to *interact* and *cooperate* with each other in “guild, manor, town, monastery and many other associative ties” (Nisbet, 1994, p. 8), the extent of citizens’ involvement and influence in these public spheres normally depended on their “social, financial, professional and trading statuses” (Heater, 2004, p. 133). In other words, rights to civic participation were too limited to benefit everyone.

2.2.2. Expanding rights in modern Europe

In the 17th century liberal ideologies emerged in Europe, calling for the expansion of citizen’s rights including the rights of civic participation. Writing about the need to challenge monarchical system, John Locke ([1690] 2005) advocated that everyone is born as “free, equal and independent”, having basic rights of “life, health, liberty, or possessions” by nature (pp. 8-9). In order to respect and defend these rights, citizens should be entitled to “join and unite into a community” for living in a “comfortable, safe, and peaceable” state (p.46). Community members should have rights to fully engage in creating, maintaining, changing and abolishing a consent which could be a law, a regulation or an agreement. Only in this way would individual citizens put on “the bonds of civil society” (p.46). Civic participation hence implied *making a united community* and *negotiating for a consent*. John Stuart Mill ([1859] 2008) agreed with Locke’s claim on the supremacy of personal rights. He believed that the insistence on “liberty of thought and discussion” would strengthen public rationality, which helps to prevent state authority exercising power over personal rights (pp.18-51). But the dilemma was that not everyone’s voice could be heard, and meanwhile the tyrannical

government kept suppressing personal liberty. For this reason, Mill ([1861] 2008) deemed an ideal framework was 'representative democracy' in which citizens chose their representatives to make speeches or deal with public affairs. Civic participation hence implies inalienable rights to guaranteed *free speech* and *permitted voting* for representatives in governing.

In short, according to Locke and Mill, civic participation was linked and overlapped with other rights in the forms of free expression, commonly agreed contracts, governing for political authority, sharing economic and social welfare. These actions represent not only a set of rights themselves, but also as a protective shield for citizens' civil, political and social rights, which would ensure citizens to own private property, live with freedom and dignity, and keep individuals away from abuse, by state authorities or by an autocratic system (Janoski & Gran, 2002).

The expansion of participation rights relies on critiques towards previous theories and social conditions, to which Marxism¹² has contributed. Karl Marx and his followers criticised liberal democracy on the basis of a free market economy, protecting the rights of property owners without guaranteeing universal equality (Marx & Engels, 1967; Turner, 1993; Sarup, 2012). The socioeconomic status would decide who has the right to be engaged in conventional public affairs, as Engels (1846) remarked that:

...the right of electing and being elected, retained for their own class. Equality is set aside again by restraining it to a mere 'equality before the law'... which means, in short, nothing else but giving inequality the name of equality (para.6).

...the liberty of the press is, of itself, a middle-class privilege, because printing requires money, and buyers for the printed productions, which

¹² Since this tradition is so influential in China, it will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

buyers must have money again (para.6).

...*the jury* is a middle-class privilege, as proper care is taken to bring none but “respectable” into the jury-box (para.6).

The quotations reveal a gap between liberal appearance and unequal reality, in which civic participation claimed as fundamental rights solely supported bourgeois interests, instead of benefiting the majority of the population – peasants and workers. The ‘proletarian’ class have to pursue their full rights through political *praxis* (Marx & Engels, 1967). This ideology then triggered the revolutions and movements in many countries in the last century, which became a popular and radical form of participation. Yet, the legitimacy of this kind of participation rights is not easy to be acknowledged, either in the past or in the current period of social media revolution. Within a Marxist perspective, another pursuit of participation rights entwines with the rights to education. It is expected that generalised compulsory education empowers the oppressed proletariat with dialogic literacy in order to overcome the divisive social consensus (Marx & Engels, 1967; Cole, 2008; Sarup, 2012; Freire, [1970] 1996). The relationship between education and civic participation will be further discussed in Section 2.4.

2.2.3. Universal rights to be promoted

As with the rise of feminism and multiculturalism in the 20th century, there has developed a growing sense of civic participation as an egalitarian right for women (Werbner & Yuval-Davis, 1999; Skelton et al., 2006), for children (Alderson, 1999, 2008; Bragg, 2010), and for minorities such as immigrants, ethnic minorities, disabled and disadvantaged groups (Unterhalter, 1999; Kymlicka, 2003; Guldvik et al., 2013). Various struggles have emerged for entitling these groups with equal rights to participate in public affairs as other citizens.

Recent decades have witnessed the progress in promoting human rights, with a set of universal and interconnected principles being articulated. A landmark for confirming the principles came with the adoption of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*¹³ in 1948. In it, human rights related to civic participation can be summarised into seven categories:

- right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 18);
- right to freedom of opinion and expression (Article 19);
- right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association (Article 20);
- right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives (Article 21);
- right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment (Article 23);
- rights to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests (Article 23);
- right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits (Article 27)

In the age of globalisation, scholars who argue for cosmopolitan citizenship tend to take human rights as being dominant over other claims. The UDHR has been applied as a guide to define and defend human rights, including participation rights. Although these Articles, along with the theory of cosmopolitan citizenship, have been criticised for their utopian ideals and neoliberalism-driven discourses dominated by the ‘Western’ or the ‘Northern’ (Bauer & Bell, 1999; Dobson, 2006; Reynolds, 2012; de Andreotti, 2014; Moyn, 2014), defenders argue that they can act as a benchmark to measure

¹³ The UDHR is considered to be the foundational document of the international law accepted by all member states of the UN. It is regarded as a widely accepted document in respect of human rights.

the actions by governments and authorities (Osler & Starkey, 2005; Osler, 2016). As to my research, these themes have been applied as indicators to analyse how young people viewed and acted their rights to civic participation in the world-wide internet environment.

2.3. Civic Participation and Responsibilities

2.3.1. Moral responsibilities

Another understanding of civic participation arises from the perspective of responsibility including multiple layers of values and acts. The first layer focuses on individuals' moral commitments. Reviewing the tradition of civic republicanism, Quentin Skinner (1991) appealed for a revival of public spirit which is embodied in citizens' sense of responsibility for civic participation. What concerned Skinner (1991) was a 'corruption' of civic life in which citizens lose their rationality, becoming reluctant to care about and contribute to their community and state while overstressing personal interests. As public good shrank, personal rights would be eventually violated (pp. 303-304). To avoid this corruption, he suggested strengthening participatory virtues, of which there are diverse understandings. Crick (2010) noted that participatory virtues underpin the qualification of citizenship. Besides the acquisition of property and education, what makes a person a true citizen includes "courage, fortitude and audacity in public affairs" (Crick, 2010, p. 19). In some circumstances, citizens serve in authorities or militaries so that patriotism and loyalty are praised as civic virtues in support of a flourishing and sustainable republic (pp.19-20). Oldfield (1990) and Dagger (2002) valued the role of ethical relationships in achieving public opinions and common decision-making within a community. They suggested that citizens should be responsible for maintaining the spirit of friendship and public trust.

Doheny (2007) highlighted moral principles for citizens' collective acts, which includes "set[ting] aside personal interests in favour of community interests" and "carry[ing] out this public business in public" (p.407). Furthermore, Levine and Higgins-D'alessandro (2010) listed some normative values to be prepared for youth civic engagement, such as "tolerant, trusting, caring, and committed to the common good" (p.116).

Virtue-based civic participation can deliver good values. However, this viewpoint needs to be challenged as applied in my research. Since citizens hardly keep the passion of participation and public spirits all the time (Skinner, 1991; Crick, 2010), they may not act as responsibly as they are expected to. There is a trade-off between freedom and moral commitment (Levine & Higgins-D'alessandro, 2010), which calls for rebalanced thoughts about civic participation in the age of new media. Moreover, participatory virtues will become 'useless' spirits if there is a lack of political skills and knowledge to equip citizens with (Blunkett & Taylor, 2010; Crick, 2010). Therefore it is necessary to consider participatory virtues both in spirit and in practice.

2.3.2. Social responsibilities

Understanding civic participation as social responsibilities relates to the idea of *social contract* and *community service*. Since the Enlightenment, proponents of Civic Republicanism have criticised the fact that a sovereign holding a supreme power and suppressing citizens as its 'subjects' would not undertake the duty to protect individual freedoms. Jean-Jacques Rousseau ([1762] 1973) advocated that individuals should collectively unite into a state based on a social contract, where citizens consent to surrender some of their freedoms in favour of a general will. To ensure the state runs in accordance

with the general will, citizens have to fulfil their obligations in making the contract, defending the rules and supervising the authority. Only with this condition would a democratic state be constructed. For Rousseau the social contract was made between individuals and the state, normally formulated as laws, while his followers proposed different versions of a social contract which could be made among individuals, organisations, or local or global communities (Rawls, 1971; Dagger, 2002; Jordan, 2011), thereby the duty of civic participation expanded in various fields. As Levine and Higgins-D'alessandro (2010) illustrated the participation in “deliberating, collaborating, volunteering and advocating” (p.120), they reaffirmed that civic participation is not a ‘cost’ but a ‘must’. Crick (2010) observed that citizens take actions “to gain the vote, to gain social power, to become not just legal citizens but to gain the rights of political citizens” (p.21). He called these movements “civic republicanism in practice”. He also pointed out the rise of ‘consumer society’ requiring civic participation to achieve fair and just commercial contracts. Especially when information and media products become exchangeable goods and services, consumer citizens have a duty to create new social contracts (Ward & de Vreese, 2011; Lunt & Livingstone, 2012).

Communitarianism is another stream of theories advocating participatory duties, and perceives community as a means of government (Bell, 1993; Etzioni, 1995; Sandel, 1998). It emphasises “the importance of the call of the community to ensure citizens will behave responsibly” (Doheny, 2007, p. 408), which suggests community providing citizens with opportunities of participation to make a good life (Ilcan & Basok, 2004). Meanwhile, it encourages citizens’ active participation in community service both in morality and in practice, which calls for more communal responsibility than

individual responsibility (Delanty, 2002; Annette, 2009). In an Anglo-American context, one typical example of community service is voluntary work. Accordingly, there is an appeal to 'service learning', with its emphasis on learning in the community, learning through experience and learning to be a responsible citizen (Annette, 2008). In China and many Asian societies, the family and the school play the roles of community where citizens are involved in complex social relationships (Delanty, 2002; Bell, 2008). The community-based participation requires stronger obligations than rights in order to maintain the social order with the core values of stability and harmony (Janoski, 2014). As the forms of community and social relationship keep changing in the social media age, it is worth discussing the change of participatory obligations, especially how young people face and lead the change.

2.3.3. Political responsibilities

Compared to Civic Republicanism and Communitarianism, Marxism puts broader and more active responsibilities on civic participation, in which activism is a necessity. The most important missions of Marxists have been stated as to pursue 'true democracy', which means fundamental equality and human emancipation (Marx & Engels, 1967). This requires a power shift from the individual to the collective through political struggles, which

...shows the active and emancipative side of democracy which succeeded not as an intellectual process from the academic ivory tower but as a result of political conflicts and societal needs (Sack, 2013, p. 22)

The struggle-driven participation focuses less on moral responsibilities praised in the 'ivory tower', and instead undertakes political responsibilities based on a sense of humanity and loyalty to democracy, seeking for a

revolutionary transformation of the very basis of civil society (Turner, 1993; Cole, 2008). This is not easy, because the bourgeoisie as the ruling class would not give up their privileges spontaneously (Parenti, 1998). Under Capitalism, people are “born to be followers rather than leaders”, their class statuses are “given” by the ruling class rather than “socialised” by people themselves (Cole, 2009, p. 118). Under Socialism, the proletariat commits to leading the political transformation for a wider range of equality (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Cole, 2008, 2009). Equipped with these ideas, many activists feel accountable to participate in the revolution led by the working class. This tradition has powerfully influenced public life in China since the early 20th century. Yet, when it comes to the 21st century, the fierce revolution has been gradually discouraged due to some inherent problems. For instance, this active participation may result in a state of egalitarianism ignoring difference. It may only exist for a short period for specific political purposes. It cannot replace normative community-based political participation (Bell, 2008; Sack, 2013), such as regular voting in elections, organising campaigns or fundraising, contacting officials and joining in cooperative activities in organisations (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). However, carrying on the method of class analysis and critical ideology, contemporary Marxism highlights citizens’ duties in critical discourse to “overview global development and challenges” (Cole, 2008, p. 145) and reconstruct the ‘political’ community (Sack, 2013, p. 24). Within China, there was limited emphasis on critical discourse in formal education, but this might be raised up by the younger generation using new technologies.

2.4. Civic Participation and Capabilities

The relationship between rights and responsibilities is not opposition but interdependency. Whether civic participation appears as rights-driven or

responsibility-driven, it needs capable citizens to fulfil it. The question to be discussed in this section is what participatory capabilities could and should be delivered to citizens and in what ways. This is also asked when attempts are made to consolidate citizenship education (QCA, 1998; Heater, 2002; Keating et al., 2010; Hedtke & Zimenkova, 2013). Reviewing three clusters of theories, this section presents a group of participatory capabilities and capability-based citizens' identities.

2.4.1. Experience-sharing, knowledge-acquiring and problem-solving

Firstly, advocates of participatory democracy have stressed civic participation as the core element of democracy, and developed the meaning of democracy. John Dewey ([1916] 2004) believed democracy as not only “a form of government”, but “a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (p.83). He addressed the importance of sharing experience which helps citizens learn to exchange opinions, organise activities and solve problems. Besides, acquiring knowledge also matters, because “knowledge is a mode of participation” that makes citizens informed and their participation more effective (p.323). For Dewey, an ideal school works as a practice base for civic participation with golden rules of harmony and balance, where young people commonly learn moral values, aesthetic literacy and communication skills. Citizens possessing these capabilities would help build up more democratic societies.

Carole Pateman (1970) led the argument for constructing participatory democracy through formal education, especially in higher education. She particularly noted that equal civic participation has an educational function, as it provides citizens with opportunities to understand and exercise actual democratic procedures at different levels, such as family, school, local

community and state. Citizens try different approaches to commonly solve problems and then influence public policy-making together. Although they might take wrong actions, they still can learn from mistakes and then produce positive consequences. This whole process is not only political practice, but also educational practice, which can improve citizens' awareness and skills for participation (Pateman, 1970; Schlozman et al., 1999).

Both Dewey and Pateman have pointed out an ambitious purpose of civic participation beyond the right-responsibility-constructed citizenship, looking upon the education of an entire people in a genuine community where citizens' intellectual, emotional and moral potentials are expected to develop. They also provide a perspective to understand civic participation within daily life, instead of only within serious political activities.

2.4.2. Leadership, critical-thinking, dialogue and deliberation

Secondly, from a Marxist perspective, the capabilities for civic participation refer to the leadership of social movements and the agency of critical reflection and action. In Engels's (1846)'s time, the discrepancy of capability between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie was one of the reasons why they lived in different situations. It was essential for the working class to continually struggle and practice their leadership in political and social movements. Over the course of time, as the domain of struggle changed, so did the meaning of capability. For Antonio Gramsci (1971), revolutionary struggles revealed the economic and political domination of the bourgeoisie over the working class in a traditional capitalist society. But contemporary domination is more likely to be hidden in the civil society controlled by mass media, institutions, languages, religions and consuming practices.

Participatory citizens need to identify and distinguish this 'cultural hegemony' and critically reflect on it. They also need to struggle for the good of political and social leadership, as well as for intellectual and cultural leadership.

Neo-Marxism emphasises dialogue and deliberation as key participatory capabilities which are as important as authentic actions and revolutions. For Freire ([1970] 1996), dialogue appears not only as a pedagogical tool facilitating "the process of learning and knowing" (p.18), but also as a method of political deconstruction aiming for "the practice of freedom" (p.8). He pointed out that civic participation relies on critical dialogue, remarking that "true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking" (p.92). For Habermas ([1992] 1996), deliberation works as "ethical-political communication" (p. 359) in the differentiation of public spheres, including "popular science and literary publics, religious and artistic publics, feminist and 'alternative' publics, publics concerned with health-care issues, social welfare, or environmental policy" (pp. 373-374). Within these public spheres, the ways of participation become various and complex, where even the daily communication activities with public purposes, such as reading, consuming, celebrating and criticising, can be counted in (Englund, 2010). This leads to conflicts of opinions and values so that rational communication and deliberative discussion are emphasised as essential abilities of citizens (Hermes, 2000, 2005; McGuigan, 2005). Bearing these ideas in mind, I am particularly interested in dialogue and deliberation led by young citizens in the cyber public sphere.

2.4.3. Agency, networking and cooperation

Thirdly, as Feminist and Multiculturalist campaigners notice the intrinsic heterogeneity in gender, language, culture, race and religion, they address

the inequality of capabilities as the main obstacles to their success in civic participation (Kymlicka, 1992, 1995; Unterhalter, 1999). To improve this unequal situation, Martha Nussbaum (2003) developed Sen's capability approach and defined civic participation as a sustainable capability out of ten fundamental capabilities of human beings to social justice.

The participatory capability firstly implies the *agency* which enables citizens to imagine and shape their lives with dignity and responsibility, instead of "being instructed and shaped" (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p. 6). Agency partially derives from innate human characteristics, but more from any individually- or collectively-learned ability (Nussbaum, 2003; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007; Nussbaum, 2011). This view is in accordance with Marxist humanists' emphasising on human agency - the ability of people to successfully struggle to change things (Cole, 2009; Sarup, 2012). A high-quality of participation also needs citizens' capability of networking and cooperating, "being able to establish positive relationships with others and to participate in social activities without shame" (Terzi, 2007, p. 37). This cooperation actually incorporates other capabilities, such as acquiring and analysing information, communicating and negotiating, arriving at a common consent, and making political choices and decisions. All these capabilities enable citizens to actively govern their political environment, pursue rights of political participation, and protect free speech and association, rather than always wait for others to do this on their behalf (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 80). In short, civic participation can be understood as a comprehensive capability set, which is correlative with participatory rights and duties. It can be developed through a broadly defined education within and beyond schooling (Nussbaum, 2000, 2003). In this sense, civic participation as a political issue has been brought into an educational consideration.

2.5. Contextualised Civic Participation in China

In China, although there is a distinctive tradition of *participation* deriving from oriental doctrines represented as Confucianism¹⁴, the very specific notion of *civic participation* was not articulated until the rise of ‘citizenship’ in the late 19th century, when Chinese society was about to embrace modernity (Vickers, 2015). In some historical periods, civic participation in China was regarded as a controversial issue, with a label of ‘an imported idea’ based on the Western model of civil society. However, it has been developed and localised over the years (Keane, 2001; Bell, 2008; Guo, 2015). This section endeavours to understand civic participation in contemporary China, from the perspectives of the public sphere, rights, responsibilities and capabilities.

2.5.1. Contested public spheres in contemporary China

Taking Habermas’s concept of public sphere into the Chinese context, I firstly review some public spaces that potentially support civic participation. For instance:

- Guangchang (广场) means a square, a place of gathering and holding collective events, which is usually located in a town or city. The largest Guangchang in China is Tiananmen Square, the symbolic centre of political power which holds national mega-events.
- Shichang (市场) equates to the idea of an open and public marketplace which is also a meeting point for a variety of agricultural, commercial and labour exchanges.

¹⁴ For instance, Confucianism encourages *rushi* (入世) which means men going to the secular society and change the world with “the spirit of worldliness” and “worrying mentality” (Y. Zhu & Zou, 2008, p. 166). It also supports for political participation through writing, debating, serving the authority or criticising on status quo (Bell, 2008, p. 157). But this tradition has been argued as an elitism-orientation and obligation-orientation (Bell, 2008; Janoski, 2014; C. Wang, 2015).

- Caochang (操场), particularly used in the settings of school, university or army, refers to sporting and assembling areas.

Although these places are literally public spaces in China, they function more like geographic meeting points, instead of social, communicative spheres for public discourse. The function of Guangchang has largely degenerated into a playground. Recent debates focus on their legitimacy as dancing places, since many people in cities occupy Guangchangs for their group dancing, playing music via loudspeakers and blocking pavements. This has caused debates on whether or not some citizens' freedom to use public places violates others' freedom from noises and inconvenience, yet it is driven by an individual or group interest instead of a public will (Y. Yang, 2014).

Similarly, Shichang and Canchang are normally used by specific groups of people for purposeful activities, such as shopping, running exhibitions and physical training. But some public places' civic participation functions have been re-activated in the internet age, which we shall explore in the following chapters.

Contemporary Chinese cities have witnessed an increasing number of tea houses and coffee shops, which have become popular gathering venues. Tea houses are usually used for leisure activities, where people have drinks, chat with friends, and play chess, cards and Mahjong. This de-political atmosphere of the tea house was portrayed by Chinese dramatist Lao She, with a striking slogan put on the wall of a tea house saying "Don't talk about national affairs (莫谈国事)". This poster aims to remind ordinary people to keep their nose clean to avoid persecution caused by inappropriate comments on political issues. Lao She's drama *Tea House* satirises the oppressed participatory culture in the last century, when China went through regime changes and revolutions. This cautious attitude towards public

conversations can be still observed in present tea houses, where people are grumbling about the social and political status quo instead of publicly making deliberative discussions. By contrast, coffee shops in China have been imagined to be able to cultivate public discourse, since many of them are used for running literary and cultural salons, gathering people from various fields to have discussions. To some extent, coffee shops in China represent a metaphor for Westernisation or modernisation, which imported not only a kind of overseas drink but also a lifestyle with its social organisation, or even an embryonic impression of the Bourgeoisie Public Sphere (He, 2010). In fact, some Chinese coffee shops are also places for business meetings, professional group working, students' self-studying, friends' meeting, and for card and Mahjong playing. As Habermas ([1962] 1989, p. 257) noted, different social groups may have their favourite coffee shops. They may come neither for civic discussions nor to achieve public opinions. It is hence too simplistic to expect coffee shops in China to replace tea houses to construct a public sphere. However, it is worth considering whether or not internet cafes play a better role than offline tea houses and coffee shops.

There are forum-like public spaces in Chinese contemporary history which originally aimed to encourage freedom of expression but eventually led to disappointing results. One typical example is 'Xidan Democracy Wall', a long brick wall in the Xidan intersection of Beijing, with many posters put up on it since November, 1978. The Wall enabled both government employees and ordinary people to 'publish' political opinions and protests on handwritten posters glued to the bricks (Thwaites, 2004; J.M., 2013), but gradually a large number of criticisms of the government and malicious personal abuse to other citizens emerged (Li, 2001; Thwaites, 2004; Paltemaa, 2007). In March, 1979, the government clamped down on the wall, prohibiting the

movement of poster-publishing, for some complex reasons. Some Western researchers (Seymour, 1980; M. Goldman, 2002; Svensson, 2002) tended to view this movement as Chinese citizens' struggles for a liberal model of democracy and for their political citizenship based on human rights in the post-Mao period. However, Paltemaa (2007) noted that the movement involved an important argument about socialist democracy between the visions of Marxism and Chinese Red Guard who used Big-character Posters (大字报, Da Zi Ba) to insult and attack others during the Cultural Revolution. This movement indicates that an imagined public sphere might become a drastic battlefield where citizens attack and hurt each other if they lack the understanding of participatory rights and responsibilities. Considering historical events, a key dilemma in the Chinese context is that ones' freedom of speech may infringe others' rights and dignity, or undermine social stability and harmony, and vice versa. As poster-publishing activities transfer into online spaces, similar dilemmas will be seen and need to be discussed.

In terms of media-based public forums in China, most mainstream media (e.g. newspaper, radio and television) tend to support elite-driven discourses (Cao et al., 2014) and have been questioned due to the effect of removing variety and contestation. Cao (2014) argued that "political elites attempt to maintain continuities with their revolutionary past and the intellectual elites try to preserve China's cultural heritage" (p.5). This is one of the reasons that President Xi Jinping has recently called for the renovation of the Chinese media system, remarking that Chinese journalism and publicity should connect the CPC with ordinary people. He emphasised that "Party spirit and the idea of serving the people have long been interrelated" (Xi, 2014, p. 172), which implies the responsibility of the Party-governed media to engage with people and to achieve public consensus.

We should serve the people while educating and guiding them, satisfy their demands while upgrading their personal quality, disseminate and report more on their great endeavours and vigorous lives, role models and their moving stories (Xi, 2014, pp. 172-173)

But the legitimacy of such elite-driven and party/state-driven journalism has been significantly challenged by the social media through which the grassroots began to voice and act (Y. Hu, 2008; Cao, 2014; Tong, 2014). The change in peoples' media habits has resulted in another round of transformation in China's public spheres.

The above examples show that there remains a tension between authority and autonomy in Chinese public spheres, but it seldom contributes to deliberative discussions and decision-making for common good. This is the reason why commentators suspected the existence of public spheres in present China as citizens have limited understandings about citizenship and the spirit of agora (Xin Gu, 1994; Paltemaa, 2007; NewsLine, 2012). But this critique needs to be critically reviewed when it comes to a cyber public space.

2.5.2. Orderly civic participation

Integrally examining rights, responsibilities and capabilities of civic participation, the so-called 'Western'-originated theories have been spread and discussed in the academic sphere in China for many years. In Chinese mainstream political and administrative spheres, the key concept advocated is that of *orderly civic participation*. For instance, the *Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China* (NCCPC) requires for "the expansion of citizens' orderly participation in political affairs at each level and in every field" (J. Hu, 2007), while the *Report to the*

Eighteenth NCCPC emphasises orderly civic participation in relation to other aspects (J. Hu, 2012).

We should broaden the scope and channels of such self-governance and enrich its content and forms, with the focus on expanding *orderly participation*, promoting transparency in information, improving deliberation and consultation on public affairs, and strengthening oversight of the exercise of power, to ensure that the people have greater and more tangible democratic rights (sec.5, para.3).

Based on the national policy, the attribute 'orderly' can be interpreted from at least four aspects, being that citizens must: (1) acknowledge and follow the current Chinese political system and CPC's leadership; (2) be informed of the rights and responsibilities of participation in accordance with law; (3) act in deliberative and moderate ways, in avoidance of irrational and violent behaviours; and (4) respect the core values of rationality, harmony, justice and democracy (K. Yu, 2006a, 2006b; Wei, 2007a, 2007b; Xunbao Gu, 2009; B. Sun, 2009). Chinese civic participation can be further classified into *legal* and *illegal* participation (Guo & Guo, 2015). The legal forms allow citizens to take part in different levels of elections and to work in social organisations and the congress of workers and staff. Recently, some citizens are invited to join in consulting meetings in their communities, like the Citizens' Consultative Committees in the Guangdong province. The illegal forms refer to petitions and strikes that take place without official permits, which are not included in orderly civic participation. Within the legal framework, citizens' participatory responsibilities for a stable and harmonious society are highlighted. This is the reason that scholars tend to view Chinese civic participation as a duty-driven model similar to Communitarianism (Etzioni, 1995; Xu, 2006; Howell, 2011; Janoski, 2014), which appreciates moral commitments to the state and good behaviours in communities.

Counterarguments to the duty-driven participation model focus on a recent increasing awareness of rights of civic participation in China, considering the international framework of human rights. For instance, China has acknowledged the legitimacy of human rights based on UDHR¹⁵ (H. Yu, 1999; Hua, 2015). Both the 50th and 60th UDHR Anniversaries were celebrated in Beijing, where former Presidents Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao respectively gave speeches to emphasise its value (China Society for Human Rights Studies, 1998, 2008). China also officially ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1998, which is a legal treaty based on the UDHR. ICCPR articles have been applied to formulate and assess relevant domestic policies and research, such as the National Human Rights Action Plans and Annual Report on China's Human Rights. These examples show that universal rights to participation in the UDHR and ICCPR have been formally recognised in China, at least in policy. However, since the international system has to accord with the Chinese situation, the rights to civic participation are highlighted as “orderly civic participation” and “legal freedom of expression” (SCIO, 2012; China Society for Human Rights Studies et al., 2015). Some rights like demonstration, petition and organising unions are too controversial to be announced.

Orderly civic participation has been also required in Chinese media and publicity environments. Freedom of speech is a conditional freedom. Besides obeying the law, Chinese media expression has to worship the CPC's leadership and preserve the Party's spirit and national values, keeping a correct political direction and “disseminating the Party's theories, lines, principles and policies” emphasised by President Xi (2014, pp. 172-173).

¹⁵ China was one of 48 original approvers of the UDHR in 1948, when China was governed by the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party). After the change of Chinese regime and the establishment of People's Republic of China (PRC), the CPC governed China has not rejected UDHR.

The aim of publicity is to educate people and foster responsible speeches which “enrich the people culturally and ethically, enhance their moral strength, and meet their cultural and intellectual demands” (p.173). In other words, the direction of speech needs to be guided and the fulfilment of speech needs to follow the principles of the national policy.

To sum up, orderly participation in China emphasises responsibility. Citizens should take an appropriate and peaceful approach to participation, heading to a promising result which gives priority to the rule of law and the stability of Chinese society. This indicates that *participation within the structure* becomes an important capability in China. Citizenship education requires students to firstly understand the Chinese political system before taking actions. Until recent years, educational researchers began to suggest nurturing *active responsible citizens* through a *participatory citizenship education*, encouraging young people to be involved in their community life (e.g. school, university, neighbourhood, youth organisation, the party-affiliated associations and the nation). This practice-based education aimed at improving civic spirits, virtues, rationality, and participation skills (Tan, 2011; F. Ye, 2011; Feng, 2016). While skills of negotiation, deliberation and collaboration are highlighted in the ‘active’ domain, individual and social morality and the spirit of public good are valued in the ‘responsible’ domain.

2.6. Classification of citizenship

Considering different levels of civic participation being in line with civic participation, researchers have classified several types of citizenship and relevant learning models. Arthur et al. (2008) have argued that young people are transforming their participating interests away from *formal* domains (e.g. political parties, government concerns and public protests) towards *informal*

domains (e.g. NGOs, charities, volunteering, environmental protection and cultural modes of expression). Pérez Expósito (2013) divided young people into a *disengaged group* and an *engaged group*. The former group were seen as politically apathetic and civically incapable; while the latter seemed to be keen on public and political activities with capabilities. He stressed that the apparently disengaged group might occasionally participate in social or cultural activities, however, substantial civic participation should take place in a political dimension, which reaches to the core of citizenship education.

Another binary formulation is that of *good citizens* and *active citizens* (QCA, 1998; DfEE & QCA, 1999; Crick & Lockyer, 2010). The former implies a normative view of citizenship that encourages conformity. Good citizens tend to obey the law, respect authority, be polite and well-behaved, address moral virtues of care and concern for others, be good neighbours and generally relegate ideas of the good life in private spheres. The aim of nurturing good citizens is not value-free, but reflects the results of political struggles to foreground dominant discourses that do not threaten the status quo (Pykett et al., 2010). However, the latter, active citizens, emphasises *reflective capacities* and *responsible behaviours* to the community. As defined in the national curriculum for England, active citizens are those who are “willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life and with the critical capacities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting” (QCA, 1998, p. 7). The process of nurturing active citizens is helpful to construct civil society and sustain social solidarity (Blunkett & Taylor, 2010; Crick & Lockyer, 2010). Although this notion has often been criticised for it may trigger challenges to the authority, it has been regarded in many cases as an ideal goal of citizenship education (Ireland et al., 2006; Ross, 2008).

Hudson (2005) offered three levels of citizen identity: *passive*, *active* and *politicised*. Passive citizens are not as enthusiastically engaged in civic activities as the active, who believe they can make a difference. Significantly, some young people move beyond passive and active levels as they not only take part in school-based and local activities with a strong sense of responsibility and concern, but also critically reflect on their participation experience with a politicised perspective, with the use of relevant political knowledge and skills (Osler, 2000; Hudson, 2005). It can be seen that Hudson's definition differs from Crick's. What Crick means by active citizens is closer to what Hudson means by politicised citizen. Thus, it is necessary to clarify concepts in different frameworks and set up my own framework.

In China, there is a category called '*Kanke* (看客)' similar to the *disengaged group* or *passive citizens*, which has been criticised in China for a century. It can be describe as the *insouciant bystander*. Insouciance here is more than disinterest, unconcern, or nonchalance. Lu Hsun (鲁迅) in his book *Call to Arms* (1960) represents Chinese people who listen to or merely observe their fellows' painful experiences, rather than take actions to help change and reform the society. Another example of the insouciant bystander is to be found in Martin Niemoller's poem 'First they came' (Niemoeller, 1946). Insouciant bystanders are citizens holding a national status, but they do not feel solidarity with their fellows, nor are they concerned to protect human rights in practice. These bystanders have a minimalist understanding of what is entailed by citizenship (Osler and Starkey, 2005).

Good citizens in China are praised for their loyalty to the motherland and to CPC, their submissive behaviours, and their deep reflection on personal virtues. Chinese education, which emphasizes moral and ideological

principles, aims to produce such 'good citizens' (Lee & Ho, 2008). The CPC defines the outcomes of its citizenship and moral education programmes as 'qualified socialist citizens'. In other words, citizens that have awareness about 'citizenship and socialist concepts of democracy, the rule of law, freedom, equality, equity and justice' (MOEPRC, 2010, p. 10). '*Socialist concepts*' here means that there is an official CPC understanding of the meaning of democracy, freedom, and justice that good citizens are expected to adhere to and not challenge. There is little expectation that good citizens will apply critical faculties to the state of democracy or the application of justice, hence the notion of active citizens is seldom used in Chinese officially political discourse.

Summary

This chapter historically and comparatively clarifies the meaning of civic participation in Western and Chinese societies. It starts by analysing the models of public sphere, focusing on civic expressions and actions. Then it proposes a comprehensive concept of civic participation (see Figure 2-1), consisting of three mutual-related aspects with overlapped elements. Civic participation contains a group of basic rights held by individual citizens along with citizens' responsibilities for democratic society. It also requires capabilities of civic participation which enable rights to be protected and responsibilities to be undertaken. Although the reviewed theories tend to focus on one or two aspects, they do not overlook others. For instance, the pattern of Liberalism was criticised for overstating individual freedom, "but this does not mean that Liberalism is mute on responsibility" (Doheny, 2007, p. 406). Liberalists view civic rationality as both responsibility and capability. Civic republicanism and Marxism understand a responsibility as an active right, which would help citizens to critically reflect and protect personal

interests (Janoski & Gran, 2002; McCowan & Unterhalter, 2013). Moreover, in the framework of Multiculturalism, the provision of human rights are the key elements for civic capability (Nussbaum, 2003, 2011). Due to a long history and multiple contexts, here I can only refer to some representative theories which help us to understand the concept of *civic participation*.

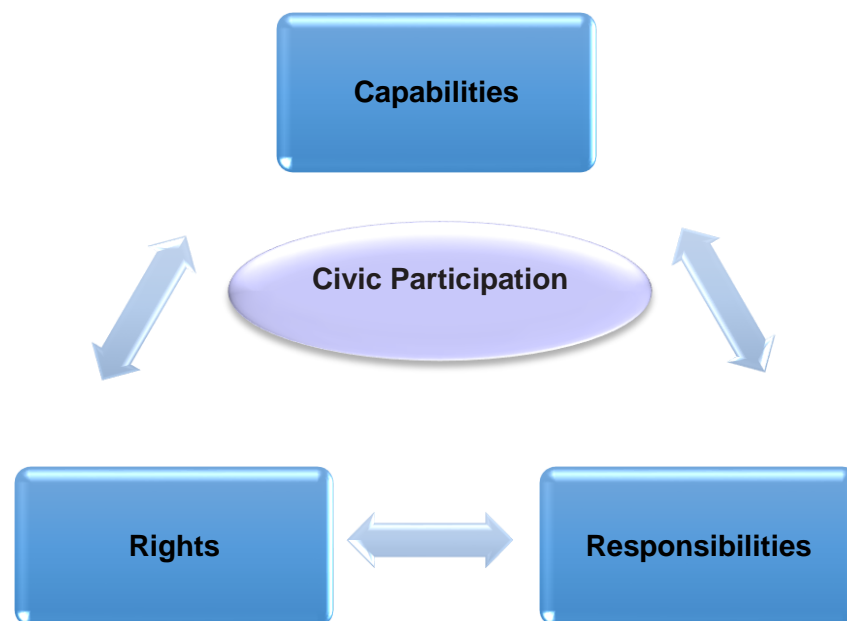


Figure 2- 2: Understanding of Civic Participation

One of the key difficulties in constructing a theoretical framework of civic participation is to distinguish China from the West. Since many ideas and terminologies originate from the West but are used in Chinese national policy and research, it is necessary to consider the actual political and social situations and further interpret orderly civic participation. However, due to a flow of ideologies in the age of globalisation and a lack of sound legal systems in cyberspace, this may blur the boundary between ‘orderly and disorderly participation. Thus, I would argue that civic participation is a

dynamic working process which integrates elements from both Western and Chinese ideologies. Young people may understand it from both formal education and informal participatory experience. Holding this integrative view, I summarise the concrete contents of civic participation in Table 2-1. This has been used as thematic codes for empirical data analysis.

Table 2- 1: Contents of Civic Participation in Three Dimensions

Dimensions of Civic Participation	Contents
Rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • freedom of thought, conscience and religion • freedom of opinion and expression • freedom of peaceful assembly and association • to take part in the different levels of government, directly or through representatives • to vote in elections • to work, having free choice of employment and protection against unemployment • to organise and join trade unions • to participate in the cultural life of the community
Responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to promote public spirit and participatory virtues • to abide by the laws and regulations • to vote in elections • to make and follow a social contract • to serve the community • to influence policy-making processes • to struggle against inequality and injustice
Capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • of acquiring and analysing information • of listening and respecting others • of thinking and acting reflectively and critically • of dialogue, deliberation, debating and negotiating • of governance, problem-solving and decision-making • of networking, communication and cooperation • of leadership

The Table 2-1 also helps to clarify about the nature of the participation people are attempting, indicating a wide range of civic participation activities. The core of civic participation is the process that citizens are directly or indirectly involved in and which have an influence on public life. For example, citizens might seek to effect change in the political system for a state; they might contribute to improving an institution, an authority, an organisation or a community; and they might work together to enrich their cultural and leisure life. The three general aspects (political, social and cultural) of civic participation will be also discussed in Chapter 3 when review the fields and contents of youth cybercivic participation.

At last, the classification of citizenship discussed in this chapter also provides a framework to analyse citizens' propensity of participation before the internet age. These debates have been applied to analyse online civic participation and citizens' online identities in the following chapters. The next chapter will discuss the notion of *cybercivic participation* based on empirical studies, particularly focussing on youth experiences.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW ON YOUTH ONLINE CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND LEARNING

Following the discussions on classical and contextualised understandings of civic participation in Chapter 2, this chapter critically reviews a number of empirical studies arising in the digital and internet age concerning youth participation culture. The chapter consists of six sections. The first section chronologically presents some landmark studies about the relationship between the Internet and youth lives. The second section discusses how the specific research interest of online/cyber civic participation arises from a list of popular and controversial issues about youth digital culture, and how young people become involved in civic activities in different aspects. The third section focuses on the educational insights into youth online civic participation. The fourth section compares different research approaches that investigate youth online civic participation. The fifth section moves to review studies in the Chinese context, which includes both Chinese and English research. The final section indicates the gap in knowledge between previous and future research and probes into a new context-based research approach. The review helps further clarify key definitions and proposes research questions.

3.1. Participative Youth Culture Online: Integrating Perspectives

One of key questions being asked before conducting the present study is what makes the current generation different from those who passed before. While answers vary, all responses tend to include reference to the presence the Internet which has become embedded in everyday lives. Researchers

have proposed particular concepts to understand the younger generation, including 'the Net Generation (N-Gen)' (Tapscott, 1998), 'smart mobs' (Rheingold, 2002), 'cyberkids' (Holloway & Valentine, 2003), 'the digital generation' (Buckingham & Willett, 2006) and 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). This generation consists of children and young people who grow up surrounded by digital media connected to the Internet. The number of studies in this field has been so tremendous that I can only mention several remarkable works in recent decades.

Early in 1998, Tapscott set out to understand what this younger generation do with their digital expertise. He argued that the N-Gen could do almost everything in the virtual world.

They manage their personal finances; organise protest movements; check facts to prove a teacher wrong; discuss zits; check the scores of their favourite team and chat online with its superstars; organise to save the rain forest; make C-friends (cyber friends)...cast votes; learn more about the illness of their little sister; go to a virtual birthday party; get video clips from a soon-to-be-released movie (p. 5).

This initial portrait of the N-Gen showed that in the process of joining and organising diverse activities online, young people became comfortable and confident staying in cyberspace and travelling between offline and online settings. Thus, Tapscott (1998) made an optimistic comment that young people were less 'passive' audiences than their parents who grew up with television, although some of young people confronted disappointing issues like "the digital divide" (p.255-265) and "contradictions between generations" (p.295-299). Eleven years later when many of the earliest N-Gen themselves have become parents facing new challenges, Tapscott (2009) still believed that the future leadership would be handed over to the younger N-Gen both in the virtual and actual world as he highlighted the role of social-networked citizens in changing democracy.

Inspired by Tapscott's early exploratory framework built with the N-Gen in the USA and Canada, Rheingold (2002) paid attention to another groups of the N-Gen, as he saw teenagers in Tokyo, Helsinki and Manila on the street "staring at their mobile phones instead of talking" (p. xi) and "twiddling the keyboards with their thumbs" (p.xiii). He defined this group as '*smart mobs*' who are the users of mobile technologies, being always online and able to connect with each other. Rheingold believed that an intergenerational power shift and an expansive social coordination were happening as individuals were empowered by ubiquitous mobile networks in which they could get a wider range of information and peer support. Examples manifested a new form of social power leading by smart mobs, which include their collective actions of building online commercial communities, launching street protests, and organising political demonstrations by forwarding text messages. However, Rheingold reminded that the smart mobs were not always 'smart' because they expose themselves to "threats to liberty", "threats to quality of life" and "threats to human dignity" (p.185). To avoid these risks, smart mobs have to learn more intelligent and efficient ways of cooperation.

Based in the UK, Holloway and Valentine (2003) explored the way children applied Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in transforming their activities at school and at home, which contributed to bridging digital divides, eliminating social exclusion, improving children's information literacy and social competence, as well as connecting school and home, children and adults, and online and offline worlds. Meanwhile, they criticised the research tendency that cyber-enthusiasts overstated the role of technologies (p.159), so they called for more thorough understandings on children's experience in constructing their social world and creating a more

participatory and inclusive learning culture. These stated hopes have provided social and educational perspectives to update ICT policy and to develop ways of learning with 'cyberkids'.

Buckingham and Willett (2006) invited researchers from different countries to broadly reflect upon youth digital culture referring to four aspects: playing and learning from digital games, communication for family and civic life, online identities and communities, and mediated learning and education. Their book related all these issues into '*media literacy*' and reminded readers that we should not overstate the role of digital media in making the coming generation into a source of promise or threat. The key point of the studies was to probe into how the younger generation actually understand and use the new media and how educational intervention could improve youth media literacy and benefit the society (pp.11-12). Keeping in similar interests, Buckingham (2008) and his colleagues further discussed youth identities as technological navigators, consumers, learners, family and community members, and participatory citizens. These authors opened up educational perspectives to understand the digital generation who construct their identities through online social interaction and peer-to-peer learning.

In a positive light, Palfrey and Gasser (2008) demonstrated that young people named as 'digital natives' have adapted to 'live' online, so they are good at using digital media to maintain relationships and gaining knowledge and doing creative work and adapting future markets, industries, education and global politics. However, Bauerlein (2008) criticised the digital natives as 'the dumbest generation' for their overdependence on the Internet and their deficit of rationality and responsibility. Evidence for this argument includes: the lack of digesting knowledge and limited independent thinking, Attention

Deficit Disorder, net addiction, the loss of social skills, contracting physical ill-health, online violence and bullying. But Tapscott (2009) deemed that the narrative of 'the dark side' resulted from fear of the unknown and a misunderstanding of the digital generation (pp.304-306). Therefore, he insisted that we should learn from N-Gen and act with them.

Livingstone (2009) categorised and dissected online opportunities and the risks of children's using the internet. She suggested overcoming the "dark side" through developing educational policy, media regulation, parenting, and schooling interventions. Ito et al. (2010) examined a media ecosphere where children build relationships with others and with society, experiencing isolation and socialisation processes due to the networked environments. Their study argued for shaping new media literacies, cultivating networked publics, and constructing intergenerational learning institutions. Similar educational stances can be found in Rheingold (2012)'s updated work, providing five fundamental points of guidance for young people: attention control, participation, collaboration, critical consumption of information, and smart networking. From the above, it can be seen that research interest about the digital/net generation has been transferred from *what they look like* into *what we can learn from them* and *what we can do in support of them*.

A summary of the previous research interests into the relationship between young people and networked digital media can be presented in Figure 3-1. The central circle highlights a key feature of the younger generation as being digitally networked, regardless of what kinds of digital media are used. The arrows indicate that youth online activities can be found in each of these ten spheres; in reverse, their offline experience in these spheres can help shape

their online activities. The diagram as a whole shows how thoroughly new technologies have come to influence young people's everyday lives.



Figure 3-1: A Representative Relationship between Young People and New Media

Although the diagram appears to be two dimensional, in reality each of the identified spheres overlaps and interacts so that the true picture implies much more diversity and complexity. Although my research focuses on young people's civic and political engagement, this no longer happens only in traditionally recognised civic and political fields. Rather, it can happen within any of spheres embedded in daily communication and activities.

3.2. Youth Citizenship Online: Interdisciplinary Perspectives

The study of online citizenship and political engagement is emerging as an important theme attracting interdisciplinary research. Media researchers address the significant role of new media when young people build virtual communities and their social networks, which crosses into sociological areas of interest. Psychologists focus on young people's identities as digital citizens, especially their behaviours and values constructed by the new media, thus trespassing into the field of cultural studies. Sociologists analyse the factors that influence young people's use of new media for civic purposes, namely their economic, political, social and cultural capital, and this crosses over into examining commercial aspects of the field. Political scientists have assumed that youth online participation might act as a remedy for perceived crises of modern democratic systems and in so doing, they invariably cross into areas of concern within educational studies. Research findings in different disciplines and those which involve interdisciplinary studies are reviewed in what follows.

3.2.1. Debates about disconnected and threatened youth

Current research interest into the relationship between new media and youth civic participation has been stimulated by two streams of concerns. One strand focuses on the weak representativeness of democratic government and draws attention to a crisis of young people becoming increasingly disconnected from political and civic affairs, which has happened in American and European countries during recent decades. The 'disconnected youth' can be broadly characterised into four types as below.

- *Uninterested*: Young people perceive political and civic affairs as being boring, hard to understand, and far away from their everyday lives (Coleman & Rowe, 2005; Loader, 2007b; Livingstone, 2009b).
- *Unsatisfied*: Young people have become politically cynical and no longer trust the media and politicians (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002) because they come to regard politics as “a dirty word” full of corruption and hypocrisy (Bennett, 2008a).
- *Non-voting*: The declining voting rates among young people are continually reported across the English speaking world (Kann et al., 2007; Mesch & Coleman, 2007; Kirby & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009; Wicks et al., 2014; CIRCLE Staff, 2016).
- *Incapable*: Young people have a weak sense of ‘political efficacy’ (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002) or ‘civic efficacy’ (Gerodimos, 2008). They felt themselves as outsiders of democratic forms, neither being provided with opportunities to be heard, nor equipped with knowledge and skills to be involved (Coleman & Rowe, 2005, p. 13). They became reluctant to make civic commitments (Bachen et al., 2008), even showed resistance to those who stayed in power (Coleman & Rowe, 2005, p. 8).

Although these tendencies towards disengagement result in *apparent* declines of political and civic life among young people, commentators have questioned the view of disconnected youth and paid attention to the transformations within youth political and civic engagement (Bennett, 2008b; Livingstone, 2009b; Banaji & Buckingham, 2013). I say ‘apparent’ here because it is partly the aim of this study to reflect upon whether young people have completely lost their interest in ‘traditional’ politics; and whether they have altered their way of civic engagement.

Another stream of concerns points to online risks that young people might encounter, including online pornography, violence, predation, and other offensive contents or dangerous groups. In order to 'protect' young people from the harms, some scholars have appealed to alternative resources and to regulations that can provide young people with safer, healthier and more promising online environments. In the US, Montgomery and Gottlieb-Robles (2006) suggested setting up more civic sites in support of "partisan political participation, community involvement, volunteering and philanthropy and social activism" (p. 132). This suggestion implies an expectation that if young people spend more time on these civic sites, they will be less likely to be exposed to harmful sites. In the UK, Livingstone and Bober (2006) remarked the current policies for guiding and regulating children's online behaviours as "problematic" due to overstating parents' or adults' roles while neglecting children's agency (p. 109). If children are invited into the policy-making process like adult citizens, actively participating in democratic negotiation and decision-making, they will strengthen their online self-control, so they will become less vulnerable and more empowered. Ribble and Bailey (2011) designed school books along with other teaching resources, in which "digital security" and "digital health and wellness" are counted as elements of "digital citizenship" (p.11). They argued that this educational programme will enable young people to recognise and minimise the perceived online risks.

3.2.2. Claims of the potential of the Internet for civic engagement

The expectation of democratic revitalisation leads to examining how youth identities can be changed from 'apathetic' into participatory citizens. Similarly, the expectation of risk management leads to studying how youth identities can shift from potential risk victims towards autonomous citizens who are able to protect their rights and self-regulate themselves from risks.

As we shall see, some scholars believe that the Internet has the potential to address these expectations and to empower young people in public space.

Table 3- 1: A Comparison between Internet and Broadcasting

Internet (New Media)	Broadcasting (Old Media)
Active audience	Passive audience
Discursive	Limited
Long time	Tight time
Large number of users	Small number of users
Full expression and exchange	Narrow engaging and presenting
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Interactive exchange:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • peer-to-peer & many-to-many • reflective • participative • encountering new ideas, sources of information and new ways of thinking 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>One-way communication:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one-to-one & one-to-many • less reflective • less participative • less opportunity to encounter new ideas, sources of information and new ways of thinking

Adapted from Coleman and Blumler (2009, pp. 11-12)

Coleman and Blumler (2009) highlighted that new media to some extent outweighs old media in attracting a larger active audience and facilitating peer-to-peer expressions and reflective participation (see Table 3-1). The features of old media lead to the control of information and ideas. For instance, Herman and Chomsky (2009) point out that the political rhetoric delivered by traditional media always reflects the interests of their owners, directors and editors, and seldom reflect the interests of ordinary people. Their study disclosed how mass media was used as propaganda tools in the USA and how easily public opinion could be manipulated by the elite-controlled media to serve the state's strategic decisions, for example in waging the wars in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. Although thousands of

young people performed “principled and courageous resistance” and launched anti-war movements, they still had little voice through broadcast media (pp.238-252). While observing elections and other democratic campaigns promoted by radio and television, Lund and Carr (2008) argued that media coverage of politics in many ‘democratic’ countries were and continue to be limited and biased so that the public debate was not nourished. By contrast, the development of new media tends to overcome the previous limitations and (re)shape public life (boyd, 2007; O'Brien, 2014). When it comes to a period increasingly dominated by the Internet, the ‘one-way communication’ and ‘elite politics’ have been challenged, and more interactive and grassroots forms of democracy can become the new norm.

However, other scholars have questioned the extent to which new media are capable of acting as problem-solving agencies. They suggested that the potential of the Internet is unsure for a number of reasons. Firstly, the power of traditional media remains strong and continues to lead on public issues. Some young people still imitated or criticised celebrities and politicians who were usually shown on television shows and films (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002; Olsson, 2006; Bennett, 2008a). Secondly, the division of ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ media is ambiguous due to the ‘convergence of media culture’ (Jenkins, 2006a). Since newspapers and broadcasting institutions also publish their materials in digital forms, providing online access and digital apps linked with smartphones, the so-called ‘traditional’ and ‘dying’ media are integrating interactive formats that encourage audience participation. Their audiences are by no means “a small number of users” or “passive audiences” as stated in Table 3-1. It is therefore inaccurate to say that the Internet holds an overwhelming advantage in making an “active audience” (Buckingham, 2000). Thirdly, the wide existence of a *digital divide* can affect

“equal opportunity of participation” provided by new media (Selwyn, 2004; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Holley & Oliver, 2011). According to Selwyn (2004), the quality of cyber-democracy depends not only on the divide of “information haves” and “information have-nots” (p.344), but also on users’ economic, cultural and social capabilities (p.355) that influence how many digital devices they have, to what extent they understand and learn from information, and how they organise and apply networked resources effectively for civic engagement. These divides may not be bridged by the Internet itself but by learning, teaching and doing democracy (Remtulla, 2008). Fourthly, cyber-democracy is a double-edged sword. Its *dark side* can be related to the ‘tyranny of the majority’, which is also a disadvantage of direct democracy, where unconscious collective decisions undermine individual or minority rights (Ott & Rosser, 2000; Anonymous, 2009; Tocqueville, [1838-1840] 2000). Even more worrying is the abuse of the Internet leading to cybercrime and terrorism (Barth & Schlegelmilch, 2014). A very well-known example is the way that the terrorist organisations use sophisticated websites to entice and recruit teenagers to join them as suicide bombers. Finally, researchers have emphasised terms like ‘civic literacy’, ‘political efficacy’, or ‘political competence’ (Dahlgren, 2007b; Livingstone et al., 2007; Stald, 2008; Christensen & Bengtsson, 2011), in order to address that it is not just technologies or media that make cyber-democracy happen but (young) people’s agency of participation.

3.2.3. The rise of youth online civic participation

While I have shown as above that young people have engaged in various public activities with the support of new media, namely the Internet, the question remains as to the extent that youth online activities can be described as civic participation. Since general “internet engagement” cannot

be completely regarded as being the same as “civic engagement” (Bennett et al., 2006, p. 23), how should we define what counts as “civic”, and what does not? What are the key features of online civic participation that make it different from those in offline settings? In what follows, I move on to review a number of empirical studies focusing on youth civic and political participation online. This section considers four aspects of this field. The first group of studies introduces diverse *places of participation*, namely websites and cyberspaces for youth online civic participation. Then I consider *contents and forms of participation*, organising literature based on a three-dimension framework (Vinken, 2007; Loader, 2008). The studies categorised as participation in *political* sphere particularly relate to formal procedures of governance including parliament or congress debates, voting, and decision-making. The category of *social* focuses upon issues of community relations, collective actions, and working to help others for the common good. The final label of *cultural* refers to citizenship that lies in the sphere of entertainment, consumption and other lifestyle activities. I wish from the outset to emphasise that these categories cannot be wholly isolated from each other; they invariably overlap. These categories together broadly comprise outline what I refer to as “the civic”. They are presented here for analytical clarity and for organising the literature that has informed the present research.

3.2.3.1. The ‘places’ of participation

Many studies in this field started from mapping the landscape of online youth civic culture through classifying and analysing websites. Analysing more than 300 websites in the USA, Montgomery and Gottlieb-Rables (2006) classified them into ten categories and drew a descriptive map of civic-featured sites, which were originally drawn from their research project ‘Youth As E-Citizens’ (Montgomery et al., 2004). Their initial research provided a

working template of site categories. They emphasised that their categories were “not mutually exclusive” (2006, p.134) but could be organised in other ways. From this beginning, Bachen et al. (2008) adapted the categories based on 73 websites and proposed a nine-category framework, which deleted “youth philanthropy”, combined “community involvement” with “volunteering”, and added “workings of government” and “media literacy”. The categories in the two studies are paraphrased in Table 3-2.

By analysing 570 websites, Banaji and Buckingham (2010; 2013) built a seven-category framework based in Europe¹⁶. They used a spectrum view to re-organise these categories between two tendencies of civic participation: pro-authority and anti-authority (see Table 3-3). Within their framework, there are similar categories applied in the USA, such as volunteering, global issues and youth activism/activist, while there are contextualised categories, such as religious problems, refugees in socially-disadvantaged groups, and political/governance issues within the European Union.


¹⁶ Banaji and Buckingham’s two publications cited here are based on their research project ‘The Civic Web’ funded by the European Commission. The project was conducted mainly between 2006 and 2009, across Hungary, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. The research explores how the Internet was used to promote youth civic participation.

Table 3- 2: A Synthesis of USA-Based Website Categories for Youth Civic Engagement

Category	Definition
<i>Voting</i>	Sites supporting young people’s vote in the US election or electoral activities
<i>Volunteering</i>	Sites inviting young people to participate in volunteer work; or those volunteering portals sites of local, national or international non-profit organisations
<i>Youth philanthropy</i>	Sites offering the opportunity to learn about or be involved in philanthropy (e.g. “donation” and “fundraising”, etc.)
<i>Local community involvement</i>	Sites providing rich and interactive resources about local communities in order to help young people learn and contribute to their neighbourhood
<i>Global issues and international understanding</i>	Sites aiming to promote international awareness and collaboration for youth civic engagement
<i>Online journalism and media production</i>	Sites focusing on youth multimedia production online and giving young people opportunities of expression
<i>Access and equity</i>	Sites focusing on disadvantaged youth to avoid the digital divide
<i>Diversity and tolerance</i>	Sites promoting “tolerance, understanding, and respect among diverse groups and cultures”
<i>Positive youth development</i>	Sites focusing on youth strengths and assets, serving traditional civic organizations and activities (e.g. “obeying the law”, “patriotism”, training for “good judgment”, “leadership” and “ethical behaviour”, etc.), in order to foster responsible citizens
<i>Youth activism</i>	Sites encouraging young grassroots activists to get involved in interaction between online and offline; guiding and providing them with strategies for political participation
<i>Media literacy</i>	Sites benefiting critical thinking about media resources, and ethical usage of media (e.g. “netiquette”, “avoiding copyright infringement”, “surfing safely”, etc.)
<i>Workings of government</i>	Sites helping young people to understand the structure and function of government

Adapted from: Bachen et al. (2008, p. 298) and Montgomery and Gottlieb-Robles (2006, pp. 133-139)

Table 3- 3: A Synthesis of Europe-Based Website Categories for Youth Civic Engagement

Category	Definition
<i>Government and party</i>	Sites encouraging civic participation related to authority, such as “local or national governments”, “the European Union”, political parties or their “youth wings”, etc.
<i>Single-issue campaign</i>	Sites encouraging campaigns regarding “globalization, discrimination, opposition to hunting, and homelessness”;
<i>Social-disadvantaged group</i>	Sites (especially open forums) supporting the expression and debate from particular youth social groups (e.g. “the disabled, refugees, gays and lesbians”)
<i>Religion-based activity</i>	“Sites promoting social activity or participation based on religious beliefs”
<i>Volunteering</i>	“Sites encouraging volunteerism and social activism”
<i>Minority group</i>	“Sites designed for specific ethnic minorities or geographically isolated groups”
<i>Activist</i>	“Sites addressing areas that might be seen as problematic, such as political violence or xenophobic hatred”
A spectrum of the civic sphere	
<i>EU or EU-oriented</i>	 <p>Pro-government or pro-state propensity</p> <p>Social practices and solidarity</p> <p>Anti-government or anti-state propensity</p>
<i>National government</i>	
<i>Political organization</i>	
<i>Religious organization</i>	
<i>International network</i>	
<i>Charity</i>	
<i>NGO</i>	
<i>Activist</i>	

Adapted from: Banaji and Buckingham (2010, p. 16; 2013, p. 20)

Through a comparison between USA and Europe-based website studies, I have begun to understand what areas of youth online participation can be located and labelled as “civic spheres”. These two tables suggest that research undertaken in a Chinese setting would find similar and different categories to construct the field of youth online civic participation. This would be an important stage, as it would help to improve the existing framework and enrich the understanding of democratic citizenship.

Coleman (2008) used another categorising method considering the websites’ producers, founders or organisers. He classified six web-based projects into “managed” and “autonomous” sites, addressing them as “two faces of e-citizenship”, which respectively contain sites built, sponsored or operated by governments (sometimes by NGOs) and by young people themselves (pp.190-193). Gerodimos (2008) similarly divided 20 UK mobilization sites into two types: “top-down” and “bottom-up” sites, respectively set up by governmental or non-governmental subjects (pp.968-969). Examples of youth parliament sites and forums belong to the top-down category, whereas youth-promoted sites such as youth consultations, training, charities, NGOs and lobbying campaigning sites belong to the bottom-up category. In Gerodimos’s classification, NGO-built sites seldom deal with governmental issues, yet usually work with or for young people in order to lead grassroots participatory culture for the public good. They are therefore are classed as bottom-up sites, which differs from Coleman’s model.

I found both top-down and bottom-up cases in China’s cyberspace in which governmental sectors played a powerful role while young people needed to make strong efforts to follow or challenge examples from authoritative sources. But I do not assume these two sets of categories have to be

polarised. I prefer to apply Gerodimos (2008)'s neutral categories, rather than pre-judge the nature of sites as being managed or autonomous. The main website analysis focused on which channels web producers could use to serve and support young people's civic activities. Instead of the producers' stance, Livingstone (2004a) argued for audience-based approaches to focus on young people's practice and creation of contents and forms.

3.2.3.2. Participation in the political sphere

Within the political sphere, existing research has shown how young people get involved in three main areas of civic activities: electoral campaigns, political conversations and demonstrations or protests. The most successful examples of Internet-based civic participation were found in election and voting events, which are seen as key political in liberal democratic countries. In 1998 Tapscott predicted a change of democratic political systems, remarking that "democracy as we know it will be finished; perhaps we should get serious today about rethinking our notion of governance and what it means to be free" (p. 304). But he did not know in which ways the influential model of American democracy would be "finished" until 2009, when he revised his previous work and cited Barack Obama's success in 2008's presidential campaign. It is fair to say that Tapscott's work acts as a benchmark for how rapidly young people equipped with social media changed American voting turnout throughout Pre-Internet Age, Web 1.0 Age and Web 2.0 Age. In the past decade, young people's digitalised practices in relation to voting has become a key academic interest during election seasons in different countries (Xenos & Bennett, 2007; Ampofo et al., 2011; Kirk & Schill, 2011; Bruns & Highfield, 2013; Dang-Xuan et al., 2013; Graham et al., 2013; Vraga et al., 2014) (See Appendix 1). The surge of youth voting in a certain period can be interpreted as a vindication of the

adoption of new media forms for civic participation. Nevertheless, not all studies have obtained optimistic results. While the Internet seems to promise a new phase in youth engagement in elections, other social-economic factors also matter, such as gender, occupation, income and education (Coleman, 2007b; Mesch & Coleman, 2007). Additionally, it seems that politicians were making more efforts to engage young people, while young people tended to use the Internet just for collecting voting information (Graham et al., 2013). Thus, it is arguable that the primary significance of youth online participation in electoral campaigns may be making themselves more informed.

Researchers also paid attention to youth online political conversations during non-election seasons, arguing that the formation of participatory political culture is as important as voting, which helps with youth political socialisation. They aimed to explore two key questions: do young people talk about politics through online platforms; and how do these conversations happen? For instance, Coleman and Rowe (2005)'s research revealed that young people (aged 13-18) were on discussion forums about political issues, such as the Iraq War, 9/11, and about political figures like Prince Charles or George Bush. But these conversations happened more often within youth peer-to-peer networks, instead of between young people and politicians or formal political organisations. The government-funded websites failed to engage young people in real parliamentary democracy. Young people felt themselves as disconnected as usual, complaining that "When you hear adults talking about politics, you feel like they are talking between themselves" (p. 2). Similar evidence has been found in other studies, showing young people's pessimism towards stereotyped politics (Coleman, 2007b; Bennett, 2008b; Livingstone, 2009b; Banaji & Buckingham, 2013).

Tobias Olsson (2006) provided slightly different but optimistic results. He investigated 19 young people (aged 16-19) who were involved in four different Swedish political parties and found young people frequently participated in their parties' internal debates online, and were even addicted to tracking and responding. Although this research was based on a small sample of participants, it at least revealed that young people were able to transfer their offline political concerns into online debates. One explanation for this finding was their affiliations to political organisations. When young people belong to the connected offline groups, they tend to participate more actively online to continue the political debates taking place in their daily lives. This correlation has been verified by two other survey-based studies on a larger sample of young people in Italy and in Australia respectively (Calenda & Mosca, 2007; Vromen, 2007). In these cases, young people who already engaged in political networks were more likely to make political communication happen online, such as contacting political parties, trade unions, campaign organisations or Members of Parliament. This is related to the notion of *political efficacy*, referring to young people's sense of being able to trust and communicate with politicians and to make change in the political realm (Bennett et al., 2009; Banaji & Buckingham, 2010). This raises the possibility of other triggers of participatory political culture besides the Internet, which reminds me of the possibility that young people are technologically connected but politically disconnected. Thus, it is necessary to consider different levels and factors of youth online engagement.

As well as the above-mentioned normative political activities, the innovations of youth online political participation which were pushed forward by social media due to their strengthened interactive and collaborative features have

been noticed by current research (Loader & Mercea, 2011). Coleman and Rowe (2005) reported that young people in the UK were “more interested in new forms of participation” such as demonstrations, signing petitions and boycotting products. One of the earlier examples showed that young people participated in anti-war protests after they heard about the Iraq War in 2003. At that time, the original news of the campaign was published online, but was then mainly distributed “through word of mouth” (p. 12). Since then this process has included the sending of interpersonal messages through social media. This has led to young people themselves leading campaigns such as the 2008 Candlelight Protests in Korea (Yun & Chang, 2011), the 2010-2012 Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa (Shearing, 2013; T. Markham, 2014), the 2010 university occupations in the UK (Theocharis, 2014), Occupy Wall Street in the USA in 2011 (Bennett et al., 2014; Karpf, 2014) M15M in Spain and M12M in Portugal in 2011 (Sloam, 2014).

Since all these cases involved young people collaborating in large-scale protests, relevant studies have analysed the process, mechanism and effects of these activities. There is a common acknowledgement of the political power of networked young people, namely their “disruptive capacity for traditional political practices and institutions” (Loader & Mercea, 2012, p. 762). In such cases digitally networked young people appear to have inflicted some damage to those in positions of authority. Yet, this kind of finding may be insufficient to justify the extent of youth enthusiasm within forms of civic participation. For one thing, these extreme events do not happen all the time nor in most regions. Future research should consider how young people help rebuild the ‘disrupted’ system in post-protest periods, and how they act in apparently conservative regions where protests are regarded as disordered or illegal actions (e.g. in China). Furthermore, a

larger percentage of participation does not necessarily mean a higher quality of civic participation. Future research might consider distinguishing participants who have civic-awareness or clear political views from those who join events just for fun or for other reasons.

3.2.3.3. Participation in the social sphere

Some commentators have categorised the foregoing '*political*' activities into '*social movements*' because the two areas can overlap. Many protests or demonstrations call for *social justice*, which aims to widen understanding of economic decline, unemployment, regional poverty, working and education rights, and inequality caused by a number of demographic structural factors (Amadeo, 2007; Loader, 2008). Such political patterns of participation can also be addressed within the social sphere. Internet-based *social movements*, along with young people's online activities with regard to *social benefits* and *social relationships*, enable us to understand civic participation from a wider perspective.

Amadeo (2007)'s survey-based study indicated that young Internet users in Chile, Denmark and England were more likely to participate in "social-movement activities" which include the actions of volunteering work, collecting money for a social cause, collecting signatures for a petition, and joining in a nonviolent protest march (p.138). These youth activities were observed as located in and contributing to communities. The author introduced the notion of *community of practice* initially proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991), defined as:

... people who share a concern, a set of problems, or passion about a topic and deepen their knowledge and share their experience by interacting on an on-going basis (pp.141-142).

This notion helps us to interpret youth online civic participation from a social-cultural perspective, emphasising community-driven interests and practices, instead of “adult-oriented” conventional activities in electoral, partisan and governmental aspects. The range of communities of practice is wide and merges with online virtual communities, from work teams to school groups, residential neighbourhoods to members of professional organisations, and can even expand nationally or globally. It is argued that communities of practice encourage collaboratively *situated learning*, which focuses upon ideas such as “learning as belonging”, “learning as doing” and “learning as becoming” (p.142). Amadeo (2007) believed that young people who are involved in community-based issues would be able to change their identities from ‘peripheral’ to ‘more central’ participants. The question then arises as to what can be learnt from young people’s experience of constructing communities of practice and how best to develop forms of situated learning.

Bennett (2008b) and colleagues also highlighted youth preferences for non-institutional spheres. They found “the decline story” was heard pervasively, except in community services such as volunteering, donation, and experience-sharing (p. 4). These activities can also be described as fitting into traditional civic engagement which preceded the Internet but are now being observed as following “a steep rise” in participation in the networked age (ibid.). For instance, Xenos and Foot (2008) indicated that young people adapted offline volunteering and donation into online forms, enabling the spread of information, signing up to volunteer and making donations through online platforms (p.59). Bers (2008) examined several cases of youth citizen identity construction in the virtual community. In such a “social laboratory”, young people experimentally “construct their own virtual homes and populate them with their most cherished objects, characters, pictures, stories, and

share personal and moral values” (p. 140). Rheingold (2008) observed that high school students use blogs, Wikipedia, and digital journalism tools quite often for citizenship narratives. Hence he suggested “connected writing” exercises which encourage students to work together, writing and commenting on blog posts, creating public wiki pages, and producing news reports or story-telling podcasts (pp. 107-114). All these activities provide the community with knowledge-based, rational and critical public discourse. One common argument raised in this collection is that young people’s civic interests and actions have been embedded into their community lives, making social benefits and improving public good spontaneously.

More examples of young people’s contribution to their communities can be found in Banaji and Buckingham (2010, 2013)’s cross-nation project (See also Table 3-3). They presented case studies on “alternative” forms of online civic participation (pp.119-128). Here, the alternative means participating through international charity organisations or through community-based portal sites aiming to encourage youth voluntary involvement and efforts to make changes to local and global communities. Their research presented a set of critical arguments. Firstly, the internet appeared to be an important tool only for young people who were already connected with communities and engaged in civic activities offline. Secondly, social factors such as class, ethnicity, age and religion, significantly affected young people’s way of using the Internet. Young people who lacked resources and skills would find it hard to be heard both online and offline. Thirdly, the Internet is by no means always inexpensive or as effective as offline mobilization. The overheads of running and maintaining a site along with its features of interactivity, security and equality have an impact on youth civic participation.

Researchers also considered civic engagement within social relationships. Livingstone and Bober (2006) explored the risks that children encountered online and how parents regulated activity at home to balance opportunities. They called upon policymakers to value media literacy education at home that would benefit young people's surfing and habits of expression while also protecting mutual rights, trust, and responsibilities between parents and children. Seeing family life as a micro-social realm, Hartmann et al. (2007) looked upon "democratic familyship" that was characterised by dialogic negotiation and a degree of balance in power relations. ICTs as both symbolic and material objects at home, have been described as helpful to the generation of democratic familyship from online to offline, facilitating young people to recognise authority, reach compromises, and make decisions. These family-based strategies could also be applied to the social negotiation. Others paid attention to diverse youth peer groups and their online communities, such as girls, GLBTQQ¹⁷ and Wiccan¹⁸. By analysing blog posts, online dialogues and videos, researchers demonstrated that communication in cyberspace can help specific youth groups build their identities, raise their concerns about gender, race, occupation, class, and other social justice issues, express their political demands, and support their informal learning. (Davies, 2006; Driver, 2006; Polak, 2006; Scheidt, 2006; Thorson et al., 2010). In a word, current studies have identified a tendency for family-driven or friendship-driven civic participation to shift between online and offline.

¹⁷ The GLBTQQ group consists of those who hold gender identities as "gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning" (Driver, 2006, p. 229).

¹⁸ The community of Wiccan is populated by teenagers who identify themselves as witches and/or express the values of the Wiccan religion (Davies, 2006, p. 213).

3.2.3.4. Participation in the cultural sphere

Beyond the boundaries of political and social categories, many scholars have investigated a wider range of Internet-based cultural activities and promoted a commonly positive argument that young people are not disconnected with democracy nor with civic life, but are just reluctant or incapable of engaging in certain civic issues that seem far away from their own everyday lives (Dahlgren, 2007a; Bennett, 2008a; Livingstone, 2009b; Jenkins et al., 2015). Some researchers have applied the ideas from *cultural citizenship* (Rosaldo, 1994; Burgess et al., 2006; Goode, 2010) and *lifestyle politics* (Giddens, 1991; Bennett, 2011) to explore youth online civic disposition, which combines with considerations of identity, gender and sexuality, health and well-being, environment, consumerism, recreation and entertainment, job, fashion, sports, self-actualisation and so forth.

In this section I focus on reviewing examples of empirical research about youth *consumerism* and *entertainment* activities for civic purposes. For example, Livingstone (2004b) paid attention to one of the dominant youth identities: enthusiastic *consumers*, who rely on digital and online commercial products. A part of her research explored the possibility of constructing youth identities as citizens who are able to critically understand commercial and marketing strategies so that they can protect themselves from the risks of consumerism. Such a double identity also reminds us that youth civic participation can be seen in many fields of personal lifestyles. For example, those game players, film fans, and music lovers online contribute to their interest groups as local citizens. However, Livingstone and her colleagues then emphasised the need to distinguish civic-minded consumers from general consumers, by asking whether young people were actively participating in their communities or merely consuming information. They

also found that the content and extent of participation was differentiated in gender, class and age groups. Even in basic information consumption, the opportunities were not being taken up equally (Livingstone et al., 2005)

Kann et al. (2007)'s study on American young people highlighted online consumerism as representative of participatory culture, which can promote core democratic values, such as openness and freedom of expression, willingness and ability to share, independence of action and the making of choice or decisions about participation. These core values are embedded within young people's routine usage of the Internet, shaping their habits of participation and teaching them citizenship skills, regardless of the activities. The authors then manifested how such a participatory culture can improve youth civic engagement. They focused on *political consumerism*, which includes purchasing or refusing to purchase goods and services based on political, social, or ethical considerations rather than solely on price and quality. Since the Internet lowered the threshold for organisations and individuals to engage in political consumerism, individual or youth organisations could easily launch or participate in various consumer activities. For example, young people were observed protesting against Coca-Cola due to allegations of mistreatment of workers, and boycotting Starbucks while supporting organic foods through online channels. A more revolutionary form of civic engagement, argued by the authors, is the marriage of SNSs and community services, cultural activism and consumer campaigns, which have currently become pervasive and triggered my own research interest.

While Livingstone, Kann and their colleagues' early studies begin to see the online combination of consuming activities and young people's civic

awareness, they have not taken this phenomenon seriously as a pattern of citizenship. When Earl and Schussman (2008) observed cases of online consumer petition and cultural contestation, they attempted to display young people's civic skills mirroring social movement repertoires of action. The commentators argued that digital technology enables media consumers to engage with the process of producing and promoting cultural products, in which consumers can express their preferences and values. Their illustrative examples taken from the free website PetitionOnline showed that some areas (e.g. online music, video games, and fans communities) that seem clearly non-political, are actually an indicator of deeper transformations surrounding cultural consumption and civic engagement.

Stald (2008) studied girls' and young women's online consumer culture and proposed a notion of *consumer citizenship*. She argued that their online doll-making games were apparently about fashion designs, clothing sales and beauty industries, but actually related to female reflexive power in the construction of self-esteem, confidence and individualised dressing codes. The substance of these experiences leads to "cyberfeminism" or "feminist politics" (p.57). In this case, we can understand consumer citizenship from "the relationship between the structures of *consumerism* (wider societal discourses) and the *agency* (the capacity to think and act freely) of young consumer/producer" (p.50). Drawn from Giddens (1991) and Rose (1999), Stald highlighted that the key element of contemporary citizenship is "no longer about a relationship with government, but is about acts of 'free but responsabilized choice'" (Stald, 2008, p. 55). Other researchers also identify and examine children's civic agency in a consumerism-driven neoliberal context (Coleman, 2008; S. Goldman et al., 2008; Ito et al., 2010; Ward & de Vreese, 2011). Many traced back to Giddens' (1991) notion of lifestyle

politics and viewed youth online civic participation as political expressions in the individualised life fields. The participation was characterised by self-monitoring, making responsible choices, exercising autonomy and promoting self-improvement. These findings echo the fields of youth online activities shown in Figure 3-1, where the non-political participation is presented.

Apart from consuming and marketing activities, researchers also highlighted the value of online games, responding to prevailing negative concerns that digital games often focus upon the effect of violence and lack narrative literacy and creativity (Ito, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Mackey, 2006; Oliver & Pelletier, 2006). They made efforts to update perspectives for understanding youth game culture and to explore ways in which youth civic participation might not always be apparent, such as fighting against violence, solving conflicts, and creating community-based narratives. Scholars have agreed that games can contain educational potential, as can other forms of entertainment such as television, music and films. This prompted me to consider a further research task about how elements of citizenship can be involved in entertainment-education (Montgomery, 2008).

3.3. Learning to be Participatory Digital Citizens: Pedagogical perspectives

Studies of European, African and American countries have highlighted the innovations of media literacy education and how they can empower young people and narrow digital divides caused by technological, socio-economic, generational and linguistic inequality (Burn & Durran, 2006; de Block & Rydin, 2006; Oliver & Pelletier, 2006; Thompson et al., 2006). The relevant studies have raised three main questions: What should young people understand concerning online civic participation? How can young people

learn from their participation experience? And how would the educational outcomes benefit civil society both online and offline? These questions can be summarised with Selwyn (2002)'s early classification of ICT-based citizenship education, which includes education *about, through* and *for* citizenship (p.8). Selwyn argued for an ICT-based citizenship education that would help achieve the curriculum's aims to develop "knowledge about becoming informed citizens", "skills of enquiry and communication", and "skills of participation and responsible action" (p.10). Since the Internet is one of the core technologies of ICT and civic participation is one of key elements of citizenship, Selwyn's analytical framework can be applied in the present research.

3.3.1. Learning about digital citizenship

The previous studies have demonstrated that young people relied on the Internet for collecting civic information in political, social and cultural realms. For example, they search for candidate information in an election, become familiar with the policies and principles of a Party, look through NGOs' webpages, or understand aspects of rules and regulations operating within a consumer community. These kinds of knowledge originated in offline society and some have been encountered by users in their formal schooling curriculum. When young people take part in online civic activities, they work as knowledge-building communities (Rheingold, 2008), exchanging up-to-date knowledge from an information channel which is faster, easier, and more accessible. Online experience has been seen as a supplement of offline learning about citizenship. However, online experience may not always lead to young people acquiring knowledge that is accurate or positive. It is therefore worth paying attention to misinformation that also can be faster, easier and more accessible in such a 'post-truth' world.

There is another type of knowledge about citizenship which emerges, particularly in the digital and online environment beyond the scope of offline citizenship. Montgomery (2008) argued that young people and educators in the USA should understand recent policy changes which were caused by and benefit to youth online democratic communications. She selected five issues, addressing how young people engaged in online and offline campaigns, how civic participation eventually influenced policies, and how these issues became important building-blocks for knowledge in support of future learners in the field of online citizenship (see Table 3-4).

Table 3- 4: Building-Block Knowledge for Future Civic Participation in the USA

Issues	Debate
<i>Network neutrality</i>	Whether or not the non-profit information and services should be provided to anyone
<i>Intellectual property</i>	Copyright issues and youth online sharing activities
<i>Equitable access</i>	"Bridging the digital divide" and ensuring digital and internet access through schools, universities and public libraries
<i>Community broadband</i>	Improving community-based internet system, e.g. wireless (or "WiFi") networks
<i>Online safety</i>	Concerns over "cyberporn" and bills for online child protection

Summarised from: Montgomery (2008, pp. 34-41)

The contents in Montgomery's framework have been expanded into nine elements by other USA-based researchers (Ribble & Bailey, 2011; Ribble, 2013). Mike Ribble and his colleagues designed a Key Stage 12 school course that specifically discussed "digital citizenship" and taught students to use technology appropriately for civic purposes. Table 3-5 shows the framework and main contents of their courses.

Table 3- 5: Nine Elements of Digital Citizenship

Element	Definition
<i>Digital access</i>	Full electronic participation in society
<i>Digital commerce</i>	The electronic buying and selling of goods
<i>Digital communication</i>	The electronic exchange of information
<i>Digital literacy</i>	The process of teaching and learning about technology and the use of technology
<i>Digital etiquette</i>	The electronic standards of conduct or produce
<i>Digital law</i>	The electronic responsibility for actions and deeds
<i>Digital rights and responsibilities</i>	The requirements and freedoms extended to everyone in a digital world
<i>Digital health and wellness</i>	Physical and psychological well-being in a digital technology world
<i>Digital security (self-protection)</i>	The electronic precautions to guarantee safety

Source: Ribble and Bailey (2011, pp. 11, 16-42)

Both Montgomery’s and Ribble’s work implied that if children or young people cognitively understand these elements of digital citizenship before they go online, they might be more confident and competent in their online civic lives. This outline of knowledge areas also fits “the rights, responsibility and capability framework” in Chapter 2. For example, digital access, commerce, health and wellness can be related to children’s rights to provision; digital security can be related to rights to protection and responsibility of respecting others; digital law requires discussion of rights and responsibilities together; digital communication, literacy and etiquette draw learners to reflect on capability. However, these elements in real online environments are much more complicated and entwined with political or

social limitations and technological ethics. Moreover, these kinds of knowledge are so contextualised depending on policies, laws and regulations and the level of technological development that it is hard to transplant from the USA to other countries. In this sense, I would comment that knowledge about digital citizenship is by no means fixed knowledge written in school textbooks, but needs to be viewed as flexible knowledge requiring learners to make efforts to collaboratively construct.

3.3.2. Learning through digital citizenship

In the framework developed by Selwyn (2002), education through citizenship emphasised skill improvement. Using ICT had by then become a key skill and begun to present the idea of a child having an “entitlement” to citizenship. Holloway and Valentine (2003) argued:

Most notably that those who lack technological skills to participate in the Information Age will be excluded from these activities and unable to exercise their rights and responsibilities, will consequently be denied full citizenship (p.1).

This statement illustrates how radically technology had already changed the connotations around citizenship. If civic participation is no longer a purely social-political issue but also a technological issue, whether or not young people master the new media will influence their feelings, understandings and practices of citizenship. Even if a young person under 16 years old did not hold the legal status for voting, those who were proficient in ICT would become citizens or “social actors who have the potential to inform public policy” (p.4). This demonstrates again that the life-course matters a great deal to citizens in the making.

In answer to the question of what kinds of ICT-based civic skills can be developed through youth online civic participation, Montgomery and Gottlieb-Robles (2006, pp. 141-142) found in their survey that civic websites are expected to promote young people's skills in team-building and leadership, listening and expressing, debating and turn-taking, and activity-organising. With a similar analytical framework, Bachen et al. (2008) proposed a mandatory skill structure consisting of, "problem solving/decision making, group learning, project-based learning, simulations [i.e. learning through playing], opinion expression, discussion [i.e. interactive communication], and participation [i.e. taking action]" (p.299). Bachen and colleagues also identified two types of interactivity in cyberspace: "content interactivity" and "interpersonal interactivity", which are characterised by "human-to-content interaction" and "human-to-human interaction" respectively (p. 293). They believed that the design of websites which had inbuilt interactive elements accelerated the development of youth civic skills. The authors hence called for interactive pedagogical techniques and sharply criticised traditional one-way learning as ineffective citizenship education, such as memorising textbook contents and reciting teachers' doctrines in class. Whether or not so-called traditional learning skills in the Internet age should be completely discarded raises further questions.

The above two studies based on website analyses did not probe into young people's real experience, yet they provided directions to identify what skills might be trained. There are empirical studies from youth perspectives which demonstrated skills-building through youth online civic participation. Olsson (2006) found that young people learnt debating skills, rhetorical skills to make political arguments and critical thinking skills to reflect upon online information. Both Hartmann et al. (2007) and Ferguson (2007) explored

youth skills of moderately negotiating, promoting informed discussion and dealing with conflicts. While Hartmann's study focused on skill acquisition within a family-based power relationship, Ferguson's focus was within a school-targeted deliberative online forum. Bers (2008) argued for a shift of citizenship education towards understanding and supporting youth autonomy that lies with praxis-driven learning activities (i.e. making, creating, developing, discussing and debating), instead of designing a civic curriculum. There is also a piece of strategic research by the Association for Progressive Communication Women's Networking Support Programme, which provided a toolkit to develop young women's social networking skills for online activism, including planning, organising and advocating campaigns, and protecting privacy and security (APC WNSP & VNC, 2011).

Although technological-based civic skills matter, they would not simply achieve youth political mobilisation. Rather, they have to be integrated with the relevant knowledge which I discussed, and also with young people's civic awareness and motivation towards online civic activities. All these elements together constitute media literacy education for citizenship, which moves towards constructing citizens' identities and improving civic capabilities in the digital age (Bers, 2008; S. Goldman et al., 2008; Banaji & Buckingham, 2013). The next section will focus on this aspect.

3.3.3. Learning for digital citizenship

Selwyn (2002) defined "learning for citizenship" as encompassing:

... the 'about' and 'through' strands and involves equipping students with a set of tools (knowledge and understanding, skills and aptitudes, values and dispositions) which enable them to participate actively and sensibly in the roles and responsibilities they encounter in their adult lives (p.8).

Taking this into account, I understand 'learning for digital citizenship' as an ideal objective of citizenship education which combines different capability elements, developing levels or learning models. The reason I look at it as a combination is that to nurture *sensible*, *responsible* and *active* citizens could not be accomplished in a single action. Instead, this goal needs to be achieved step-by-step.

A series of improving studies conducted by Bennett's team have proposed two main paradigms of citizenship (See Table 3-6) and relevant civic learning styles (See Table 3-7) in a post-industrial age dominated by digital media and the Internet. The *self-actualising citizen* (AC) is a recent citizenship paradigm focusing on lifestyle politics and relies on peer-networked civic participation. By contrast, the *dutiful citizen* (DC) pays more attention to institutional civic issues and relies on the communication through traditional media. Citizenship of AC and DC lead to two civic learning styles respectively. The AC (actualising) learning has been found to be favoured and developed by young people as it emphasises autonomy or peer control and problem-solving. Meanwhile the DC (dutiful) learning seems more like the one-way delivering of conventional and institutional knowledge and skills. Although the AC learning becomes increasingly popular, Bennett notes that the DC learning represented by school-based education may still be of educational value. Nevertheless, Bennett admitted that the boundary between these two styles is not too strict to be crossed. Young people may be able to benefit from the integration of two styles. Based on this theoretical framework, my research has the aim of testing if AC and DC learning styles can be applied to analyse Chinese young people's online experience.

Table 3- 6: Two Paradigms of Citizenship

Actualising Citizen (AC)	Dutiful Citizen (DC)
<i>Weak</i> sense of duty to participate in government	<i>Strong</i> sense of duty to participate in government
<i>Lifestyle politics</i> : e.g. political consumerism, volunteering, social activism	<i>Institutional politics</i> : e.g. government, public organisations, news, partisan issues
<i>Expressing, consuming and producing</i> as main acts of participation	<i>Voting</i> as the core democratic act
<i>Lower trust</i> towards media and politicians: less likely to follow politics in the news	<i>Higher trust</i> towards media and politicians: more likely to follow government and news
<i>Loose networks</i> for social action: e.g. peer networks, friendship-based community, interest groups, consumer groups	<i>Hierarchical membership</i> : e.g. political parties, defined social groups, public organisations, institutions and campaigns
<i>Interactive</i> communication through digital media	<i>One-way</i> communication through conventional mass media

Adapted from: Bennett (2008a, p. 14); Bennett et al. (2010, p. 398)

Table 3- 7: Two Paradigms of Civic Learning

AC Civic Learning styles	DC Civic Learning Styles
<i>Interactive</i> information and knowledge: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> project-based shared by peer-to-peer networks 	<i>Authoritative</i> information and knowledge: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> text-based provided by governments, teachers, news reports
Training <i>participatory</i> skills of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> expression ideas by the use of self-produced media media creation 	Training <i>passive</i> skills of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> transmission information by the use of traditional forms of public address media consumption
Preference for learning in <i>self-defined</i> and <i>democratic</i> environments	Preference for learning in <i>site-defined</i> and <i>structured</i> organisations
Actions or activities generated by peers	Actions or activities offered by authorities
Assessing by learner	Assessing by external standards

Adapted from: Bennett et al. (2009, p. 108); Bennett et al. (2010, p. 49)

Nearly in the same period Bennett's team drew their models from a USA context, UK-based Livingstone (2009b) identified three varieties of young online citizens. The distinctions among them are primarily marked with different levels of civic literacy: (1) "*the interactors*", who engage in online activities very frequently and interactively but lack civic interests; (2) "*the civic-minded*", who pursue civic interests online but lack civic skills; and (3) "*the disengaged*", who are neither interested in nor capable of civic participation (p.129-130). Livingstone proposed two more categories than Bennett: the internet-engaged but civic-disengaged citizens and the completely disengaged citizens. Her second category of 'civic-minded citizen' has similarities with Bennett's notion of 'actualising citizen', which addressed the awareness, sense and wiliness of participating in online civic activities. In other words, Livingstone considered the extent of youth involvement in general civic affairs, while Bennett focused on the content of participation in governmental or non-governmental civic affairs. Although their emphases seem different, both of their studies raised the question whether young people are '*citizens now*' who are learning from online civic participation and actually influence the political decision, or '*citizens-in-the-making*' who are waiting to be formally prepared with knowledge, skills and values in technological and citizenship fields.

All studies presented in this section have provided a theoretical framework to the present research. Therefore educational implications have been taken into account when the research questions were designed. I wished to see if these educational findings would be seen in my sample of young people, if these learning theories could fit into a Chinese context, and if the research would enrich and develop citizenship education theories in the digital age.

3.4. Investigating on Youth Online Civic Participation: Methodological Perspectives

3.4.1. Quantitative approaches

As to the approaches to investigating youth online civic participation, many studies started from quantitative approaches to capture a representative picture about young people's attitude and behaviours towards online civic activities. There are two major methods in use. The first one is *website content analysis*, which aims to locate, select, categorise and characterise the spheres where youth online civic discussions and actions had happened or could happen. This method requires a large sample of websites. The sample sizes in different studies have already been indicated in Section 3.2.3.1. Those *civic-featured* sites were selected according to basic criteria (Montgomery & Gottlieb-Robles, 2006; Bachen et al., 2008; Coleman, 2008; Banaji & Buckingham, 2010, 2013). For instance,

- The nature of sites should be civic-driven, containing civic contents or resources;
- The organisation of sites (e.g. design, presentation, structure) should be in user-friendly form and enable active participation;
- The producers of sites could be diverse but should work in civic-related areas or for relevant purposes;
- The main audiences/users of sites should be young people;
- It is better for the sites to hold a pedagogical potential (e.g. employing active pedagogical techniques; encouraging interactive peer learning; introducing policy issues related to ICT; emphasising inclusive contents and responsible editorial stance)

These criteria are very helpful in making a representative sample of sites while filtering irrelevant ones. Yet they need to be adjusted in practice as website situations and research aims change. Considering many popular web portals (e.g. Yahoo, AOL, Sina, and BBC) and social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn) involve diverse contents including civic topics, if researchers limit their interest to particular civic-featured sites and ignore the comprehensive sites, they risk missing a range of potentially valuable data.

The website studies above usually applied a quantitative content analysis to generate a large number of codes from web texts, identify existing civic themes and evaluate the site's capacity to facilitate youth civic participation. It has been recommended as "the ideal method" for media studies since it can "provide a very specific framework"; "reduce researcher bias"; and "be externally verified, replicated or applied by other researchers wishing to extend the research agenda" (Gerodimos, 2008, p. 972). However, this method pays more attention to those designed or authority-defined contents on Web 1.0 sites, mostly from the producers' perspectives. This significant limitation of the massive website content analysis was not overcome until the age of Web 2.0, when users became producers and forum posts and social networking hashtag became the contents for analysis (S. Wright & Street, 2007; Balaji & Chakrabarti, 2010; Small, 2011; Graham et al., 2013). Since I position my research as a youth study in the field of education studies, instead of a website study, I decided not to apply quantitative content analysis for depicting a map of civic-featured websites in China, but instead adopted a *qualitative content analysis* (See Chapter 4) to draw a landscape of several youth-featured sites. I considered some Features Analysis

strategies belonging to content analysis that Gerodimos (2008) used for a small-sample-based study, in which he examined:

... sites maintenance, interactivity, navigation and structure, accessibility, transparency, content and background information, promotional and participation tools, links between actions and outcomes, youth focus, online community, web links (p.971).

The features of my sample sites are analysed in Chapter 6.

The second often-used quantitative approach is the *questionnaire-based survey*, which aims to identify youth attitudes towards online civic participation and their self-recognised participatory behaviours. This approach is also required for large-scale samples of respondents. One of the advantages of using questionnaires is that a large amounts of information can be collected nationally and internationally. For example, Calenda and Meijer (2009) created web questionnaires and investigated 2,163 students in Italy, Spain and the Netherlands. Bakker and de Vreese (2011) designed an online survey in the Netherlands for young people aged 16-24, which obtained 2,409 respondents. Compared to their planned sampling of 10,000 people, the response rate of the survey seems unsatisfactory. Similar challenges were found by Warren et al. (2014) and Vraga et al. (2014), whose surveys respectively received 502 respondents among 1,000 young people in Malaysia and 1,325 respondents among 4,000 young people in the USA. The questionnaire-based surveys are based on participants' recall or reflection on their online experiences, instead of providing lived data. Since my research focuses on youth interaction that actually happened online in a small sample of youth online community, a questionnaire for general information collection was not suitable for this research.

3.4.2. Qualitative approaches

Qualitative approaches have been applied in existing research to understand more specific opinions and feelings of young people during their online civic participation. For this research theme, a shift from quantitative into qualitative was caused by the transfer of researcher position from that of *statistician* into *audience researcher* who should sit down with young people, observing them and listening to them (Livingstone, 2004a; Olsson, 2006).

Coleman and Rowe (2005) designed a piece of qualitative research conducted both online and offline. They set up a dedicated website and recruited 100 young participants aged 13-18, who agreed to respond to forum-based questions about their use of new media for civic purposes. They contributed approximately 800 to the forum. Meanwhile, they ran face-to-face discussions in eight schools. Each classroom session typically involved a group of 15 young people, and they conducted a semi-structured discussion. In most of these sessions, participants had access to computers and were able to refer to specific web sites to illustrate their comments. Taking this research as an example, I perceived advantages of using a qualitative approach for my own research plan, which set out to look at young people's civic expression online; listen to young people's opinions in an educational field (i.e. school); and connect their online experience with offline thinking. But I wished to adjust some of the strategies that Coleman and Rowe used in order to secure data from young people's everyday practices online, instead of from a pre-arranged environment and setting where they would be invited to make comments.

Ethnographic research methods have been applied in some internet-based studies, but seldom for the research questions related to youth online civic

participation and learning. boyd (2008) studied youth engagement on MySpace with methods of “participant observation” and “deep hanging out alongside qualitative interviews” (boyd, p.120). Ito et al. (2010) highlighted the strength of this approach in two aspects that enables us:

... to understand how new media become embodiments of social and cultural relationship that in turn shape and structure our possibilities for social action and cultural expression.

... to surface, from the empirical material, what the important categories and structures are that determine new media practices and learning outcomes. (pp .4-5).

Thus, an ethnographic approach became appropriate for the kind of study I was undertaking for a cultural study, even though it had not been widely applied in the study of civic participation in youth sub-culture. Chapter 4 contains a more detailed discussion of the research design.

3.4.3. Mixed-methods approaches

The big projects preferred to use mixed-methods research, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Banaji and Buckingham’s project provided an instructive example of a mixed-methods approach. The first advantage of their research is that the selection, classification and analysis of websites were conducted in both quantitative and qualitative ways. Second, it used multiple strategies, such as in-depth case studies, in-depth interviews and broad online surveys, to collect data from youth experiences. Third, it paid attention to both online and offline civic participation. Fourth, it triangulated data from “text, audience and internet producer”. Finally, it targeted a wide range of youth participants in different nations.

While a mixed-methods study offers distinct possibilities for researching in this field, my research interest and expectation led me towards adopting an

ethnographic approach. There was also the purely pragmatic concern over feasibility arising from the requirements of a larger-scale sample, the time needed to extract quantitative and qualitative data, and the sophisticated design required to integrate ontological and epidemiological considerations (see Chapter 4). These requirements of a mixed-methods study were time prohibitive for an independent researcher.

3.5. Youth Online Civic Participation in China

It has become apparent that the selection of above studies relies heavily upon Anglo-American texts and research which raises issues in itself about Western-centric academic approaches. While some of these commentators base their writing on local sources, the things they write of are commonplace around the globe and also resonate across a vast of countries. However, there are limited studies located in China and focusing on Chinese young people's real-life experience of engaging in civic activities, this section only reviews a few of them.

3.5.1. Equating online 'political' participation with 'civic' participation

The majority of existing empirical research in China focuses on youth online political participation. There are three main issues frequently examined. The first one is young people's *attitudes* towards online political participation. On the one hand, from researchers' observations, Chinese young people seem to hold unprecedented levels of interest and passion in politics and they are willing to devote themselves to online political debates about government activities and policy-making at different levels (Chen, 2009; Lv, 2010; Cheng et al., 2015). On the other hand, Chinese young people's attitudes towards participation are often at odds with their actions. University students care

and think about political affairs but seldom actually take action to influence the affairs (Zou et al., 2010; Fang, 2011). However, such a view should be questioned as students incorporate activities within the different layers of organisations.

The second aspect refers to *patterns* of Chinese youth online political participation. In Lv (2010)'s dissertation, he presented three frequently-used forms among Chinese young people: (1) getting political information from online newspapers; (2) expressing viewpoints on institutional political websites, BBSs or personal blogs; and (3) initiating offline political activities. For example, thousands of Chinese young people posted on BBSs to protest against the USA-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization's missile bombing on the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999 and to encourage refugees of the Sichuan earthquake in 2008. During in 2008 Beijing Olympic Games many young people contacted one another via the Internet and then walked along the street to protect the Olympic flame from attempted interruptions by Tibetan separatists. The three patterns have also been mentioned by Luo (2008) and M. Zhang (2011), who added another viewpoint that young people's choices of participation patterns were sometimes related to their perceived benefits. For example, some young people post online to get payment from the website companies that recruit a great number of commentators in order to increase their click rates. As to the new pattern of online political participation, Huan Sun (2010) employed a quantitative research method to explore the relationship between the use of SNSs and the extent of political participation. He found that SNSs do influence Chinese young people's political knowledge, skills and habits of using other media (H. Sun, 2010; H. Huang, 2014), which have provided young people with more opportunities and confidence to respond to the political activities.

Thirdly, the impacts of university students' online political participation are discussed by a wide range of studies. One dominant argument is that online political participation by young people might be a double-edged sword. From a positive perspective, Chinese online participation by young people has greatly improved their sense of political effectiveness, social responsibility, and self-identities as political beings (Chen, 2009; Zou et al., 2010; Fang, 2011; Qi, 2011). This implies that young people feel more empowered than in previous times expressing political ideas and influencing changes in wider Chinese society. By contrast, the negative viewpoints discussed within certain Chinese literature worry that youth irrational, radical, even illegal online actions undermine the stability and harmony of universities and society (Luo, 2008; Chen, 2009; M. Zhang, 2011). This repeats and amplifies commonly encountered fears about the potential of the coming generation to act as a force for future disruption. Such points of view underscore the value and even need for open, critical enquiry into this field in order to challenge prejudicial thinking, especially about young people.

Recent Chinese research has paid attention to civic activities in market or business settings (G. Yang, 2009) and in disseminating information, organising petitions or protesting (Tai, 2006), which affected government decision-making. However, little research specifically examines the response made by young people in China.

3.5.2. Requirements for ideological and political education

Most of existing research addressed the importance of ideological and political education at university level in guiding youth online political participation, the universities in China are regarded as one of the fields of

public opinion (輿情阵地), where academics and students are collecting, exchanging, creating and distributing ideas so that they can lead public opinions (Luo, 2008; S. Chen, 2012). Firstly, ideological and political education is regarded as one of the most effective measures in helping young people to identify their political roles and to choose orderly and well-organised political participation (Zou et al., 2010; Qi, 2011). At best this is a form of protection for youth. At worst this constitutes a form of compulsory direction leaving little room for young people to deviate. Secondly, it is claimed that ideological and political education contains proper values to be delivered to young net citizens, in order to strengthen their political stand when they engage in online political discussions. The main contents of ideological and political education in Chinese universities include patriotism education, Marxism and Socialism education, moral education, mainstream culture education and socialist values education (H. Lin, 2010; Fang, 2011). Thirdly, educators face a need themselves to improve their own net-using skills, political awareness, communication abilities and teaching capacities (Zou et al., 2010; Tang & Wang, 2012). In this way we see evidence of the broader impact of cultural and media changes upon the older generations. Although recent suggestions from technological and cultural perspectives are proposed in order to enrich youth networked public opinions (Tang & Wang, 2012; B. Wang & Wang, 2012; Hongbo Wang, 2012), it is difficult for researchers to ignore Chinese political context and the relationship between the ideological and political education and youth online practice (Zou et al., 2010). Although such studies stand in a conventional position, their limitation reveals the broader issue of how existing political processes and educational structures can adapt to Chinese cyber citizens' recently developed appeals.

3.6. The Gap in Knowledge

Although the existing studies acknowledged here have provided profound findings and debates, there remains a set of questions for further exploration, and these have helped me raise my own research questions. Most existing research is focused on Anglo-American and European contexts, while English speaking academics have paid less attention to China where, along with India, there is the largest group of young Internet users in the world. The very recent studies that examined a Chinese context stuck to a relatively narrow understanding of civic participation, narrowing it with political participation so the educational recommendations are limited in the area of ideological and political education. There is a different start point when studying youth online civic participation in China and Anglo-American-European contexts. The narratives one encounters in China begin with concerns about irrational, over-active and non-orderly civic participation, while the narratives of many commentators who come from so-called “advanced democratic countries” (Xenos et al., 2014) begin with concerns about the deficit of democracy and the lack of youth participation in China. Thus, the present study foregrounds an interest in Chinese young people’s usage of new media for contributing to or challenging the conceptual and practical facets of citizenship. The main research question is: *how do Chinese university students employ social media for their civic participation?* This question will be interpreted from different aspects, through five sub-questions drawn from the literature review.

The first sub-question is: *What civic issues concerned the students most?*

This is about the definition of civic participation constructed by Chinese youth through their online practice. In such a digital and internet age, the meaning of ‘civic’ is no longer equal to what Marshall defined it as in 1950s,

parallel with the term 'political'. Instead, when we talk about civic participation, it is broader than political participation. This is why I focused upon the notion of civic participation in this thesis. Although it has been discussed in this chapter from the political, social, cultural and pedagogical perspectives, the boundary of each sphere seems nebulous, and increasingly entwined with private lives. In other words, when many previous studies titled with "political participation", "civic participation" and "public participation", they did not clarify the overlap and distinctiveness between these categories, especially in online settings. If the question "what counts as civic participation?" is answered clearly, there might be a danger that some other online activity becomes a substitute for it (Banaji & Buckingham, 2010). This question is extremely important for the study in China where the *civic* is often mixed with the *political*. It is also one of the key theoretical questions to be answered through the research.

The second sub-question is: *in what ways do the students participate in civic activities?* Most early research published before 2013 focused on youth engagement in the age of Web 1.0 when the technology of the World Wide Web was usually put up by organisations with considerable funding behind them. The websites looked almost like adverts made by the producers. When it comes to the age of Web 2.0, new features of youth civic participation might be encouraged by social media. Bearing this possibility in mind, I am interested in exploring updated forms for young people to take part in civic activities alongside the rise of social media.

The third sub-question is: *what are the key factors that affected their civic participation?* Many researchers have highlighted the existence of a "digital divide" and attributed it to technological and socio-economic factors, but

most of the findings drawn from statistical investigations only show a positive correlation between different factors, rather than listening to young people about whether or how these factors influence their online civic participation. Thus, in this research, I have asked Chinese young people to talk about the reasons for their participation or non-participation in online civic activities.

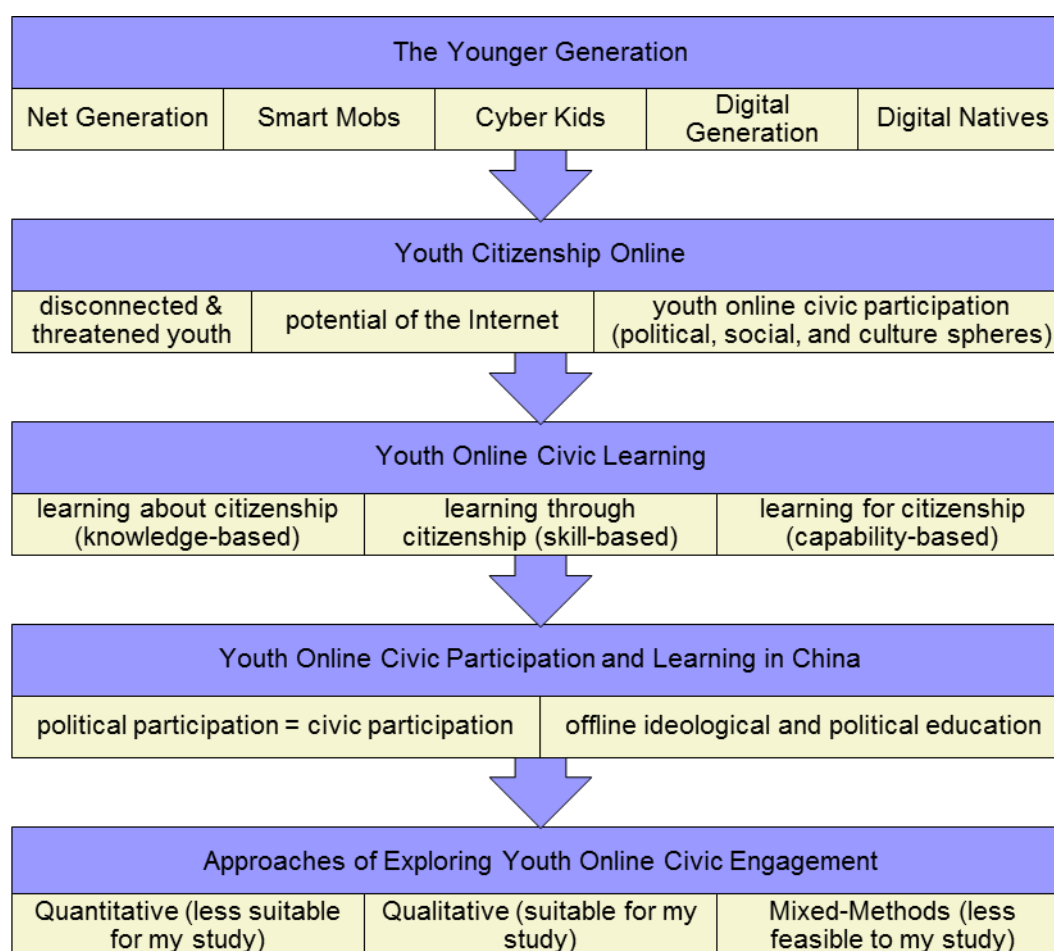
The fourth sub-question is: *what impacts do they feel their participation had achieved?* This is inspired by a critique encountered in several studies. Coleman et.al (2005 & 2008) argued that it was dangerous to assume that participation is always a good thing in itself, necessarily better than non-participation, as it leads to making the judgement that young people are somehow at fault if they choose not to participate. Banaji and Buckingham (2010) also expressed doubt about such assumptions, by providing examples of negative offline events which are caused by confrontational and abusive online participation. Therefore, I decide to critically question both positive and negative outcomes of civic participation in the research.

The last sub-question is: *what are educational implications of their cybercivic participation?* This question considers the potential innovation of citizenship education in China, where there is a need to comprehensively discuss and design educational programmes in support of learning *about, through and for* digital citizenship. Most previous studies in China maintain the top-down perspective of strengthening political and ideological formal education, but this propensity faces challenges. In this study, I would listen to students' and teachers' suggestions about how to promote citizenship education in the digital age and how to improve cybercivic participation to nurture cyber citizens from both informal and formal positions.

Summary

I present a summary of this long chapter in Table 3-8. Existing empirical studies have discussed the expansion of youth internet culture, the potential of online citizenship, the rise of online youth civic participation and its implication for citizenship education. I also considered methodologies applied in previous research and similar research interest in Chinese contexts. The chapter reveals that the notion of youth cybercivic participation requires further constructive understanding, so I open up the discussion about research design in Chapters 4 and 5, and then provide contextualised findings in Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

Table 3- 8: Summary of Literature



CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes my research design for investigating Chinese youth cybervic participation. As Crotty (1998) suggests, research-designing typically starts with a real-life problem that needs to be addressed, answered and solved. The research question, incorporating its purposes and contexts, leads to the selection of methodology and methods. To answer my research question - "*How do Chinese university students employ social media for their civic participation?*" - I am less interested in how many students are engaged in the practice and interaction, and how many times or how often they participate in civic activities. Instead, I pay more attention to what civic topics they are actually talking about, what conversations and interaction strategies they are using, why they participate in online civic activities, to what extent they contribute to their community, and what educators, universities, authorities and students can learn from youth cybervic participation. These interests need to be explored in a qualitative study which focuses on the meaning of non-numerical data (Robson, 2011).

This chapter starts with an ontological and epistemological discussion about my research, providing fundamental ideas about why ethnographic strategies are suitable. Then it introduces principles of *virtual ethnography* and its advantages for online fieldwork and virtual community exploration (Hine, 2000). It also depicts how I designed and conducted my virtual ethnographic study. The study process includes selecting and accessing fields, data collection through online observation and offline in-depth interviews, qualitative content analysis of data and presenting results.

4.1. Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions

4.1.1. Objectivism v.s. constructionism

To choose and justify methodology and methods, a researcher firstly needs to consider a research *paradigm*, which consists of an integrated array of assumptions, concepts, variables, questions, values, and some attendant methodologies to explore objects, subjects and the relationship between them (Guba & Lincoln, 2005 ; Kuhn, [1962] 2012). Every research paradigm can be understood from *ontological*, *epistemological* and *methodological* dimensions. Ontology discovers the nature of the world, concerned with “what is”; while epistemology discusses our views about the world, concerned with “what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate” (Crotty, 1998, pp. 8-10)

When researchers explore the world (or a reality, or a problem), ontological inquiries concern *what it actually is* or *how it is made up*. Epistemological inquiries concern *what it means to know* or *in what ways we view it*. In many cases, the nature of the world cannot be separated from our views on it. The ontological issues and epistemological issues usually arise together (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). They spontaneously lead to methodological inquiries of *how it might be discovered* or *how we can explore and verify it*, as methodology selection is always based on and adjusted to its ontology and epistemology. Thus, when I considered which paradigm might be suitable for my research, I took these three aspects into account: (1) rethinking the nature of the Internet and people’s online activities, (2) testing different theoretical frameworks to understand cyber culture and cybercivic participation, and (3) reviewing methodological approaches in support of different understandings.

4.1.2. Social constructionism

Research into the Internet is very diverse and flexible, and leans towards either objectivism or constructionism, or sometimes contains both of them. There is no single method regarded as the only right way of doing Internet research, but there may be preferences. For example, if a study focuses on information-searching and data-retrieving capabilities of the Internet, it will probably need a statistical analysis from a large database in which big data maximise the objectivity. If a study focuses on the interaction and communication capabilities of the Internet, it will probably need an interpretive analysis about how people's online activities help with the meaning construction in cyberspace (Jones, 1999). As my research pays more attention to the meaning of Internet-based interaction, I follow a *constructionist* assumption. I will further discuss understandings of the Internet and people's online participation in Section 4.2.

There is a more complex picture of paradigms based on the constructionist assumption. This thesis follows the paradigm of *social constructionism* (Burr, 2003) that is normally used to describe meanings constructed by humans during their interactions and interpretations. The main epistemological assumption of social constructionism indicates that "social properties are constructed through interactions between people, rather than having a separate existence" (Robson, 2011, p. 24). From a social constructionist view, the social system along with human activities is too complicated to find an objective reality. This does not mean social constructionist researchers deny the objective reality. Rather, there are many realities, because different people have different ways of looking at the world and participating in social lives. When these differences merge, conflict, or interact with each other, knowledge representing some perspectives could be constructed (Burr,

2003; Andrews, 2012). The paradigm therefore, as Schwandt (2007) emphasised, values people's lived experience in diverse social situations.

Social constructionist studies are regarded as more critical, dynamic and flexible approaches, because they place more emphasis on: (1) challenging taken-for-granted knowledge rooted from an objective view of the world; (2) exploring the process of daily interactions and social constructions between people; (3) taking historical, cultural and linguistic specificity into account; and (4) understanding the world from different perspectives (Burr, 2003; Andrews, 2012). These advantages of the social constructionist paradigm enable my research not to follow the conventional statistic investigations of university students' civic and political participation in China (Z. Hu, 2007; Qi, 2011; Shen et al., 2011), but present students' lived experiences and the process that they are engaged in - civic discussions and activities with their peer-group and other groups of net citizens. Moreover, it leaves space to specifically consider and analyse the Chinese historical, social and cultural context when using multi-disciplinary theories to interpret the phenomenon.

4.1.3. Symbolic interactionism

One of the crucial theoretical perspectives underlying the social constructionist paradigm is *symbolic interactionism* (Mead, 1962). Blumer (1969) introduced basic arguments of symbolic interactionism as meaningful communication. When people communicate and interact with each other, they usually have to use significant symbols which deliver specific meanings to successfully express themselves and understand others. The symbols, such as languages, talks, conversations and non-verbal expressions, work as communication tools that bridge the self and other, and enable the individual to be thoroughly social. Crotty (1998) reminded us that social

constructionists, who aim to examine the processes that ordinary people participate in social life and make sense of them, have to directly deal with symbolic issues of language, interrelationships, and communities. Cohen and Crabtree (2006) found the symbols also help reality and knowledge to be constructed and negotiated through dialogues. Building on these ideas, my research has looked for and distinguished symbols of online interaction among people in order to understand youth online community. It has also made efforts to reflect those so-called “non-symbolic interaction” and found that some “conversation of gestures” can be symbolised and become visible and expressive (Burr, 2003), such as the wide use of images and emoticons in digital messages on social media.

Symbolic interactionist theory has been applied to research on the Internet where people create new modes of relationship and interaction. One of the most important features of online interaction is transcending the spatial and temporal limitation (N. James & Busher, 2012). Once people are networked by the Internet, they can communicate anytime, anywhere, and with anyone, even with people they have never met. In other words, the Internet, as one of the representations of modernity, tears space away from place by “fostering relations between ‘absent’ others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction” (Giddens, 1990, pp. 18-19). The emergence of social media strengthens this ‘absent’ and distant interaction, making it more frequent and intimate. The symbols used become increasingly diverse, images, audios, videos, games, post threads, virtual communities and networks deliver and construct multiple meanings for online social interaction besides oral and written text. Hence the research into online participation has to pay attention to these symbolic materials.

The perspective of symbolic interactionism has influenced and promoted ethnographic methodology, which is classically applied to explore human communities and social interactions (Crotty, 1998; Burr, 2003). Ethnography is seen as a good choice for researching people's everyday encounters and symbol-based social interaction. This is because its methods of observation and interviews allow researchers to access the original symbols of social life, such as languages, gestures, images, customs, and then understand the perceptions, attitudes and values of a community. The ethnographic way of thinking and practising can help acquire multiple perspectives about multiple social constructions of meanings and knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), hence I am convinced that ethnographic approaches suit my research.

4.2 Methodological Implications

4.2.1 Foreshadowed problems: internet as culture and cultural artefact

Ethnographic methodology encourages researchers to bring assumptions into the field which are called foreshadowed problems. As researchers get more and better knowledge about the setting, they are able to test, reinforce or correct those assumptions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). A set of foreshadowed problems for using virtual ethnography are related to the role and effects of the Internet. In this section, I draw heavily on the work of Hine (2000) in discussing why virtual ethnography could be an enriched meaning-developing approach for my research.

The methodology selection primarily depends on how I understand the nature of the Internet and social media. There are two major perspectives for previous research into the Internet. The first one supports *technological determinism*, which claims that the Internet as an independent technology

can change and shape human society. The most straightforward changes refer to the role of time and space, the form of communication, and the pluralism of the living world (p.5). For example, online trading systems have simplified shopping processes and threaten the street retail business; distance learning systems have created a new environment for study and will threaten traditional schooling systems. From a technological determinist perspective, the Internet is also recognised as natural and value-free, neither good or bad in itself (Chandler, 1995), so it can be examined through more objective and technological-based approaches, such as experimental studies (examples provided by Hine, pp.15-16), alongside online activities. These studies focus on exploring and comparing the different functions of different media and internet applications.

Although technology matters, the social characteristics of the internet cannot be ignored. Taking Webster's *social theory* and Hiltz and Turoff's notion of *social inertia* into account, Hine (2000) disputed technological determinism and leans towards the second perspective. She argues that "rather than technology itself being an agent of change, uses and understandings of the technology are central" (p.4). This argument is based on two assumptions: the Internet as *culture* and as *cultural artefact*. The former stresses that Internet-based communication presents or reforms social relationships, structures or organisations because it is inevitably influenced by the context, such as users' gender, race, status, languages, attitudes and habits. Virtual community and identity play are typical representations of Internet culture. Rheingold (1993a) defined virtual community as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyber space" (p.5). Hine (2000) further highlighted that the

construction of a virtual community depends on its members' sense of responsibilities, intimate connections, and authenticity and reliability. However, the existence of multiple identities makes a looser and more flexible virtual community because every user is able to play different roles synchronously or asynchronously. An individual is no longer a unified self, but a fragmented self. Although someone may insist on using only one username to keep a stable and sustained identity, he or she still can perform differently in different online settings. In this context, the kinds of roles brought into cyberspace and the ways the community appears are decided by people, not by the Internet itself. This standpoint indicates that online settings are socially constructed. Hine's latter assumption takes the Internet as a cultural artefact, which admits the Internet as an object. But this object is different from nature discovered by human beings; it is more like text produced and consumed by human beings. The producers make the text in one way; the readers may interpret it differently (Grint & Woolgar, 1997). The Internet was specifically produced for purposes such as serving military missions, university research and public communication. Currently, more and more stakeholders are involved in the development of the Internet. Consumers and audiences can join producers and service providers in contributing to Internet production. For example the process of text production becomes more complex and contingent, especially when it comes to the social media era, because the audience can also play a role as producers by contributing to the text. In this sense, the Internet as a cultural artefact means it is socially shaped by different groups of people.

4.2.2. Virtual ethnography: a broadened and reformulated ethnography

According to Hine (2000), *virtual ethnography* would be an appealing methodology for examining both culture and cultural artefacts, in online and

offline settings respectively. Ethnographic methods like observation and interviews are good to establish what people actually do and think of the internet. Furthermore, ethnographic writing can provide a very thick and interesting description about the relationship between technology utility and social construction, so that “an enriched sense of the meanings of the technology and the cultures [is developed]” (Hine, 2000, p.8). My research expects to present an actual situation and a thick description about the process whereby young people contribute to constructing ‘virtual community’ and producing civic-featured ‘text’. Hence, this approach could help better understand youth cybercivic participation as a part of Internet culture and as one of the factors in shaping the Internet as a cultural artefact. Table 4-1 presents the origin of this methodology and its applications in this research, followed by further explanations about the research design.

Table 4- 1: A Brief Review of Virtual Ethnography in My Research

	Ethnography	Virtual Ethnography	My research as a Case of Virtual Ethnography
Object	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people as members of ethnic or cultural communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people in virtual communities • people in established communities gathering in cyberspace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • university students who I met online • university students with online experiences who I met offline
Place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • physical and geographical sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • computer-mediated sites and cyberspaces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BBSs • SNSs
Contents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discourses • thoughts • actions • customs, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • internet productions • online interactions • offline responses or reflections, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • online civic discussions • online civic activities • offline civic activities with online support
Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participant observation • in-depth interview survey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • online participant observation • extended interview, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • online participant observation • offline in-depth interview

4.2.2.1. Changing everyday life: inhabitants always online

Ethnography originally derived from anthropology. It was initially used in an attempt to reveal distinctive ways of everyday life and the beliefs and values integral to cultures belonging to social groups (Radcliffe-Brown, 1922) (Crotty, 1998; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). It has since been widely adapted for ethnic and cultural studies (Clifford, 1992; Gray, 2003) to assist in understanding a group of people's actions, thoughts and customs, and to interpret relationships, communications and interactions among them, or with other groups. For this research, I set my target group as 18-24-year-old Chinese university students, one of the most vibrant groups who are creating diverse and trending cultures in China.

Traditionally, ethnography has been framed by geographic boundaries, involving researchers focusing upon communities within identifiable physical locations, mapping and understanding the practices within these locations, and then retreating to other spaces in order to write research reports (Clifford, 1992). With the development of digital technology, the Internet has created a new lifestyle that people occupy and populate in a virtual world, especially for the digital/Internet generation who no longer restricted to live and study in a campus or a workplace. When young people currently announce that they do not just use the Internet but live on it, a new ethnographic field comes into being which challenges traditional geo-spatial approaches within ethnographic practice (A. N. Markham, 1998; Hine, 2000; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). When I spoke with my research participants, all of them said they felt the need to go online every day, for information collecting, news-browsing, working in groups for their courses, shopping, watching movies and/or television, and chatting with family and friends. Often these were being done simultaneously, with users switching back and

forth between activities. One student showed me his default online signature which was visible for his friends in different social media sites:

I'm 24 hours online. You are very welcome to bother me! If you want to talk, do send me a message; if you don't want to talk, just poke me online (SI 22).

Here, the "poke" is similar to a greeting gesture of tapping one's shoulder and saying hello to someone. This signature shows his open attitude to online friends and messages: all-welcome and at any time.

Many other interview students also mentioned that the use of social media has been intertwined with their daily lives, dominating their communication, assisting their study, and even influencing their career development (SI 5, 16, 25). The times and places of conversations have changed, and so have the ways in which conversations and interactions take place. Therefore, it requires an adapting methodology to understand everyday-life in change. Since the virtual world cannot be detached from the material/physical spatial world, it permits for a transference of the main principles of ethnographic inquiry to also be suitable for ethnographers of the virtual world. Moreover, many of inhabitants of the virtual world who are always present online are more observable for ethnographic researchers.

4.2.2.2. Expanding places for fieldwork

As to virtual ethnography, Leander and McKim (2003) addressed three key issues for consideration including *place*, *knowledge about identities*, and *participant observation*. This has implications both for practical research strategies and for research ethics. Hence, I will now discuss the application of virtual ethnography in my research from these three dimensions.

Place is one of three essential elements of the social context of ethnographic research. The other two are actors and activities (Spradley, 1980). Any physical place can be the site for a social situation as long as the other two elements are present at the same time. This kind of place can also be regarded as a field for ethnographic research because human interaction and culture happens when particular actors do particular activities in a particular place (Leander & McKim, 2003). A key methodological tool lies with structured observation or recoding of what takes place. With respect to the cyber setting and location, there are also three elements: *place* (cyberspace), *actors* (internet users), and *activities* (various online conversations and activities). Together these construct an interactive ethnographic field, which is continuously expanded because of the capacity of internet technology to multiply and fragment. Additionally, cyber-related innovations have become embedded into the social life of a generation.

Many virtual ethnographers have advocated multi-sited ethnography (Hine, 2000; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Gatson, 2013). This is not only because it is easier for researchers to “travel” in different online settings where there are fewer or no boundaries, but also because the research focuses on community and activity. Online communities and activities are not scoped by physically located boundaries, but by connections and networks among people. Since cyberspace consists of a flow of people, information and money, which becomes a “space of flows”, it requires researchers to trace the flow in multiple fields rather than stay in a single location (Castells, 1996a, 1996b, 1997). In this way, a holistic picture of a virtual community and interactive activities can be drafted.

The design of my research considered these principles, so the fieldwork was based on two types of cyberspace, BBSs and SNSs, where I observed students as Internet users. In order to investigate their online activities in relation to civic participation, my focus was upon political and social topical discussions and activities among young people.

4.2.2.3. Diverse identities of participants

Unlike in traditional ethnographic fields, communication in cyberspace is not necessarily face-to-face. Most of the time participants are used to hiding their identities or playing different roles. Identifying participants hence becomes a challenge for virtual ethnographic researchers. Identity play, when a participant adopts a pseudonymous name and thus disguising who he/she is while engaging in the cyberspace, exists widely in the online setting. Such anonymity might influence the reliability of the research data. .

To overcome the research difficulties caused by identity play, it is necessary to consider the relationship between online and offline. From one viewpoint, the puzzle of identity play needs to be solved. Paccagnella (1997) stated that researchers should only believe the authenticity of identity if it has been verified through the process of engagement and interaction. From another, identity play can be accepted because online identities could be consistent with those which participants sustain offline. Hine (2000) argued that participants more or less always provide information about their offline lives. Online identities are intertwined with offline identities. She therefore suggests that ethnographers focus on interactions within informants and trace the threads of evidence in their offline lives, rather than insist on verifying whether identities are authentic or not. Following the strategies above, I considered both real and virtual identities. I observed participants

who had direct offline connections with me and formally consented to join my research, in order to trace their online life stories, but also paid attention to those anonymous or pseudonymous participants who were not acquainted with me but could be observed in public online settings interacting with so-called net citizens. In other words, I viewed the identity of each participant as multiple identities consisting of real names and different online pseudonyms.

Identity anonymity and identity play might also bring difficulties to information categorising and data confirmation for research. There is a very important principle in virtual ethnography - the need for reflection (Jones, 1999), which requires critically thinking when observing the web-texts, the producers and the audience of the Internet. To minimize the bias caused by identity play, I took three reflective strategies. First, I located my fieldwork specifically in websites which aim to serve my target user groups, and which encourage real name registration. Second, I tried to recognise active participants and focused more on the resources and texts provided by them (Hine, 2000). Third, through a long-term interaction with young people online and a repeated verification of source and information quality (Leander and McKim, 2003), I was able to confirm participants' identities more reliably. For instance, sometimes a person might use several different pseudonyms to participate in one topical discussion, trying to create the illusion that particular opinions looked stronger and received more supportive responses than others (SI 3). In these cases, it was not easy for an ordinary researcher like me to distinguish identity play at first sight. It is also impossible to count how many people are behind one pseudonym or how many pseudonyms are used by one person, unless you get the authority as a web administrator technically and ethically. My ways of reflection included checking participants' public visible personal information (e.g. the date of registration,

the length of online time, and the number of posts published by the same pseudonym), and analysing what they had said before. This means any participant who I observed as recently registered, very seldom staying online, and with few published posts, or only repeatedly responding to few specific topics, would not be treated as reliable data in my research.

Although this kind of identity play makes the research process more complex, it should be regarded as an interesting strategy used by young people for civic participation, especially for discussing controversial issues, as they do not want to show their real identities. This is also a distinct ethical challenge that virtual ethnographers need to consider (See Chapter 5).

4.2.2.4. Challenges of participant observation

Participant observation has been regarded as one of the fundamental methods for ethnographic research. It requires an ethnographic researcher to enter the field site, engage in the community, and observe and record everything in the settings including activities, people and physical environments (Spradley, 1980). On the one hand, the researcher experiences everyday life as an ordinary community member; on the other hand, he or she needs to interpret and reflect on the experiences obtained -- “Good participant observation means play and research in parallel, as the same engaged activity” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 69).

In terms of participant observation in the virtual world, the researcher must gain access to various online spaces and frequently take part in online communication in person, especially within the environment of social media. The object of the observation has become the “Network Society”, which consists of a set of flowing nodes (e.g. people, ideas, money) and

connections between nodes (Wittel, 2000). To catch these nodes, regular and active participation in multi-sites is addressed and it can make observation more effective. I took this strategy in my research. Only if I was engaged in a widespread social network relationship could I gather and share information, express and exchange opinions like ordinary users, and then gradually get to know people operating within the youth online community and its culture. Although online participant observation encourages full engagement from the researcher, I could not express opinions or take actions myself because this might interfere with the nature of their networks. To what extent a researcher can participate also refers to an ethical consideration, which I will further discuss in Chapter 5.

There are two factors that may challenge virtual participant observation: one is the existence of 'lurkers' (网络潜水族); the other is the role of 'researchers'. Firstly, there are a host of lurkers, who just read but do not give active responses online. It would be very difficult to observe the actions and activities of lurkers because they are invisible, silent and leave few observable traces. Thus, here arises a question: should lurkers be considered as participants or non-participants? On the one hand, they certainly exist and make contributions to cyberspace. For example, an online topical post I observed on a students' forum had received over 300 hits, though only 20 visible participants had expressed their viewpoints. This implies that there were a considerably large number of lurkers. Non-participation can be considered sometimes as a political act, just as participation in formally non-political activities can sometimes be politically significant (Coleman and Rowe, 2005). Lurkers' non-participation or passive participation may also contain political and civic attitudes, like disinterest or dissatisfaction with a certain topic. However, the anonymity leads to the

difficulty of recognizing the identity of lurkers, so I could not actually observe everything in the virtual ethnographic field.

Secondly, the double role of a researcher using participant observation results is a dilemma, or even a failed observation, because the researcher's identity as a lurker or as a visible participant may affect the dynamics. For example, when I once observed a university BBS, before obtaining the approval from the administrator, I could only use the guest identity, which permitted me to read a part of students' posts, but not to achieve full engagement in the students' topics. However, when I disclosed my real identity to a group of participants, two of the students slightly edited their previous posts, with some words changed and deleted; several others stopped posting for the following three days.

In order to avoid these dilemmas in participant observation, I adjusted my research approaches in two ways: firstly, I began to understand the authenticity of identity as negotiated and sustained by the situation rather than as a fixed identity attached to a fixed body. I therefore traced more opinions or actions which were frequently presented by different users, instead of an individual user. Secondly, I did not announce my status as a researcher when undertaking participant observation in the formal data collection process, unless it was necessary. This is because if I unmasked my status and participants knew that they were being observed, the reliability of the observation would likely be influenced. In other words, I tried to conduct participant observation in a silent way where I frequently appeared in the fields but did not intentionally influence the nature of the networks.

4.3. Research Design and Implementation

4.3.1. Sample groups

I selected a sample of Chinese university students aged 18-24 as my research subjects, for five reasons. Firstly, this group, accounting for around 50% of Chinese young net citizens (aged 6-25), is continuously reported as the largest and most active group of social media users in China (CNNIC, 2010, 2011, 2014a). Secondly, Chinese citizens over 18 years old are entitled to full constitutional rights and obligations, so that they can be fully engaged in political and social life. Thirdly, undergraduate and postgraduate students in China, firmly within this age group, are always reported as passionate, creative and influential net citizens who possess aspirations and the potential to construct a more democratic society (Y. M. Huang, 2008; Fang, 2011). Fourthly, although it is necessary to admit that not all young people have access to digital technologies because of a *digital divide* (Tapscott, 1998) which isolates many rural, poor and technologically illiterate youth, university students in China enjoy considerably more opportunities to use the Internet and social media applications than other groups of young people (CNNIC, 2014b). Fifthly, as a native educational researcher, I have good connections with many Chinese universities which allow me to enter the fields and find student participants.

Due to a cultural-featured perspective applied in the ethnographic study, I suggest regarding the sample of university students as a sub-cultural group of youth digital culture, instead of a statistically representative group of all Chinese university students. This perspective can also respond to the criticism that ethnography is less quantitatively valid, as an ethnographic analysis is driven by a deep understanding and comprehensive analysis towards a cultural group (Boellstorff et al., 2012, pp. 36-40). In fact, it is

difficult to present the sample size with a countable number in this research. Although I interviewed 47 students in offline settings, I could not calculate the number of students being present on the observed online platforms due to the existence of lurkers. Besides, this sampling difficulty is also related to multiple identities online. Each student may possess several social media accounts, while each observed social media account may be shared or managed by several students (see the dilemma of 'identity play' in Chapter 5). Thus, the strategy that I have taken is restricting the size of online sample groups within four observed social media sites and viewing them as cultural actors respectively 'living' in top-down, bottom-up, relationship-driven and topical-driven online fields, which I will further explain (see an analysis of site categories in Chapter 6).

4.3.2. Data collection

To comprehensively answer the research questions, I applied multiple research methods to collect data from diverse fields and different perspectives. This strategy is called "triangulation" (Robson, 2011, p. 158), and it can help increase the validity of my research. There are two main methods utilised in my research for data collection. Online participant observation was the principal method for giving a thick description, one that sought to capture as much data as possible from multiple sources (Dowling & Brown, 2010; Geertz, [1973] 2000). In addition, offline in-depth interviews were carried out face-to-face, which provided a picture of youth online practices from the users' own experiences (Hine, 2000; Whiteman, 2012). I also tried to understand the students' cybercivic participation from their teachers' perspectives, and university tutors were invited to share their opinions of students as part of the study. The data triangulation approach used in my research can be easily understood from Figure 4-1.

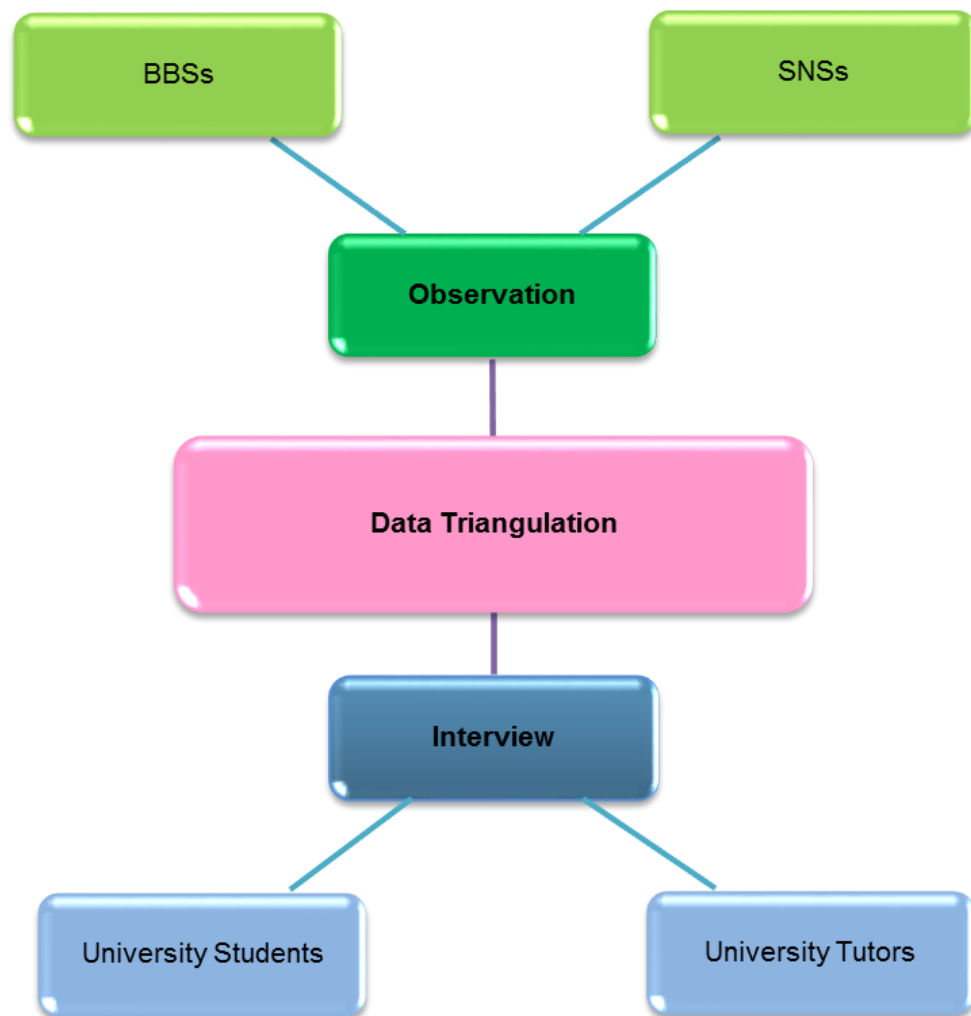


Figure 4-1: Data Triangulation Approach Applied in the Research

4.3.2.1. Online participant observation

Online Participant Observation (OPO) is one of the most fundamental methods in virtual ethnography. Borrowing some strategies from media research and field ethnography, it includes observation and analysis of three aspects: producers, audience and productions (Boellstorff et al., 2012).

Since social media break the strict boundaries between producers and audience, internet users play dual roles of audience and producer and make nearly all of the products, such as information, knowledge, opinions, and activities, which can be shared with one another via websites. In other words, websites are an enriched ethnographic field in which the data from places, actors, and activities can be collected simultaneously.

Between December 2011 and May 2013, I carried out a long-term OPO that combined *random observation* and *structuralised observation*. Taking the former strategy, I “surfed” online and browsed newly published materials in the fields without any particular observation plan; while taking the latter one, I spent nine months¹⁹ on a formal observation process according to an observation schedule (see Appendix 2) designed by myself, storing posts, taking field notes and analysing data. There are also a few observation data occasionally collected between 2014 and 2016 as supplemental cases for composing this thesis. Instead of observing a vast number of websites, I focused on two categories: BBSs and SNSs. I selected four case sites as key observation fields (see Table 4-2), which were reported, both in the literature and by respondents in the pilot study, as being the most popular, influential or representative websites (see Chapter 6 for details).

¹⁹ The formal and intensive online participant observation was conducted during three stages over 273 days in nine months:

Stage 1: from December 1, 2011 to February 28, 2012;

Stage 2: from September 1, 2012 to November 30, 2012;

Stage 3: from March 1, 2013 to May 31, 2013.

Table 4- 2: The Categories and Features of the Observed Sites

	Observed sites	Features
BBS	<i>BBS. Youth.cn (BYC)</i> < http://bbs.youth.cn/forum.php >	A top-down forum: built, sponsored, and operated by the Communist Youth League Centre, to attract and serve young people.
	<i>ChickenRun</i> (a university student forum)	A bottom-up forum: built, sponsored, and operated by university students.
SNS	<i>Renren</i> (Chinese Facebook) < www.renren.com >	A Chinese social networking service based on widespread social relationships such as friendship, school friends, work colleagues and partnerships.
	<i>Sina Weibo</i> (Chinese Twitter) < http://weibo.com >	A Chinese micro-blogging social media site launched by SINA Corporation where users disseminate and read short messages of up to 140 Chinese characters to/from the public or among a particular circle of contacts.

I logged into these four fields every day during the observation period, recording the civic topics that concerned young people and the strategies of participation used by young people. Popular and topical civic posts could be found in the “Top-10 Hot Topic Rankings” on BBSs and on the “New Feeds Page” of SNSs. Observed topics covered not only daily life issues, but also specific political, social and cultural issues. Responses to those posts usually imply participants’ attitudes to the civic topics and strategies of engaging or withdrawing. Thus, the main tasks of observation included:

- collecting the multimodal texts from students cybercivic activities, including text, images, photographs, audios and videos posted on the forums and social networks media;
- counting the topics and contents which students viewed and replied to most frequently;

- observing how they gathered information, expressed their opinions, started discussions and debates, and connected online topics with offline activities;
- observing how they expressed agreements and disagreements, making negotiations and decisions;
- recording and storing observation data as raw data (e.g. texts, images, audio, screen shots using N-Capture for computer software NVivo 10.0) and preliminary processed data (e.g. field diaries).

4.3.2.2. Offline in-depth interviews

In-depth interviews also played an important role in the ethnographical research because they not only helped me collect descriptive first-hand data from interviewees, but also helped supplement and test the data collected through the OPO (Hine, 2000). I employed both un-structured and semi-structured interviews in the research process. At the pilot stage, I used snowball sampling to select 20 participants, including university students, university tutors and websites producers, as interviewees. Un-structured interviews were carried out via instant message systems (MSN, QQ), in order to collect general impressions, problems and ideas of young people's daily internet use, general online participation and civic participation. However, the un-structured interviews were only used as an informal approach in support of the data collection.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face in order to further explore the reasons, impacts, problems, difficulties and possibilities of youth cybercivic participation (See Appendix 5 & 6). They also aimed to collect suggestions and recommendations from students and educators for

promoting future citizenship education in China. 55 opportunity-sampled participants from six universities were interviewed, including 47 student interviewees (male: female = 18:29) and 8 tutor interviewees (male: female = 5:3) (See Appendix 7). Most of the participants were interviewed individually, with a few interviewed in pairs or threes. Each interview lasted 40 minutes to 1 hour. Principal interview questions referred to:

- students' internet use habits (favourite websites, topics, activities);
- students' interests, topics and activities in political and social fields;
- forms of participation and strategies that students used for cypercivic participation;
- real experiences and stories of students' cypercivic participation;
- reasons why students did or did not join in civic activities;
- results and influences of students' civic participation and their own reflections;
- problem-solving suggestions or educational recommendations from students and tutors.

All interview data was stored on a digital audio recorder, transcribed into text form, imported and analysed by the computer software NVivo 10.0.

4.3.3. Data analysis

4.3.3.1. Qualitative content analysis

In terms of data analysis, I mainly applied the approaches of qualitative content analysis, which is a method specifically good at describing and interpreting meanings in a systematic way (Schreier, 2012). Qualitative content analysis was originally used to analyse artefacts and documents. Nowadays, it is used to deal with a wide range of materials, such as

interviews, focus groups, textbooks, company brochures, portal sites, SNSs, television programmes and newspapers. It is therefore widely applied in media-based studies.

Qualitative content analysis suits my research because of its aims and the forms of my research data. As I have discussed in the previous sections in this chapter, I expected to investigate youth cybercivic participation through a constructive and interpretive way. Since “meaning is not given, but we construct meaning” (Schreier, 2012, p. 2), the meaning I would like to decipher from the study is individualised and from diverse perspectives. Both my participants and I have taken an active part in constructing meanings. Different meanings are also based on different forms of research data. Qualitative content analysis is suitable for multi-sources of data, involving less obvious meaning and requiring some degree of interpretation. It can deal with not only verbal data, but also visual data; not only data sampled from text resources (e.g. document, internet, etc.), but also data collected by researchers themselves (e.g. interview, focus group, etc.) (p.3). Thus, it enables me to integrate multiple categories of data and present my arguments from multiple perspectives.

4.3.3.2. The construction of a coding frame

My research includes the integration of both the first-hand empirical investigation and the theoretically comparative interpretations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This approach leads to a coding frame for analysis which combines with data-driven and theory-driven codes. There were four main steps in constructing my coding frame:

Step 1: systematically classifying data according to research questions

The raw data were initially categorised as observation data and interview data. The former were saved in the NVivo 10.0 database as digital verbal texts and multi-media visual materials such as images and videos. The latter were recorded by a digital audio recorder, transcribed into text form, and imported by Nvivo 10.0. The first coding step is to systematically set up coding categories according to my five sub-questions about students' cybercivic participation, including: *civic participation issues*, *reasons for civic participation*, *strategies of civic participation*, *impacts of civic participation*, and *educational supports for civic participation*. The sets of coding labels are directly from participant's own words or my summary glosses of what a participant "seems to be referring to or describing at a particular point" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 37)

Step 2: developing codes of different degrees according to a conceptual framework

In order to reduce the data and further summarise the coding labels, I employed a set of notions in support of my conceptual framework. I also built another set of coding categories to describe what cybercivic participation means from different theoretical perspectives. This lists ideas from different disciplines, classified into three dimensions: *civic participation rights*, *civic participation responsibilities* and *civic participation capabilities*. This set of codes was mainly used for summarising and explaining some empirical data in a more abstract and theoretical way.

Step 3: integrating and interpreting codes for further discussion

In the third stage, I integrated the first and second types of coding labels together to do a second round of coding. This step aimed to build another

set of codes focusing more on educational discipline, which contains three dimensions: *knowledge, values and skills of civic participation*. The categories, along with their specific codes, not only reflect the ideas from my observation and interviews, but also respond to my conceptual framework (see Chapter 2). This part of the codes and materials provides a basis for further discussing how young people learn citizenship through cybercivic participation (see Chapter 8).

Step 4: reflecting and writing findings from analysis to interpretation

Following Schreier (2012)'s suggestion about combining the data-driven and concept-driven strategies together, I created a coding frame consisting of three sets of coding labels:

- Set 1: Coding based on Current Research Question;
- Set 2: Coding based on theoretical framework: multi-discipline;
- Set 3: Coding based on Empirical and Theoretical Investigation: educational perspective)

The details of the coding frame are shown in the Appendix 8.

To further test my coding frame and results analysis, I repeatedly reflected between the data and the theories. I paid particular attention to those nested, overlapped and intersected sub-categories and labels, which are regarded as the most important parts of the code maps of qualitative data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). At the same time, I continued my literature analysis to clarify and conceptualise theoretical assumptions, because foreshadowed problems are closely related and revealed to the researcher through theoretical studies (Hine 2000, p.9). Following these procedures, I started organising my writing and reporting my findings in the order of the sub-questions. These strategies have helped me write my thesis from

analysis to interpretation (Robson, 2011, p. 412). Then I decided to present and discuss my research findings in two main aspects: the current situation of youth cybercivic participation (Chapters 6 and 7) and the potential of civic learning from their participation (Chapter 8).

Summary

This chapter has clarified the ontological and epistemological assumptions about my research project, which is based on ideas of social constructionism and symbolic interactionism. Since the main purpose of my research was to provide an understanding about youth online interaction in civic activities, I selected virtual ethnography as the methodology to explore a kind of cybercivic culture constructed by young people. I have reported in this chapter how I conducted this qualitative research approach and reflected on some key elements about using online observation and offline interviews. Research ethics is also an important aspect to consider alongside reporting methodology and research methods. In this research, the ethical consideration refers not only to educational research ethics but also to internet research ethics. Essential ethical issues have to be addressed on the basis of institutional ethical guidelines and engaged with to find relevant solutions. It is therefore necessary to further explore this through the practice of research. The next chapter will explore how my research could be conducted ethically and morally, which means respecting and protecting participants, respecting knowledge and academic freedom, and conforming to the rules of ethics and the culture of the research context.

CHAPTER 5: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is not unusual for a doctoral thesis to briefly deal with ethical issues. However, the questions raised in the field of internet-based educational study are so complicated that a more extensive treatment is merited. It will become apparent through the following pages why I propose an entire chapter to discuss the crucially important area of ethical considerations in relation to my study. Ethical considerations have become a concern capable of igniting fierce controversy, as ethical issues in relation to cyber-information hit the headlines of news media all over the world, such as the case about Wikileaks. Ethics are normally understood as codes of conduct and moral compasses. Taking my virtual ethnographic research on youth online civic participation as a case study, this chapter specifically discusses internet and educational research ethics from three dimensions: ethical expectations, decision-making in practice and ethical dilemmas which need to be solved. Ethical issues reflected in the research include responsibilities to 'normal' and vulnerable participants, sensitive information and data protection, potential benefits and harms, access to the observation fields, voluntary informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, online quotation and copyrights, data storage and protection, and feedback to participants and organisations. I argue that ethical issues are not isolated from, but intertwined with, research questions, methodology and concrete research contexts. Therefore, researchers should not only respect existing ethical guidelines but also consider "situated ethics" and cultural diversity.

In the Internet age, the field of social, educational and youth studies, in relation to children, young people and other vulnerable groups, has been expanded to include research about the digital and internet generation, as

many virtual communities are being built by and for young people. This expansion has raised many new challenges to research ethics in respect to persons, privacy, data and research quality (A. N. Markham et al., 2012). Investigations of human subjects with online identities involve more complicated processes and potential risks than those of people only holding offline identities. Although general ethical principles about both youth and internet study have been addressed in different versions of ethical guidelines²⁰, ethical dilemmas are constantly emerging in practice. These include conflicts between guidelines and local ethics, contradictions between confidentiality and authenticity, difficulties of obtaining online informed consent, ambiguity of public/private spaces, and the limitations of both data storage and copyright protection. Furthermore, cases within different national and cultural contexts involve local ethical considerations that may conflict with normative guidelines. The use of British or American ethical guidelines may not fit the context in China, for example. In this context, personal oral agreements are sometimes more accessible, more reliable even, than written contracts; online authorship can be difficult to confirm, making copyrights difficult to obtain. These contradictions challenge both the theory and practice of research ethics.

By drawing on concrete examples from a virtual ethnographic study exploring Chinese youth online civic participation, ethical issues from the following three perspectives are highlighted:

- how relevant ethical guidelines are taken into account in the design of empirical research;

²⁰ The following British Educational Research Association (UK) documents are often used to guide educational researchers and youth workers: *Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (BERA, 2004) and *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (BERA, 2011).

The following Association of Internet Researchers (US) documents are often used to guide internet researchers: *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research* (Ess & AoIR, 2002) and *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research* (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

- how specific ethical decisions are made in the process of data collection and research presentation; and
- how ethical dilemmas are dealt with or put aside for later discussion.

My research is shaped by the three types of dual roles that I occupy: internet user and internet researcher; online observer and offline communicator; UK-based researcher and Chinese citizen. Positioning this chapter as a case study on Internet and educational research ethics, online and offline ethics, and research ethics in different countries, I advocate that researchers who undertake research across different contexts not only respect existing ethical guidelines as operational in certain locations, but also take a “situated approach” when dealing with the relationship and conflict between “general principles” and “localised ethics” (Whiteman, 2010, p. 7).

Situated ethics signify dynamic, diverse, localised and constructive rules in the sense of being immune to universalisation, while they do not exclude the relevance of general principles (Simons & Usher, 2000; Whiteman, 2012). Yet, researchers may have little choice but to accept the procedures laid down by bodies administering research programmes in certain locations. McKee and Porter (2009) argue that, in order to better comply with “general principles when making ethical decisions, the researcher should “attend to the complexities of context, of place, of situation, of technologies, of methodologies, and of authors/persons/players/residents” (p. 147). This also implies that the researcher should play an active role in constructing ethics by reflecting upon guidelines and negotiating with the ethics committees and research participants. In some circumstances it may be possible to test the boundaries that exist.

5.1. Ethical Expectations for the Research Design

Ethics are normally understood as codes of conduct and moral compasses. Ethical concerns take priority over the implementation of a study because the respect and protection of persons has become a supreme principle in social research. When a study focuses on human actions and activities, involving people as participants, it must ensure that research questions are framed in a meaningful and relevant way. This helps to make the data valid, reliable and representative, while avoiding or minimising predictable or potential harm to human subjects, which is addressed by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, n.d.). In this way, ethical issues are closely related to research questions and methodology, influencing the quality and legitimacy of the study (A. N. Markham, 2006). This is also one of the reasons researchers in many circumstances are required to obtain approval for research involving human participants from appropriate ethics committees set up by universities or other academic organisations before their project starts (ESRC, 2010). Taking my own experience as an example, I had to submit an ethics approval form to a university ethics committee before I started collecting data, which listed all the ethical concerns that would be involved in my research. I clarified a set of important questions and preliminary responses to help frame the ethical considerations of my research (see Table 5-1). Ethical expectations at the stage of research design focus on three aspects: responsibilities to participants, sensitive information, and potential benefits and harms of the research.

Table 5-1: Initial Ethical Considerations for the Research Design

Questions Supporting Research Design	Short Responses	Relevant Ethical Issues
Who are the participants involved in the study?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • young adults: Chinese university students aged 18–24 • university tutors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • informed consent • right to withdraw • confidentiality • vulnerability of group
What topics does the study investigate?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cybervic participation • online civic discussion • online civic activities • offline civic activities via the Internet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • potential benefits • sensitive information • potential harm or risk
What are aims of the study?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to understand the current cybervic participation of Chinese youth • to explore participation-based approaches to cybervic learning • to provide recommendations for the improvement of citizenship education at the university level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • potential benefits • publishing findings
Where does the action under study take place?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BBSs • SNSs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • access to the field • public or private domain
How is the study carried out?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • virtual ethnography: • online participant observation • offline face-to-face interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • informed consent • confidentiality • privacy protection • data storage and protection • copyright
How are findings published?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publications, e.g. conference papers, journal articles, and doctoral thesis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • privacy protection • quotation and copyright
Which systems of ethics does the study follow?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • internet research ethics • educational research ethics • British and American guidelines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • online or offline ethics • cultural and ethical traditions in different countries

5.1.1. Responsibilities toward participants

The participants involved in my study were all adults over 18 years old, including university students and tutors. To respect and protect participants, I followed the ethical principles suggested by The British Educational Research Association (BERA) and The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) Ethics Working Committee summarised below:

- Researchers must treat all participants fairly, sensitively, with dignity, within an ethic of respect and without prejudice.
- Researchers must ensure that all participants who are involved in the research understand the process in which they are to be engaged, including why their participation is necessary, how their data will be used, how and to what extent their online interactions will be monitored and analysed, and to whom the research will be reported.
- Researchers must secure participants' voluntary informed consent before the research, avoiding deception or subterfuge. Consent may be obtained electronically if subjects are 18-years-of age or older.
- Researchers must recognise that all participants have the right to withdraw from the research for any or no reason, at any time, and that they must be informed of this right.
- Researchers must recognise the participants' entitlement to privacy and accord them their rights to confidentiality and anonymity, unless they, their guardians (e.g., parents) or others who have responsibility for the welfare and well-being of the participants (e.g., social workers), specifically and willingly waive that right.
- Researchers must take care to acknowledge the vulnerability of the participants whose age, intellectual capability or other disadvantaged circumstance may limit their understandings of the research or their agreements to take part in the research. In such circumstances,

researchers must fully explore alternative ways in which participants can be enabled to contribute authentic responses, or researchers must also seek the collaboration and approval of guardians or responsible others (*Ess & AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2002; BERA, 2004, 2011; A. N. Markham et al., 2012*).

5.1.2. Sensitive information and data protection

The research clearly examines civic affairs which are linked to diverse aspects of political and social life, so it is not surprising that there are a few sensitive ethical issues. The BERA (2011) guidelines define sensitive information as arising “when researching particular communities which are marginalised because of their age, culture, race, gender, sexuality, socio-economic standing or religion” (p.6). Ethical issues contain this kind of information, including controversial insights into different groups of people and events which may produce unpredictable risks. An example of this would be making participants talk about something they feel uncomfortable with, or revealing participants’ private information (e.g., income levels, religious beliefs, or sexual preferences).

To avoid these problems, I placed emphasis on participants’ rights to withdraw from the research and their rights to confidentiality and anonymity. Complying with “the legal requirements in relation to the storage and use of personal data as set down by *The Data Protection Act* (GOV.UK, 1998) and any subsequent similar acts” (BERA, 2011, p. 8), I did not share personal information with third parties without the permission of participants. This highlights the fact that academic bodies do not necessarily determine the clauses in their policies as some are actually requirements of the law.

5.1.3. Potential benefits and harms

This research aims to benefit Chinese university students through an interactive and educational approach. Firstly, it is expected to stimulate students who took part in the study to reflect their online experience, spontaneously improving their knowledge, skills and values of civic participation. For example, they may be able to expand their understandings about democracy and the relationship between technology and civic participation, and they may be able to strengthen their critical thinking, discussing, negotiating and decision-making skills. Secondly, the research could help tutors and universities review and reflect on citizenship and the political education system so that they find a direction to innovate curriculum or activities. Finally, it will hopefully provide appropriate recommendations to government agencies for making educational policy that could nurture active citizens.

The potential harm of this research primarily relates to the disclosure of the participants' and the researchers' identities and privacy. One of the preconditions for online observation is that both the researcher and the participants grant permission to access each other's social media spaces, such as personal SNS profiles or some BBS sections only open to group members. These virtual spaces present newsfeeds which may contain personal information (e.g. age, address, contact details). When I enter the virtual spaces to collect data, the non-civic interactions and participants' privacy may be exposed to me, and mine may also be exposed to them. To prevent participants from harm, I, as the researcher, must protect participants' data. However, there is a risk of revealing my personal information because I have to use real identity for communication and data collection, but participants are not required to protect researcher's data.

5.2. Ethical Decision-Making in Conducting my Study

The questions listed in Table 5-1 also refer to ethical issues considered and encountered in the process of conducting my research. Although some of them were considered in the research design stage, there are more methodological and ethical challenges in practice. This section reviews the ethical decisions that I made in relation to collecting and presenting data. The ethical issues that emerged while conducting my research are very diverse and complex. I followed the superior principle to respect and protect participants and made my ethical decisions accordingly (BERA, 2011). Six main aspects were reviewed as follows: access to the observation fields, voluntary informed consent, confidentiality and privacy, online citation and copyrights, data storage and protection, and consequent feedback to participants and universities.

5.2.1. Access to the observation fields


Accessing the ethnographic fields needs both methodological and ethical solutions. Firstly, I dropped in on four social media venues. At the beginning, I visited two BBSs as a guest, looking through forum posts presumably without any limitation. I then noticed, however, that I was not allowed to view some sub-forums that were only open to registered users. As a guest I was not able to publish a post, contact other users, or join in the forum discussion. To step further into the fields and observe everyday forum dialogues I had to sign up for and log into the two BBSs

For the two SNSs, *Renren* and *Sina Weibo*, there were more restrictions to entry than in the case of the BBSs. Firstly, as a guest I could only see the

homepages of these two SNSs: like seeing the cover of a book or the gate of a house. Without registration I was not allowed to approach users, change settings, or observe activities. After I signed up for accounts I could “surf” and view some public or personal profiles where the profile holder had not set up any access restrictions (e.g. no password was needed for visiting). Yet I was still not allowed to be involved in typical SNS interactions, namely, building my online networks and communicating with friends. When I wanted to visit someone’s individual profile, I had to send a friend request to him or her for permission. Unless my request was accepted, I could not interact with and observe the user, even though he or she existed in the field.

My experience demonstrates different levels of field access for a researcher using different types of identities (see Table 5-2). The strategy of partial access is insufficient for drawing images of the fields in detail. I hence tried to get full access, like that of ordinary users who have their own networks to communicate with, by registering with the four sites. However, even with full access to the fields, like an ethnographer who cannot walk through every corner and talk with every person in a geographic field, I could never observe everyone and everything due to the complexity of the virtual world.

Table 5-2: The Extent of Field Access with Different Types of Identities



Networked user	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Full access to a BBS •Full access to a SNS
Registered user	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Full access to a BBS •Partial access a SNS
Guest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Partial access to a BBS •No access to a SNS

5.2.2. Voluntary informed consent

The participants engaged in my research were divided into two types: the first included those who were invited to join my research activities, namely interviewees; the second included those who were observed online. Thus, I obtained voluntary informed consent in two ways: face-to-face and online. To make sure that participants understood the whole process of my research, I prepared a letter along with a consent form and provided both paper and electronic versions. The letter explained who I was, what I was going to study, in what ways the participants would be interviewed or observed, my commitment to keep participants' information and privacy confidential and anonymous, the participants' rights to withdraw from the research at any time, and in what ways I would publish research findings. Every interviewee was asked to sign a printed consent form in person before the interview started (see Appendix 4). The form sought every interviewee's agreement not only for the interview but also for further observation on SNSs. I intended to invite the interviewees to also become participants in my online observational studies because the SNSs relied more on personal relationships and friend networks.

The second type of participants contains two groups: BBS users and SNS users. I planned to ask BBS users to sign the informed consent forms but did not put this plan into practice for three reasons. First, to a large extent BBSs can be characterised by public domains where any registered user can observe speeches and actions. Many forum posts are even visible to guests. The greater the acknowledged publicity of the websites, the fewer obligations there may be to protect rights to informed consent (Ess & AoIR, 2002). Secondly, there are a huge number of observed users, so it would have been impossible for me as a lone researcher to send letters and

consent forms to every user. Thirdly, it is difficult to identify and track individual forum participants due to the existence of identity players and lurkers (Hine, 2000). The former may use several different online identities or share and manipulate one identity with others. The latter silently views the forum discussions and seldom speaks out (See also Chapter 4 for the discussion about lurkers).

In terms of SNS users that I observed online, they construct a continuously expanding network that contains not only my networked friends, whom I met online or invited from interviews, but also those whom I invited through snowball sampling from my friends' networks, or even from further networks. The majority of them had approved my friend requests and had been involved in my networks, so I sent them electronic letters of informed consent through the SNS instant message system. Since all of them reported themselves as over 18 years old, I asked them to sign the consent forms via SNS messages or through emails. There were various unexpected situations obstructing the reception of electronic informed consent. I address these difficulties and possible solutions in the discussion section.

5.2.3. Confidentiality and privacy

The ethical principles of confidentiality, anonymity and the protection of privacy are concerns not only in traditional social and educational research, but also in internet research. In this section I describe the measures I took to avoid the risks caused by disclosing confidential information.

First of all, confidentiality was kept by using the strategy of *complete disguise*, as Bruckman (2002) suggests. Irrespective of whether data was collected online or offline, all participants' names were absolutely

anonymised unless they specifically and willingly required their personal information to be presented. When analysing and publishing data, I used participants' statuses plus numbers to replace their real names, such as "Student Interviewee 1", "Tutor Interviewee 2", "BYC User 1" and "Weibo User 2". For online participants, I treated their pseudonyms as real names. This is because pseudonyms function similarly to real names since they are often searchable and traceable to real identities. Also, people care about the reputation of their pseudonyms (Bruckman, 2002).

As well as hiding individual names and pseudonyms, I insisted that group names not be revealed. Since many participants belong to a university or a university's online community, revealing the name of a group could also expose community members or bring unpredictable harm to the community (A. N. Markham et al., 2012). For this reason, I disguised six universities' names and used the pseudonym *ChickenRun* for one university forum instead of its real name.

The use of anonymity can greatly help protect privacy. In addition, I respected participants' privacy by not sharing their online identifiable information (e.g., personal profiles, blog links, personal photos, and educational backgrounds). I did not publish any personal stories or narratives, without agreements, that could help identify participants.

5.2.4. Online citation and copyrights

To cite from online material may infringe not only on participants' privacy but also on their copyrights. For privacy protection, "verbatim quotes are not used if a search mechanism could link those quotes to the person in question" (Bruckman, 2002, par. 6.2). It was easier for my research to

ensure that there was no verbatim quotation because the original language of all quotations was Chinese. After translating participants' expressions into English their original texts become much less searchable. I would argue that transferring the language or the format of the quotation is an alternative solution to preventing privacy infringement.

It is also necessary to address the fact that all texts quoted in my research findings maintained participants' original ideas. As a participant observer I only participated in general online interaction and seldom spoke out: I by no means played the role of agent provocateur by deliberately initiating politically sensitive discussions or activities online.

I also paid attention to participants' copyrights when quoting from them. Relevant guidelines suggest that researchers can freely quote and analyse online information without consent if it is published or archived for public use; no password is required for archive access; no site policy prohibits it; and the topic is not highly sensitive (Bruckman, 2002; Markham et al., 2012). These principles helped me realise that quotes from BBS users would be much more accessible than those from SNS users. It was not necessary for me to consider the copyrights of online materials that are labelled as visible to all on BBS and SNS. Nevertheless, I needed to quote from some participants' online publications, network conversations, and private profiles (e.g., diaries, instant messages, friend-visible articles and comments, etc.). In this case, I wrote to participants using instant messages to negotiate agreements with them about how copyright issues would be addressed in my research. Sometimes it is not easy to strive for a balance between protecting privacy and addressing copyright.

5.2.5. Data storage and protection

In terms of the storage and use of personal data, I promised participants that all data would be used only for my research and in an appropriate and ethical way. The data contained *sensitive information* as defined in the ethical guidelines, such as information regarding age, race, gender, sexuality, socio-economic status, religious and political orientation, personal health and so forth (BERA, 2011; ESRC, 2010). I therefore processed and protected this part of the data as completely anonymised. Unless I secured specific consent from the participant, I did not disclose or match this kind of information with its producer. Furthermore, I made sure that all data was safeguarded in my private storage device, instead of sharing it with any third party or uploading it online.

5.2.6. Consequent feedback to participants and universities

Some of the participants asked if they would be provided with the results of this study. Providing copies of any reports or other publications that arise from the research to participants upon request is a good research practice (BERA, 2011). I therefore promised to give consequent feedback to those contributors interested in the main research findings. I also promised to send copies of my doctoral thesis to the universities that supported me in inviting and recruiting participants. All participants who I met, online or offline, were encouraged to contact me by e-mail or instant message for feedback.

5.3. Ethical Dilemmas and Situated Ethics in the Practice

There are many ethical dilemmas not only for those undertaking research in English-speaking countries but also for those who study in this context but need to collect data elsewhere. These concern both social media

participants and internet researchers. Complying with the system of Internet and educational research ethics, which has mainly emerged from the powerful USA and UK university centres, I have resolved some of the research dilemmas I was faced with, but further discussion about the improvement of research methods or ethical guidelines is needed.

5.3.1. Conflicts between General Principles and Local Ethics

An initial challenge in my research was the conflict between following general ethical guidelines and respecting local ethics and customs. My dual role as UK-based researcher and Chinese citizen presented me with some difficulties when complying with the principle that “Educational research undertaken by UK researchers outside of the UK must adhere to the same ethical standards as research in the UK” (BERA, 2011, p. 5). In addition to obtaining consent from individual participants, it is necessary for researchers undertaking study overseas to also seek consent from local authorities (e.g., community leaders or local government officials) that adopt a collective approach to consent.

I prepared letters of informed consent for leaders and officials in universities and explained my research to them. However, I was not allowed to conduct the research by one university and was questioned by another, because the persons who represented the university authority seemed concerned about my research affiliation in the UK. The former did not want me to publish any research findings about the university in English and outside China, while the latter did not want me to report anything negative about the university, in English, that might influence its reputation. Although the latter university administrator finally provided his verbal consent in support of my research and helped me invite student participants, he still refused to sign the consent

form. In his words, “signing a form will make me feel uncomfortable and worried” (Administrator 2, April 12, 2012). Although I had not been directly told why he might feel uncomfortable and what he was worried about, I gradually came to understand the reason, which he implied during an informal conversation (personal conversation with the Administrator, April 12, 2012): If there is any unpredictable trouble due to joining the overseas-linked research project, then the bearer of the signature could be blamed. Some people, like these two officials, seem to be cautious about following rules of research ethics which they are not familiar with.

Similar situations happened when I interviewed tutors. Two tutor interviewees agreed to be interviewed after I let them know about my research, but did not sign the consent form. From their perspectives, signing consent forms seemed like signing a kind of contract. As one tutor said,

I'm very happy to be interviewed and answer your questions. But I prefer to chat in a relaxing manner. I feel nervous when you put some paperwork in front of me ... asking me to read and sign for it. (Tutor interviewee 2).

The other tutor, from University N, was surprised by all the documents I prepared. Although she commended me as “a well-prepared researcher”, she was still not accustomed to this “too official and formal process” and asked to join my research “without ticking this research contract” (Tutor interviewee 8). I hence respected the preferences of these two tutors. I interpret in these cases, from a cultural perspective, that Chinese people in many circumstances tend to trust personal relationships rather than signed contracts. In other words, Chinese people prefer doing formal things informally, like talking business at the dinner table.

The conflict between general and local ethics can also be caused by different interpretations of what constitutes *sensitive information*. In the Chinese internet context, it refers to a wide range of contents about citizens' identities, privacy as well as those which are deemed violent, pornographic or jeopardising national security (Zhou & Mao, 2012). The definitions of sensitive information is different from that are circulating in liberal democratic countries. In order to further protect my participants, I decided to avoid sensitive information defined in both contexts.

5.3.2. Contradictions between confidentiality and authenticity

The second challenge of my research was the difficulty of determining the authenticity of identities and information due to confidentiality. Most social media users communicate anonymously or by using pseudonyms to establish virtual selves. This obstructs internet researchers from knowing the actual identities of participants and tracking their interactions. Since the specific population can be estimated by their preference of venues, subjects, topical discussions and so forth, I selected and observed social media established by university students, or which specifically serve them (Walther, 2002). Since the early 2000s, social media has encouraged friendship-based communications (boyd & Ellison, 2007). This is a special feature of social media in China which advocates real-identity-based interactions by providing updated and complete services to users who register with their real names and authentic personal information, such as age, profession, university affiliation and place of work. This real-identity-promoted social media maximises the opportunity to meet and observe a broader sample of Chinese students aged 18 to 24. I also built real relationships with participants so that I could, to a larger extent, confirm their identities and reduce the sample bias due to identity anonymity (Leander & McKim, 2003).

Encountering identity play and false information online, however, remained inevitable (Jones, 1999). This tendency needs to be critically examined by researchers. One of the possible ways to deal with the difficulty of determining authenticity is to expand and vary meanings of identity by regarding identity as “the possibility of projecting or casting one’s life within different existential possibilities”, instead of sticking to “body” or “substance” (Capurro & Pingel, 2002, p. 191). In this way, I shifted my focus toward what participants online have said and done, namely their virtual identities, instead of who they might be, namely their physical identities.

5.3.3. The difficulties of obtaining online informed consent

The third dilemma in my research was the difficulty of securing voluntary informed consent in social media venues. As mentioned before, I did not apply the informed consent principle to BBSs where countless users are free to come and go and difficult to “catch”. I did send letters of informed consent to SNS users, because SNS profiles that have visiting restrictions are not accessible as BBS posts. However, I failed to get electronic consent forms back from participants through SNSs for different reasons. For instance, some participants accepted my friend requests but did not reply to my research invitation; some friends informally agreed to be observed but did not sign the consent forms; some inactive users did not regularly log in and check their mail box and ignored my messages for reasons unknown to me. In these cases I became confused about whether I should continue the observation or not. Although those participants did not formally sign consent forms, since our friend networks were built their online activities were still observable to me because the daily newsfeed system automatically revealed their dynamic traces, such as what they said, did, and shared on SNSs.

During this study the principle of obtaining informed consent was challenged, as participants knew that they would be observed. Theoretically and ideally, “participants must be clearly informed that their participation and interactions are being monitored and analysed for research” (BERA, 2011, p. 5). When participants get to know that they are being observed, however, the reliability of observation can be influenced. As previously mentioned, I once observed that participants changed their published posts online slightly after knowing that they were being observed. Some *zombie users* who signed the consent form but then never logged in again, might have disappeared for this reason. Since I have not found a perfect method to solve these dilemmas, I applied a combining strategy of observing as a lurker and completely disguising all participants’ personal information (Bruckman, 2002).

5.3.4. Ambiguity of public/private spaces

The fourth challenge was the ambiguous boundary between public and private spaces, which makes several ethical principles even more difficult to comply with, such as the protection of confidentiality, privacy and copyrights (Leander & McKim, 2003; Capurro, 2005, 2008). Researchers should not assume that the Web is a public domain and ‘up for grabs’ before entering into the fields of cyberspace (Milligan, n.d.). This is because people may use a public domain for private conversations, just like the situation when you are seated on a bench in a public park talking with your close friends:

In the course of confiding personal and private issues to your friends, you turn your head to discover someone tape recording the discussion,....who proceeds to explain some ambiguous research project, and attempts to justify the act by citing the public context of your discussion (Waskul & Douglass, 1996, p. 132).

Some private conversations online, like in the park, are indeed visible and audible, yet should not be assumed as public and free to cite. However, there is a counterargument: the use of the terms *private* and *public* refer to the accessibility of information, not the individual's own perception of the privacy of their actions (Milligan, n.d.). In this research, I valued both criteria and focused more on protecting the participants' privacy.

The ambiguity of the public and the private is typically shown by SNSs, which I regarded as semi-public spaces, where anyone with an account can technically get free access, but information is perceived to only be shared within networks or a few membership groups (Whiteman, 2012). Yet here more questions rise up from the earth: are the networks and membership groups seen as the public as well? Does someone publish a public-visible post about private issues only for himself or herself? How big should a public sphere be? None of these questions is easily answered. Thus, I changed my strategy and tried not to distinguish public or private characteristics, but only focused on protecting individuals (live users, not zombies).

5.3.5. Limitations of data storage and copyright protection

Finally, my research also presented challenges about data storage and copyright protection. Information published and shared by users on social media is refreshed and updated all the time, which dramatically challenges the stability of texts and traditional ideas of authorship, and makes it difficult to track, collect and store online texts. Yet it is very easy to search published contents, copy and then recompose them as new materials for wide spread online sharing thus reconfiguring copyrights (Williams & Zenger, 2012). Thus, it seems difficult to define what social media copyrights are and whose they

are. Protecting online data and copyright needs more technical and legal support. Researchers should discuss this issue in the period ahead.

Summary

The dramatic expansion of social media brings changes and challenges to the ethics of the existing research system. Although the basic principles of research ethics may not change, ways to respect and fulfil the principles may need to be adjusted by taking into account varying realities and situations. In this study, each ethical issue emerging from the research was explained with general principles along with concrete examples, adopting a situated ethics approach. Following existing research ethics guidelines, I made an effort to maximise benefits and restrict harms to the research participants. However, some challenges, problems and conflicts along the research journey remained unsolved. When an ethical guideline appears not to be applicable or a contradiction happens between different ethical guidelines or different contexts, the superlative principle in this instance has been to respect, protect and minimise harm to participants. If all institutes considered situated ethics and cultural diversity when examining the ethical issues of a research project, ethical dilemmas might seem less intimidating for some researchers who face contradictions. As our world globalises, researchers and academic colleagues might rethink and reconstruct ethical rules and guidelines according to a more complex set of realities. Such an effort might help Chinese institutions to consider, and possibly in the future embrace, positive change in the development of institutional and situated ethical guidelines.

CHAPTER 6: CYBERCIVIC DISCUSSIONS AND ACTIVITIES IN STUDENTS' ONLINE PUBLIC SPHERE

In the following three chapters I report on key findings from my empirical research drawing portraits for networked Chinese young citizens. The investigation has been developed into the contents, forms, factors, effects and educational significance of cybercivic participation. As there is a variety of forms of data, part of the discussion involves triangulating different sources and connecting observation and interview data in the analysis.

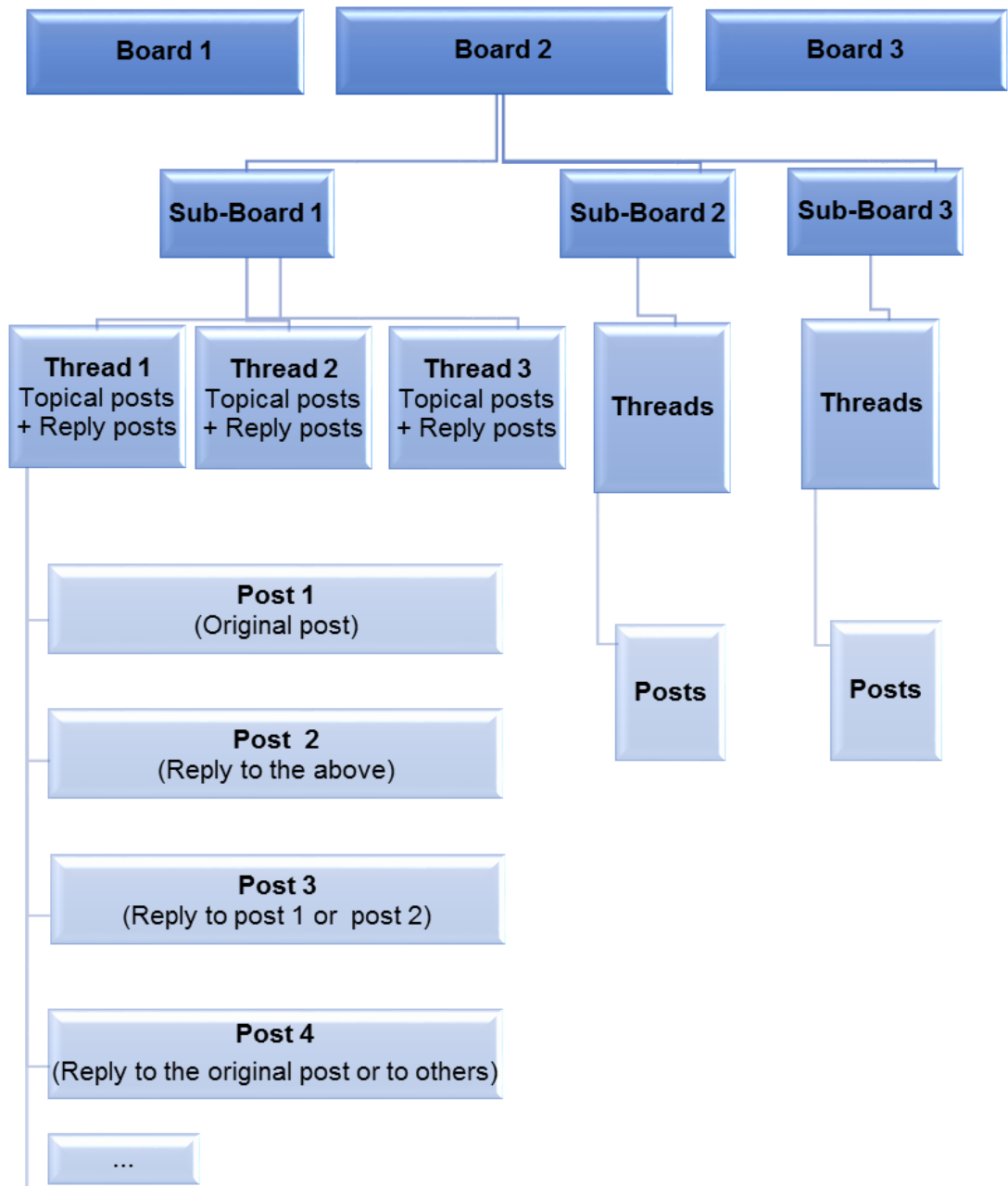
This chapter focuses on depicting the field of Chinese social media and identifying widely exchanged cybercivic topics that students are involved in. I selected and discussed the six most frequently-coded themes: *patriotism*, *public welfare*, *social justice and solidarity*, *lifestyle politics*, *community involvement* and *controversial issues*. One thing to be noted is that these analytic categories containing diverse topics are not fixed but overlapping and intertwining with each other. The actual range of civic issues can be largely expanded and their disciplinary boundary can be broken. In other words, it has become very difficult to simply define or strictly distinguish political, social or cultural issues in a social media age. As examples presented in the chapter, political issues would be discussed under social and leisure contexts, while environmental or entertainment topics could be with political purposes. Such a phenomenon is caused not only by the nature of social media, but also by the ways that young people as social actors raise, understand and deal with civic issues.

6.1. ‘Walking’ in the Sites and ‘Mapping’ the Fields

It is good to start the ethnographic travelogue with a ‘mapping’ of the fields. This would let readers who have never entered into Chinese social media to know what the sites look like, how users inhabit in, and what and how they communicate with others. Additionally, it would present how I, as an author, ethnographer, and traveller, felt while living and working within the fields. A reflection on the fields is a crucial task during the whole journey of the virtual ethnographic study, help the researcher move from *writing-up ethnographic research* to *writing ethnography* (Humphreys & Watson, 2009; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Gatson, 2013). Like every traveller starting the first leg of a journey, I had been ‘walking’ in the sites and ‘surfing’ in each of them until I got familiar with the environment and being able to navigate communication.. My reflections about the fields include the structures, user groups and relationships, functions and distinct features for civic participation.

6.1.1. BBS: a tree-structured and topical-driven public sphere

The two observed BBSs are both designed with a hierarchical tree structure. Each of them consists of a set of boards, sometimes containing multiple levels of sub-boards. Each board contains a great number of threads and each thread starts with a topical post that may be followed by numerous responding posts or, sometimes, no replies. The classification of boards usually depends on grouping similar topics, themes, and interest groups, though some boards collect threads with high click rates or those posted at similar times. I have developed in Figure 6-1 a simplified way of illustrating the BBS structure.



(drawn on 23/2/2012)

Figure 6- 1: A Simple Structure of the Observed BBSs

The users 'hanging out' in the BBS can be divided into three main groups, according to their roles and access permissions in the BBS. The first group is *guests*, who are not needed to register with the sites or to sign in. Some BBSs allow guests to browse publicly-viewable posts and to publish posts on condition of anonymity, but the two BBSs that I observed do not provide guests with full access, allowing them to view posts but not publish them. The second group, *registered users*, have greater access permissions than guests, can publish posts and reply to other users, and are thus able to join in thread discussions. Among this group, there are different levels of access rights depending on users' online activeness and contributions to the BBS. The third group is *administrators*, who play their roles in managing and supervising the BBS. Some administrators technologically run and maintain the sites, and usually staff specialised in computer science or ICT adopt this role. Others are referred to as *moderators*²¹, responsible for managing boards and contents, and sometimes leading or stimulating forum discussions by posting. Administrators can also act as ordinary registered users and guests. However, to become an administrator, one has to be invited by those running the BBSs.

The BBSs have developed into highly multifunctional sites, in support of the distribution of massive information, online topical discussions, and even online commercial markets. They replicate the character of a typical *agora* where some listen, some speak, some argue, some praise and others stand at the side-lines observing from a distance. Thus the use of the Greek term *agora* is entirely appropriate to describe the observed BBSs as it designates a public space where people's assembly and exchanges occur.

²¹ The Chinese name of a moderator is "Banzhu" [版主], which means the leader or manager of the forum board. Sometimes written as its homophonic words [斑竹] or [斑猪] for fun, which originally mean spotty bamboo and spotty pig separately.

Based on Coleman (2008)'s classification of *managed* and *autonomous* sites (See definitions in Chapter 3), I placed my observation on two BBSs as the representatives of two types. The former tends to present a *top-down* flow of communication, while the latter can be regarded as a *bottom-up* flow.

*BBS. Youth .CN (BYC)*²² is built, sponsored, and operated by the Chinese Communist Youth League Centre²³, and can be classified along with top-down or authority-managed sites. It was launched in 1999 and attached to the China Youth Network (中国青年网)²⁴, which is:

...the largest official comprehensive portal web in China...that aims to attract and serve young people (retrieved from the "About Us" page on 08/12/2012).

For its official background, BYC has run for 15 years so far, assembling a vast amount of information and resources. The current design presents diverse boards which enable topical discussions and the publicity of activities at national, local and university levels. Figure 6-2 shows the first four out of sixteen boards, as a sample of BYC layout. The board names and their expected topics are listed as below, which have demonstrated some civic features that aim to connect local and national communities:

- *Youth Forum*: news, national affairs, Chinese traditional culture
- *Campus Life*: school and university life
- *Outside Campus*: employment service and volunteering work
- *Education Forum*: education and exam

²² <<http://bbs.youth.cn/forum.php>>

²³ Communist Youth League (CYL) was first established in May 1922. Its present basic tasks are to adhere to the implementation of the CPC's basic lines and policies of the primary stage of socialism, unite and lead young people to focus on economic construction... and strive to train new blood for the CPC and young talents in the building of the country. (retrieved on 22/04/2013 from:

<http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/state_structure/65010.htm >

²⁴ <<http://www.youth.cn>>

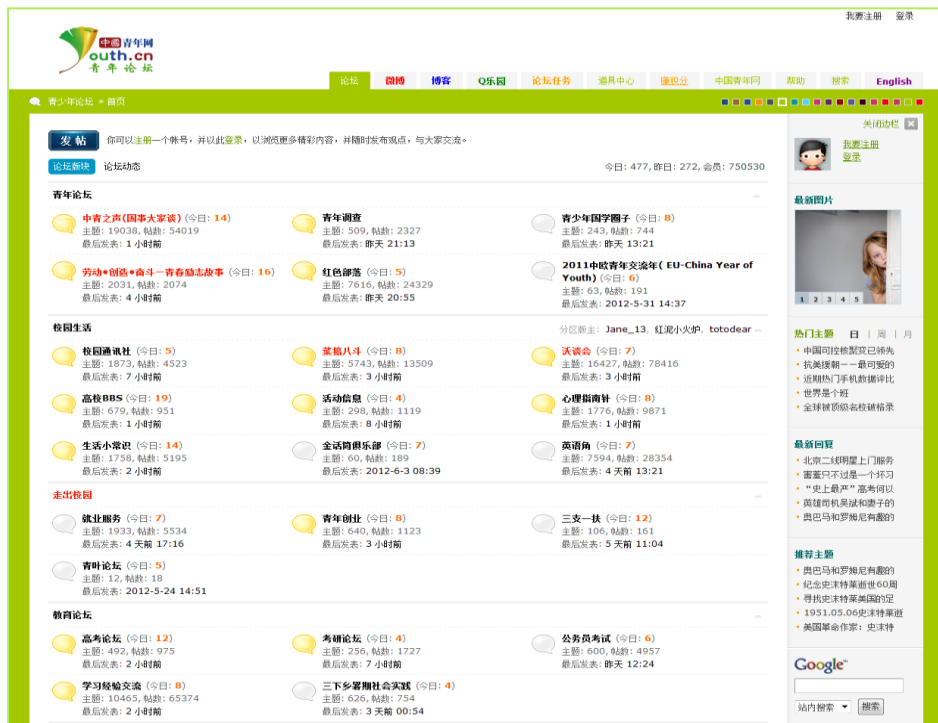


Figure 6- 2: A Screen Shot of Layout of BYC Boards



Figure 6- 3: A Screen Shot of Layout of a BYC Sub-board

Figure 6-3 shows an updated version of BYC and the layout of one of its sub-boards with the list of threads in the central part and the list of other boards on the left sidebar. Thread topics are various and the ways of posting seems interactive, from asking “your opinion about a university professor hold an AK-47 gun to give a lecture” to presenting “photographs on a long queue of student for obtaining seats in classrooms for prepare examinations”, from discussing “university students experience of occupation choice and employment” to recruiting for “student exchanging programme between China and Russia”.

Besides university students, many youth workers from all over the country are also involved in BYC, including staff who work in different levels of Communist Youth League, in education sections of governments, in universities or colleges, or in other youth organisations. Some of them work as moderators to design the site, manage the boards and to lead topical discussions.

Compared with BYC as a managed site, ChickenRun²⁵ has been selected for observation as an autonomous and bottom-up case. This is established, managed and primarily funded by students themselves. Since it was originally established in 2005, ChickenRun has become one of the influential university-based BBSs where the majority of participants are students, alumni and tutors from University B. Students from other universities, and non-student users also come to join in. Ordinary users who frequently visit and post on the site have opportunities to work as forum moderators. This implies the structure, layout and board categories can be designed and arranged by student moderators.

²⁵ The domain name is disguised for privacy protection (see Chapter 5)

Figure 6-4 present the layout of ChickenRun. The left and the central columns present thumbnails of eight boards where the threads are automatically sorted by the time of the latest reply. The right-side column provides quick links to four special boards where contents are sorted and recommended by the moderators. The names of boards in each column, from top to bottom, are listed as below:

- Left column: Daily Top-10 Posts, Academics and Culture, University Life, Leisure and Entertainment;
- Central column: The Newest Posts, Social Information, Life and Emotion, Online Markets;
- Right column: Recommended Threads, Employment Information, Greetings and Wishes, Forthcoming Activities;

Apart from thread discussions, ChickenRun provides users with various services, such as uploading and downloading documents, music and video clips, software; online shopping, online flea markets for product-exchanging; virtual currency circulation; online student radio and personal blogs. One of the most important features is that the BBS enables spontaneous online interaction based on offline university communities, in which students from University B or other universities are able to set up their online interest groups, getting together for discussion and activities both in the virtual and real world. ChickenRun therefore offered a preliminary model for research into autonomous citizenship.

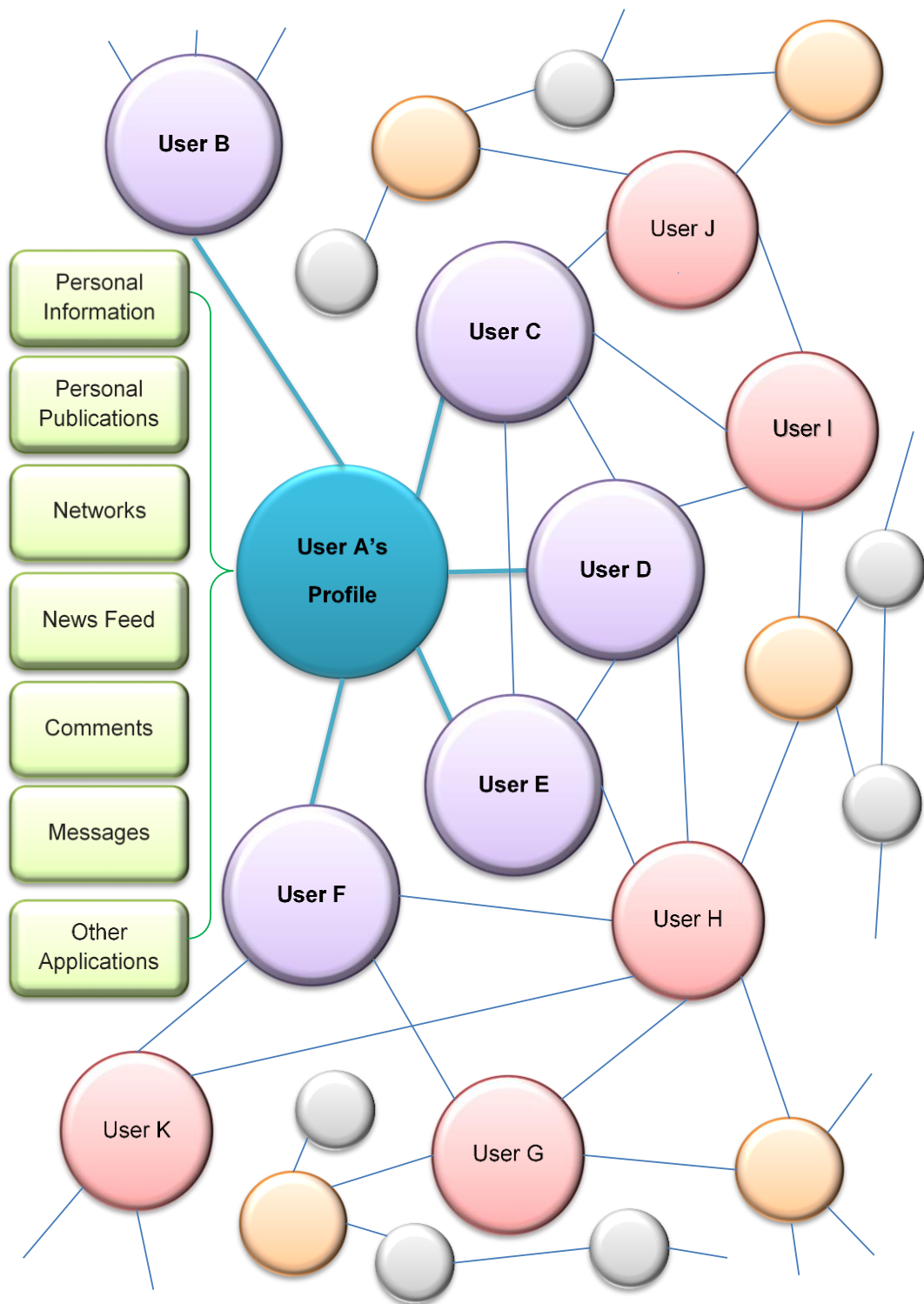


Figure 6- 4: A Screen Shot of Layout of ChickenRun

6.1.2. SNS: a cobweb-structured and relationship-driven public sphere

I have also observed SNSs as virtual fields where students 'live', work, and chat with friends. A typical SNS structure resembles a cobweb, as shown in Figure 6-5. For analytic purposes, I divided a SNS structure into three parts: personal profile, friend networks and additional applications, though they are always integrated in practice. Firstly, every individual user who sets up a profile plays the role of a node of communication. The profile, also called the Personal Page (个人主页) in Chinese, usually presents an avatar's basic information, such as name, portrait or symbolic image, age, gender, working or living area, affiliation, and personalised signature with a self-description. To some extent, the profile looks like a blog which enables the user to publish multimedia contents, categorise and manage contents, and design layouts. However, unlike the blog run as an independent web, SNS profiles are connected to one another, directly or indirectly.

Secondly, the users build up their SNS networks in three ways: searching and making friends, adding friends' friends, or joining an existing network such as a university, company or interest group. As boyd and Ellison (2007) described, people not only develop relationships with those who they already know, but also build new relationships with others who were previously strangers. On each profile, the user has a list of networked friends, so that he or she can manage the list by tagging and sorting friends into different groups. For example, friends tagged as 'classmates', 'close friends' or 'strangers' can be automatically classified into the three groups respectively. The friend list enables the users to easily click on and visit each friend's profile. The profiles also contain a 'News Feed' page, showing all friends' updated statuses and new publications at any moment. Users can make comments on friends' profiles or send messages to each other.



(drawn on 12/3/2013)

Figure 6- 5: A Simple Structure of the Observed SNS

Thirdly, SNSs also provide users with a variety of applications developed by the site or by other third-party sites, such as file-management and sharing software, entertainment plugins, online games, and links with other websites. These applications encourage users to share resources and play together within a wider range of networks, continually expanding the SNS cobweb.

Besides the profile-holders and their networked friends, administrators are another group of participants on SNSs. But SNS administrators interfere in interaction only when it is necessary, for instance if users violate the rules and regulations of SNSs, behave in ways that contravene laws, or publish content that is deemed to compromise national security and risk legal action and sanctions.

In terms of Renren, it was one of the most influential SNSs in China. The company Renren Inc. estimated that its monthly active users had reached 31 million in April, 2011 (Chao, 2011) and increased to 110 million in 2013 (199IT, 2013). It had a strong following among Chinese university students since it initially aimed to build up a virtual community for students. Its original name *Xiaonei* (校内网) meaning “campus networks”, was renamed *Renren* in August, 2009, changing the meaning to people’s networks or everyone’s networks, although university students still accounted for a great proportion of its users.

A sample layout of Renren can be seen in Figure 6-6, including the pages of profile, the list of friends and News Feeds, which are shown asynchronously on Renren but presented here simultaneously for illustration.



Figure 6- 6: Screen Shots of A Renren Profile



Figure 6- 7: Screen Shots of A Weibo Profile

Images shown in the Figure 6-6 have been edited, with users' key information concealed, for the protection of privacy. Renren encourages communication based on users' real identities. Only if users register with their real names and authentic personal information can they be provided with the full services of the sites. This real identity system has enabled me to maximise opportunities of encountering the target research group, university students, and to reduce the research bias. However, it still cannot overcome the challenges of identity play and identity anonymity because of the difficulty verifying the identity and information provided by users (see also Chapter 5).

Another observed site, *Sina Weibo*, has kept its strong influence in China. Up to November 2013, there had been over 600 million registered users and the number has kept growing (Millward, 2013). At the end of 2015, it recorded 236 million monthly active users and 106 million daily active users, who logged on with their unique Weibo IDs and accessed Weibo through websites, mobile websites, desktops or mobile applications (Weibo Corporation, 2016). This clearly shows the sheer scale of the site's presence and the extraordinary rate of growth it has experienced.

Weibo is connected with mobile applications and employs a microblog style, which enables users to quickly publish very short texts. Students reported that they could easily access it and post with their mobile devices (e.g. smartphone, iPad, etc.). In addition, users could make multimedia posts by inserting graphical emoticons and attaching images, music, video, and web links. Sample layout of Weibo are presented in Figure 6-7.

The interaction on Renren and Weibo can be summarised in four general steps:

- Step 1: registered users set up their networks by sending or accepting friend requests on Renren, and by 'following' others or 'being followed' by others on Weibo.
- Step 2: the users invite their networked friends to join in a public conversation by mentioning friend(s)' usernames when they post, applying the format of '@Username'.
- Step 3: the users add a hashtag of a topic when publishing the post, in the format of '#topic#', referring to a topic to enable others to follow.
- Step 4: the users express their different responses to others' posts, by clicking on SNS icons of 'Like', 'reply', 'share' or 'retweet'.

The actions of step 2 to 4 could be taken at the same time or separately. The process of interaction can be constantly repeated.

One common feature between Renren and Weibo to be highlighted is that each profile may have multiple identities, which can be individuals or groups. This means the profile is not necessary a private sphere. In fact, a number of organisations and people have set up their Public Pages (公共主页) on Renren, or updated their personal profiles into public profiles on Weibo and obtained the authorisation of VIP users. The public profiles allow others to visit without any access restrictions. Such profiles are usually held by:

- *organisations* who take SNSs as a channel for publicity, such as companies, NGOs, political organisations, and media agencies;
- *celebrities* who want to enlarge their public influence, such as singers, sports stars, film stars;
- *scholars* who have come to be described as 'public intellectuals';

- ‘ordinary’ people who want to project themselves into a broader environment and communicate with a larger audience

With privacy settings, SNS users can decide to what extent their profiles would be opened to the public. The privacy settings are not only applicable for the whole profile, but almost for every single section of the profile and for published contents. There are four main levels of privacy protections:

- *completely private*: only seen by oneself;
- *partially private*: open to a group of friends;
- *partially public*: open to all friends;
- *completely public*: open to the public

When one encounters such control settings it raises questions about the possibility of establishing a public sphere in SNSs. Here, if one wants to participate in public discussions and actions on SNSs, he or she has to start by meeting people, making friends and joining in the networks. For example, one of my SNS friends posted about military and international politics on his profile every day, but only his SNS friends and group members could see these contents and have conversations. This implies that civic participation normally happens within networks. This is why I regard SNS space as a relationship-driven or network-based public space.

This short report of field mapping presents the first impressions on four sites. It indicates their potential to promote online civic conversations and cooperation between agency in positions of authority and young people, and among the community that consists of networked friends, individually and collectively.

6.2. Themes of Cybervic Participation

Observing and listening to the themes young people care about and which they are usually engaged in is the first step of understanding their cybervic participation. In this thesis, I present ten popular civic-themed topics discussed and acted online amongst young people. The selection of popular themes was based on three criteria:

- topics raised in BBS threads which were determined by the number of views or comments, especially top-ten posts featured on daily, weekly, monthly or yearly thread-rankings provided on the sites;
- topics frequently and widely shared within the observed networks on Renren and Weibo;
- topics reported by interviewees when they reviewed their surfing experience on social media sites.

The civic features of youth online interaction are identified on the basis of the content framework detailed in Chapter 2, referring to the political, social and cultural domains defined in Chapter 3. There are also context-based civic topics found in this research.

6.2.1. Patriotism

The research frequently observed that young people paid much attention to patriotic discussions and activities stimulated or spread through social media. Not only have they published and shared materials online to strengthen Chinese national sentiments and identity through ethnic, cultural and political topics, but they have also critically reflected on the different kinds of patriotism and ways in which 'rational' patriotism can be promoted. The notion of *patriotism* develops alongside the rise of the nation state, and refers to the love of and allegiance to one's country and one's willingness to

defend it (Haynes, 2009). Through Chinese university students' online interaction, the meaning of patriotism has been expanded and reflected. According to the content of online posts, the topical discussions can be classified into two types: *political* and *cultural* patriotism. The former focuses on a citizen's identity with the governance of the PRC, while the latter on the identification with core aspects of Chinese culture and social life. When considering students' attitudes to patriotic activities, a dualism of the categories of *loyal* and *critical* patriotism can be applied, which were identified by Merry (2009). The former was defined as an "uncritical patriotic disposition" which may lead to "a troubling loyalty to current political leadership and its policies" (p.1). The latter focused on citizens' capacity to "think critically", to "express dissent and moral outrage" and to "consider the welfare of those outside of one's borders", which is a rational patriotism beyond national geopolitical borders (p.2). Although Merry's categories were summarised from an American context, similar dispositions of patriotism have been observed in Chinese cyberspace.

6.2.1.1. Political patriotism

Student participants on BYC have greater opportunities for approaching patriotic issues which directly address ideas relating to the love of the country. On the '*About us*' page, BYC described itself as "one of the most important online bases for improving Chinese patriotic education" (14/1/2012). For this purpose, there are two forum boards that particularly stress Chinese national identity issues within political and cultural domains.

One is '*The Red Tribe*'. Red is a lucky colour symbolising good fortune, joy and prosperity in traditional Chinese culture. In modern China, red is also affiliated with and used by the CPC government and often symbolises

national liberation and revival. A slogan description about the board says: “Promote Patriotism, Inspire National Ethos, and Shape the Chinese Soul” (10/12/2011). With these distinct aims, the board contained 7,908 threads and 25,317 replies by the end of May 2013, posted by ordinary users and moderators, with the first thread published in October 2011. The range of topics is wide, but mainly concerned political patriotism, including:

- the history of the CPC
- the socialist revolution and the construction of socialist modernity
- national policy improvement and political system reform
- China’s great achievements (e.g. Olympic Games in Beijing and Chinese aerospace industry)
- Chinese military events (e.g. military exercise with Pakistan, the building of an aircraft carrier, and escorting cooperation in the Aden Gulf, celebrating the 70th anniversary of the ‘victory’ over Japan).

Behind these topics lies a consistent message that China’s history is indelibly linked to the history of CPC, which has led and continues to lead various stages of progress and development. The view is put forward that the CPC is leading self-criticism in order to expand political freedoms and reforms, and the claim is made that this has led to China being recognised as a culturally progressive and peaceful nation around the world. The topics coalesce into connected themes reflecting current Party and government policy objectives. There is a desire to motivate the younger generation into feeling they should love their nation and be willing to contribute towards the next phase of growth and development. Table 6-1 lists the five topical threads on this board that secured the most views and replies during the observation period. At the bottom of the table, there are two post examples extracted from the thread posts.

Table 6- 1: Five Popular BYC Threads of Political Patriotism

Thread Title	Post Format	Publishing Date	Last Reply Date	Replies /Views
The 75th anniversary of Nanjing Massacre by Japanese invaders: Never forget history and mourn the victim compatriots.	text, photographs	13/12/2012	26/12/2012	31/13857
Appreciating historical photographs and paintings and learning the history of CPC	text, photographs, painting images	2012-9-28	2/10/2012	23/6474
The strongest Chinese diplomatic quotations: An inch of the territory is more valuable than life	text, photographs	17/9/2012	7/2/2015	18/15354
Can you recognise them? Photos of world leaders in their young age	text, photographs	2/2/2012	2/2/2012	17/1938
The retired state leaders at the Eighteenth National Congress of CPC	text, photographs	9/11/2012	18/9/2014	15/11465



[Historical paintings of CPC]

This painting "Set Sail" (启航) shows a historical moment in the founding of the CPC. CPC pioneers including the young Mao Zedong are shown boarding the boat to participate in the first Congress.



[Chinese Diplomatic Quotations]:

When British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher met DENG Xiaoping, she argued for Britain to extend its colonial administration in Hong Kong, and threatened to fulfil this using non-peaceful solutions. But Deng insisted that China must resume sovereignty over Hong Kong through a policy of "one country, two systems", and strongly remarked that "Although Chinese people are poor at the moment, we will never be afraid of dying if a war is necessary".

(Observed between: 1/12/2011-31/5/2013)

Political history is clearly a common emphasis in these popular threads. These posts remind users of the history of modern China, including continual wars for anti-feudalism, anti-colonialism, emancipation movements led by CPC and achievements in international affairs. They try to strengthen Chinese national identities in historical and political aspects by narrating and painting significant events. For instance, posts containing painful and enduring Chinese experiences during the Nanjing Massacre aim to let the younger generation know what happened in national history and remind them of the national humiliation. Posts containing the history of the Party stress how difficult the final victory of wars was and how the Party gained the legitimacy to govern China. The painting of 'Set Sail' and photographs of those retired state leaders are encouragements to memorise the pioneers and contributors of CPC. Posts containing the failures and successes of China in diplomatic affairs demonstrate the progress of China's role in international politics, for instance portraying the negotiation with the British government as an overwhelming success leading to the return of Hong Kong to China, which was an important turning point in Chinese diplomatic history. In addition, posts containing the historical and political stories of world leaders show different approaches of nation building and international politics.

6.2.1.2. Cultural patriotism

The other patriotism-driven board on BYC is '*The Youth Network for Traditional Chinese Cultural Study*', aimed at strengthening youth Chinese cultural identity through forum discussion. The board contained 177 topical threads and 473 replies by May, 2013, with the first thread published in July 2004. Although the topics were numerous, most focus on advocating classical and traditional Chinese culture. For instance, they refer to:

- ancient Chinese language;
- classical Chinese literature (e.g. poetry, mythology, novels, proses),
- Chinese historical figures and heroes;
- Chinese traditional arts (e.g. ink and wash painting, calligraphy, paper-cutting, and ethnic costume);
- Chinese festivals and folk-customs.

These symbols and icons of the nation used to be and continue to be taught in schools to strengthen feelings of national identity (Ross, 2008), but now have also been presented and transmitted through BBS threads. Table 6-2 lists five of the most popular topical threads on this board that secured most views and replies during the period of observation.

Table 6- 2: Five Popular BYC Threads for Cultural Patriotism

Thread Title	Post Format	Publishing Date	Last Reply Date	Replies /Views
The forgotten ancient folk customs of the Han peoples in thousands of years	text, images	19/12/2011	20/12/2011	75/5292
Chinese ancient classical architecture	text, images	19/12/2012	09/01/2012	60/5334
The world-wide magnificent architecture	text, images	31/12/2011	31/12/2011	59/363
Famous warriors in Chinese literary Masterpieces	text, images	01/12/2011	14/11/2012	50/190
Beauties in flaming lips in Chinese costume drama	text, photographs	05/01/2012	01/05/2013	27/179

(Observed between: 1/12/2011-31/5/2013)

Table 6- 3: Post Examples Extracted from the Threads

[Chinese Han folk custom]:

Carrying wine for Tomb-sweeping, as a traditional custom, originates from the time of the Song Dynasty (AD 906-1279). The tomb-sweeping of the Han ethnic group had become a family and collective activity, like a party to some extent. People went hiking and climbed hills to reach the graveyard, carrying wine and food with them. They sat around the tomb, worshipped those who had passed away, and then had picnics with families, relatives and friends. On the way to the tomb-sweeping, there were many pedlars selling food and handicrafts, so the highway resembled a flourishing market.

[Chinese ancient architecture]:

Xiantong Temple in Wutai Mountain, Shanxi Province, from the Ming Dynasty (AD 1606)



[Chinese ancient warrior]:

GUAN Yu (? -AD 220) is a famous general who served under a warlord in the Three Kingdoms Dynasty. He is a real historical figure who contributed to building the Kingdom Shu and then was recognised as one of the Five Tiger Generals, the bravest and most reliable of warriors. He is often described as a chivalrous hero or a Mars in Chinese literature and dramas because of his bravery, strength, integrity and loyalty.



[Chinese ancient warrior]:

FAN Lihua is one of four outstanding female generals in ancient China. She is more like a fictional character, appearing in novels and dramas during the Tang Dynasty, than a real figure recorded by official history. She assisted her husband in battle and protecting the country. However, after her husband and most of her family was killed by the tyrannical Tang authority, she led armies against them. Thus, She is presented as being highly military skilled, full of courage and love, and unyieldingly fighting for justice.



(Observed between: 1/12/2011-31/5/2013)

As seen in Table 6-3, popular threads have shown diverse cultural symbols that help to reinforce Chinese national identity. The posts about folk customs remind users of many of the lost traditions of the Han people, who are the largest ethnic group in China, such as their traditional festivals, solar terms for farming, family rules and communication etiquettes. The posts about architecture present a range of construction styles and building technologies during different periods of ancient China. Meanwhile, the posts also provide images of marvellous buildings in many other places in the world, in order to lead young people to understand architecture from historical, modern, domestic and international perspectives. The underlying ideological purpose is to relocate Chinese ancient history within wider world histories, thus making the claim that Chinese heritage must be seen to be part of global development over millennia. The posts about figures along with their historical or dramatic stories present romanticised and idealised national characters and spirits designed to elicit identification with users and thus strengthen a sense of national pride. The tendency within these narratives and representations is toward stating Han leadership towards a prosperous national unity.

Unlike on BYC, students engaging with ChickenRun tend to discuss patriotism via various social and cultural topics that reflect their personal perspectives. ChickenRun does not arrange special boards for patriotic discussions. Rather, the patriotic topics are embedded into general topical boards, like '*News Board*', '*University Life*' and '*Mood and Diary*'. Students often discuss recent news about China reported by domestic or international media. They also pay attention to Chinese academic achievements, for example Chinese university rankings in the world, new Chinese technology or advanced research. They are fascinated by Chinese culture and are fond

of discussing and sharing resources about it with forum peers. Their discussions range from Chinese literature to movies, from Chinese folk music to traditional painting, and from Chinese ethnic dress to food culture. They are keen to share travel experiences and photographs of beautiful landscapes from all over the country, often with a post title like “My Lovely Hometown”, “Those most magnificent mountains in China where I’ve been”, “China’s Top-10 beautiful countryside”, or “Must-Go Places in Our Wild China”. These posts may or may not be intentionally designed to arouse patriotism, but they display students’ sense of national belonging and affiliation to China. Compared with a state-based perspective that strengthens national identity through historical and political narratives, here I view students’ de-political presentation as a form of ‘soft-patriotism’, which presents an internalised identification with cultural symbols.

6.2.1.3. Loyal patriotism

When conflicts happen between China and other countries, the loyal patriotic expressions that support and defend the dominant narratives of the nation can be heard in cyberspace. Particularly when a national territorial or a diplomatic dispute was threatening to escalate, my observations of students showed that they were likely to assert their senses of national identity by sharing the news or making comments on their SNS profiles. For instance, when the continuing conflict around the Diaoyu Islands (Fishing Islands) between China and Japan broke out again in early January 2011, one of the observed students published a simple personal status update titled “Fight for Diaoyu Islands!”, which was shared 307 times via Renren networks in a week. Some participants made short comments when they shared the

mainstream news, such as “Diaoyu Islands belong to China!”, “Little Japan²⁶, Get out of the islands!” and “Let’s go fishing on Fishing Islands!” Others found historical archives and maps as evidence to declare China’s sovereignty there. Speaking about these expressions of online patriotism, a student interviewee commented that: “At that time, as long as you published posts, photographs and videos about Japan or Diaoyu Islands, your Renren profile would get more clicks” (SI 3). In other words, taking a pro-government or loyal patriotic stand gained more attention. Since February 2011, a series of online boycotting activities were launched which encouraged Chinese people to reject Japanese products.

Another example of loyal patriotism is a SNS group ‘M4’ (with the meaning of April Youth Community) on Renren. This is a youth-led political group aiming at online and offline campaigns to protect China's territorial integrity and sovereignty. This group was initially an offline group set up in April, 2008 by overseas Chinese students, in order to protect the Olympic Flame from Tibetan separatists attempting to douse it. Then a number of domestic university students joined and worked for safeguarding national integration. The first online space they established was an online patriotic website named ‘Anti-CNN’²⁷ which protested against inauthentic and prejudicial news reports about China from Western perspectives, dominated by American channel CNN. The site developed into a commentary site for political events and renamed as ‘WWW.M4.CN’ (四月网) since 2010. It has also set up its BBS site and linked with multiple SNSs.

²⁶ A contemptuous name for Japan in Chinese.

²⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-cnn>



Figure 6- 8: A Screen Shot of The Profile of M4 on Renren

Figure 6-8 presents a screen shot on the public profile of M4 on Renren. The top image presents a long-shot photograph of a Chinese youth assembly for a patriotic movement. The central one presents a collection of profile images, implying the collective power of young people taking the mission of M4 in different ways. The third image presents a close-up shot of a girl, with two Chinese flags painted on her cheeks. Beside illustrative texts about the three images, there is a vision of M4 stating that:

Patriotism is our eternal theme. It is also the DNA of our team. We are in our beautiful prime. We enjoy the best time in our lives...We are curious about the changing world. We are sensitive and concerned about our country, experiencing every moment of pain and glory, together with the rising China (texts extracted from Figure 6-8).

Although the M4's Renren profile only got 105 followers in early 2012, its Weibo grew to 160,000 followers by the end of 2015. Both observations and interviews with students have found that young M4 participants organised various patriotic activities, for instance publishing new posts aimed at teaching people how to distinguish between true and fake news about China through critically analysing examples. They also organise regular online reading workshops about Chinese history and traditional culture, and provide offline journalist training courses to recruit volunteer editors to the M4 media company and its social media. This online community of young citizens have formed a very explicit value, which is to spread a positive voice about China from the Chinese younger generation.

6.2.1.4. Critical patriotism

Despite the positively patriotic online activities, some reflective, even negative expressions on patriotism can be found in cyberspace. It has been observed that students used notions like “dangerous patriotism”, “narrow patriotism”, “blind patriotism”, “non-rational patriotism” and “over patriotism”

on four sites, indicating the development of a nuanced public debate which questioned the taken-for-granted patriotism. Students are not always satisfied with the country, so they criticise China's current drawbacks, such as government corruption and bureaucracy, unaffordable property prices, inequalities in education and employment, and problems within the national legal system. They argued for other ways of expressing patriotism such as facing historical problems, recognising realistic challenges and seeking for solutions, instead of always overstating the greatness of the PRC.

Some SNS youth communities had a strong desire to make contributions to Chinese society through a critical approach. For instance the youth group 'New Youth of University S' on Renren called for a Chinese Enlightenment led by young people. The group was set up by two students of University S in Western China in 2011, with a profile slogan saying that,

Where you are standing is your China. What you are like is what China will be like. Once you are *enlightened*, China will no longer be in the dark (texts extracted from Figure 6-9).



Figure 6- 9: The Renren Profile of New Youth of University S

The posts on this Renren public profile argue that patriots should rationally and critically review their national history. One of popular post refers to the chief editor of *La Jeunesse*, Chen Duxiu,²⁸ who was a controversial figure in Chinese modern history, with attacks against his legacy becoming part of the mainstream political narrative. Yet, an SNS student group represented this fallen figure and excavated the history that was not taught within schools. They implied that the current ‘new youth’ of China should reconsider the character of Chen and understand the complex truth of the Chinese history. They also implied that loyal CPC members and Chinese young people should return to the founding values of the Party, which might have been forgotten.

Another example of critical patriotism can be found in a series of boycotting campaigns on Weibo. As seen before, boycotting in China is often triggered by loyal patriotic activities. Table 6-4 summarises several boycotting campaigns widely discussed among students on Weibo with specific hashtags seen in the last five years. Students were seen to manifest strong attitudes of support towards the PRC to defend sovereignty and national dignity. Such dispositions of loyal patriotism have also been reflected and criticised by some students who published or shared relevant posts with the hashtags of #boycott stupid products# or #boycott all boycotts#. Here “the stupid products” implies persons without rationality or critical minds, easily being manipulated by media or by some organisations. The rejection of “all boycotts” shows a disengaging attitude towards activities motivated by

²⁸ Chen Duxiu was one of the major leaders of the May Fourth Movement student demonstrations espousing new values for China. He was also one of the co-founders of CPC and provided a theoretical base for it, but was expelled for his conflicts with the Comintern in 1929.

patriotism, such as abusing Chinese compatriots who use overseas products or who work for international companies.

Table 6- 4: The Patriotic Boycotting Activities on Weibo

The Theme of Boycotting	Triggering Events	Examples of Weibo Hashtags
Japanese products	The Dispute of Diaoyu Islands, Japanese distorted history textbooks, other remaining problems of the China-Japan war.	#boycott Japanese cars# #boycott travel to Japan# #boycott Japanese cartoon# #boycott Japanese rice cookers#
Korean products	Dispute of the ownership of traditional cultural heritage, Chinese youth addiction to Korean entertainment programmes.	#boycott Korean cosmetics# #boycott Korean singers# #boycott Korean films and dramas# #my country superior to my idols#
American products	America's return (to Asia) strategy, Dispute of Taiwan, Dispute of South China Sea.	#boycott KFC# #boycott McDonald's# #Boycott Apple#
Philippine products	Chinese and Philippines Dispute of Scarborough Reef, etc.	#boycott Philippine imported fruits# #Scarborough Reef# #Occupy Philippines#
Malaysian products	The missing Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 with Chinese victims	#boycott Malaysia Airlines# #boycott travel to Malaysia #
Stupid products	The riots in the name of patriotism where Chinese hurt or killed their compatriots who drove Japanese cars	#boycott stupid products# #boycott non-rational patriotism# #stop hurt compatriots#
All boycotts	A new round of anti-American and anti-Japanese boycotts in 2016	#boycott all boycotts#

(Observed between: 1/1/2011-31/7/2016)

As boycotting activities and debates continually fermented online, some student interviewees reported that they took part in some of these activities,

publishing or forwarding relevant content on their Weibo. They felt the development of hashtag discussions was just beginning to call for critical thoughts instead of arbitrary actions. Different voices online forced students to reflect on their standpoints in the patriotic boycotts, making them confused so that they raised some new questions (SI 2, 27 & 36):

- Why did the Islands disputes happen and what are the key point of divergence between the two countries?
- Will the boycotting foreign products really hurt the country which we are against and make our country become stronger?
- How shall we avoid the aggressive patriotic activities which may damage the social order and hurt our compatriots?
- How shall we deal with our personal relationship with foreign friends when the diplomatic relationship becomes worse?

Some answers to these questions have been provided by students themselves. For instance, one interviewee stated that the appropriately patriotic thing to do will be “studying and working hard on one’s own position to make the country better in a small step” (SI 25). The other quoted a British motto “Keep calm and carry on” to address the patriotic standpoint with the power of human reason (SI 3). These indicate a changing tendency towards patriotism. Due to the information diversity, Chinese younger generation are no longer easily to be fooled with a single viewpoint. Rather, they began to rethink their independent roles as patriotic citizens.

6.2.2. Public welfare

Public welfare (公益, *Gong Yi*) is a uniquely Chinese term expressing more than volunteering or the individualistic altruism of a person offering to assist others. The Chinese term ‘Gong Yi’ refers to the idea of public service

connected to a sense of civic duty and responsibility towards community and the nation. This is a prominent feature within Communist thinking and practice. It can also refer to the tradition of making a donation through a spiritual organisation such as the Buddhists. Now that a wealthy social group has emerged within China, the more Western notions of charity or philanthropy can also be referred to when using the term of 'Gong Yi'. This includes public good and services that benefit the public.

6.2.2.1. National volunteering

In China, volunteering work is usually regarded as an important civic activity that demonstrates young people's sense of social responsibility and helps the socialisation of youth. On BYC, volunteering topical threads got higher clicking and responding rates than others. For example, the board named '*Volunteers' Communication*' ranked third out of BYC's ten top boards, containing 20,521 original posts along with 136,211 comments by May, 2013. Among all posts from the forum, a post titled "Speak to the volunteering organisation where you worked" scored the highest number of hits (228,238 views) and attracted the third highest number of responses (989 comments).

Topical threads on BYC about volunteering focused on three aspects: *explaining policy, exchanging information, and sharing experience.*

The first type was often related to national volunteering projects, which were launched by the Chinese central government and supported by local authorities, universities, and youth organisations. Two examples are: *the West Volunteering Plan (WVP)* and *the University Graduates as Village-Officials (UGVO)*. WVP aims to recruit young volunteers to work for the development of agriculture, education, and medical services in Western

China, while UGVO encourages university graduates to voluntarily engage in governance in rural areas all over the country. To stimulate students' applications for these projects, many posts explained the relevant project policies, such as the requirements for recruiting volunteers, mechanisms for volunteering, benefits for volunteer teachers in their future career, and the payment and promotion system for village officials.

The second kind of threads on BYC provided recruitment information about volunteer work released by university representatives, NGOs and individuals. For instance, some called for volunteer teachers to help rural migrant workers' children in urban schools, for volunteer nurses to look after old people, and volunteer librarians to work in local community libraries. Those who expected to do volunteering work also posted on BYC, asking for further suggestions from the online community..

The third category focused on sharing experiences, with participants who had had certificated volunteering positions announcing their success in getting such great honours. There were also negative comments and advice shared among BYC participants. Some complained about the low-level payment and unfair treatment of volunteer teachers. Others exposed and criticised the bureaucracy in some teams of village-officials. A few suggestions for improving the volunteering system were also expressed online, such as the cooperation with enterprises to increase volunteers' allowances, the improvement of volunteering award institutions, and the provision of more opportunities for non-governmental volunteering work.

6.2.2.2. Local volunteering

When moving to student-led forum ChickenRun, volunteering was also a hot topic, which was usually posted in the boards of students' societies and clubs. Online dialogues about volunteering work among students focused on opportunity-seeking and experience-sharing. The community-based programmes, which are organised by faculty departments, university-level CYL, Students' Unions, or student societies can stimulate students' interests. The research observed thread topics covering volunteering work in:

- teaching in schools for migrant children;
- teaching in rural schools during the holiday;
- working as guides or interpreters in museums;
- helping children with study difficulties or psychological illness;
- helping disabled people in local communities;
- helping old people in nursery home; and
- helping children of prisoners

Most of these are regarded as non-official volunteering activities that benefit the local community (Amadeo, 2007; Xenos & Foot, 2008). A difference has been observed between discussions on BYC and on ChickenRun in terms of which initiatives come from students. Students often act as information-providers and activity-organisers on ChickenRun, for example, calling for proposals, recruiting volunteers and raising funds. They were more likely to post reflective summaries or comments on their working experience, which discussed personal improvements or shortcomings, conflicts with the volunteering organisations, suggestions for make changes. Some students also designed online courses and shared tips for training other volunteers, which have been developed as a civic learning programme (see Chapter 8).

6.2.2.3. Charity and philanthropy

The theme of charity and philanthropy has also been found in from Chinese youth cyber participation. Both BYC and ChickenRun provide young people with special boards for collecting and circulating charity-related information. The topical threads rely on offline charitable activities, frequently seen as online publicity for offline donation events and charitable bazaars.

Table 6- 5: Selected Charitable Projects Presented on BYC

Brief Description of Projects	Young People's Main Tasks:
<p>Little Koala Parent-Child Library:</p> <p>A community-based library project focused on educating "future citizens of the world" who care about nature and human society through a series of parent-child activities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommending good reading materials to parents • Working as a librarian to manage books • Promoting and facilitating parent-child reading • Providing parenting advice by members with Early Years professional backgrounds • Organising parent-child tours in natural and social environments (mountains, countryside, veterinary clinic, fire station)
<p>Biao'ai Music Alliance:</p> <p>A university-based music project that aims to care and support disadvantaged students suffering from poverty, disability, or psychological conditions. The project offers these students free music performances and job opportunities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping organise Biao'ai concerts in different universities • Joining the concert performance if good at music • Selling or donating personal second-hand goods to contribute to the Alliance's funding • Managing and supervising the Alliance's funding, which is used to purchase concert tickets for disadvantaged students and to support their job hunting • Introducing and offering job opportunities to students
<p>Academic Podcast Platform:</p> <p>A draft proposal for an online resources sharing project intended to promote lifelong learning of university students and those who have not been enrolled into university for various reasons.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To build a free online platform for uploading and downloading academic resources • To use iTunes podcasts or to develop a similar podcast system that learners can use with their portable equipment (smart phone, iPad) • To share university educational resources and social resources • To participate in an online collaborative learning

(Observed between: 1/9/2012-1/3/2013)

Table 6-5 provides three examples of existing or proposed charitable projects posted on BYC, in order to encourage young people to establish social entrepreneurs, which are characterised by being non-profit and for social problem-solving. All three projects were proposed by young people, while the posts were published by a BYC moderator. Since the projects were well-designed with detailed plans, they were presented as promising models for those who wanted to launch a charitable event. The projects not only combined offline and online approaches (Parent-Child Library and Music Alliance), but also introduced a more creative way that integrated knowledge and academic resources as charitable products (Academic Podcast). The original post published on 3 December, 2009, had received 1,743 views by the end of March, 2013. This number of views indicates that it aroused considerable interest among users. However, there were no actual replies.

On ChickenRun, there are a great number of posts about university-wide charitable sales and donations, launched and published online by students. Their donations and items for sale are diverse, including money, books, stationery, clothes, cosmetics, CDs and DVDs, artistic works like paintings and calligraphy, handcrafts, postcards, recycled papers and even ice-cream. Online posts are more like advertisements for these activities, which are held on campus or directly implemented online. This forum publicity helped to successfully convey support to people in need. Forum users also paid attention to student-centred philanthropy in support of students' daily activities. For example, a post named "OLAY (Oil of Ulay) charitable sale in campus" was targeted at female students and raised fund for student societies and clubs. It called for participation on ChickenRun and gained 4,286 views and 150 replies by the end of the activity in 2013. Students sold

or bought OLAY cosmetics and those who benefited from the activity highly praised it by posting comments online.

Compared with similar activities featured on BYC, ChickenRun contains more varied replies and opinions on philanthropy. The content of threads ranged from *seeking information* (time and place of an activity, requirements for donated items, and methods of payment) to *cheering on* initiators and participants; from *sharing* experiences of donations and sales to *criticising* non-standard and illegal operations with students' own expressions like "chaos situation", "disordered institutions", "inevitable corruption", "the opacity of information" and "the lack of public supervision"; and questioning the influence of existing philanthropy. This is an example of how there is not unanimous support for philanthropy. Students often start by thinking critically in relation to the problems and potential solutions of philanthropy, although their comments remain general.

6.2.3. Social justice and solidarity

Social justice is a broad notion connected with equality and equity in the distribution of wealth, resources and opportunities. This research applies a working definition of social justice, containing an idea that citizens should be treated fairly and carefully with the entitlement of equal rights. Youth cyber civic participation for social justice purposes can be seen from the critiques on issues like wealth inequality, government corruption, the abuses of authority power, and the neglect to disadvantaged groups. The feeling of solidarity makes people in different social classes and statuses work together to approach social justice.

6.2.3.1. Legal rights

University students whom I observed on Renren expressed their concerns for social justice and feelings of solidarity. This illustrates that serious and sensitive issues feature openly on that platform. A photo album named “*You will understand China here*” was published on one student’s personal profile in early August, 2012 and repeatedly circulated by some of the observed students through Renren networks. The album collected photographs that presented problems relating to social justice, particularly citizens’ legal rights. Its content mainly concerned the unequal rights among different social groups and the conflicts between the power of authority and the rights of individuals, for instance:

- Migrant workers were protesting against the arrears of wages;
- Urban cleaners were experiencing overtime and extra work without extra pay;
- Peasants went to petition in Beijing, asking for the help from central government but intercepted by the local government;
- Government officials’ luxury mansions and vehicles; and
- Citizens’ protested to publicly disclose the officials’ possessions

The process of sharing the album implies that students tried to visually present some dissatisfactory offline scenes in an online community. They intended to argue for citizens’ rights to participation, in respect of rights to work and getting fair pay, rights to be informed, and even rights to protest, an *illegal form of civic participation* in China.

One of the most widely viewed photographs in this album showed a Chinese family who refused to move out when their house was going to be demolished by a local authority. Although they were resisting the

government, they nonetheless hoisted a national flag but accompanied it by a banner saying “Citizens’ legal private property must not be infringed”. By the end of August 2012, this photograph had been viewed 195,443 times and shared 6,912 times on Renren (See Figure 6-11). Although the poster did not provide further information about the whole story, this striking and self-evident photograph made many students believe that the power of the authorities had infringed the house owners’ legal rights, so there was resistance from citizens.



Figure 6- 10: A Photograph on Renren Advocating Citizens’ Legal Rights

Compared with viewers who probably just glanced at the photograph, those who shared the photograph indicated having taken a clear position in relation to the source material and thus contributed towards fuelling

discussion and concern about a social justice issue. As a student interviewee said:

Tragedies put on every day, like that citizens' homes are forcefully destroyed or rural children are killed by a terribly inferior school bus. Friends in my networks who keep sharing news probably want to let others know what they are caring about. I feel they also want to remind us of these tragedies (SI 21).

In other words, the action of spreading information about injustice amounts to a call for solidarity with victims. Although the information may be factual, students, by identifying the cause of the accidents, try to consider who should take responsibility for these tragedies.

6.2.3.2. Social care

The theme of social justice has more recently made its way into the field of health care and social care. There was an interesting video named "*Travel through hundreds of Chinese universities in one minute*"²⁹, shared many times among the students I observed on Renren and Weibo. This was an elaborate video showing a chubby boy wearing a white hoody and a pair of glasses, doing a dance in front of the gate of more than 100 universities located in 11 cities. Figure 6-12 shows four scenes of his dancing at four famous universities in China.

²⁹ 视频: 校门舞男 260 秒神奇穿越全国 11 个城市所有高校
<<http://tv.sohu.com/20120206/n333889094.shtml>>



Figure 6- 11: Screenshots from the Dancing Video Helping OI Children

The video was produced by the boy himself. In fact, this is not only a funny clip but also a public service advertisement that aims to raise money for the children who have Osteogenesis Imperfecta (OI, Brittle Bone Disease) and cannot go outside, walking and running like people who do not suffer from this condition. The boy himself was a university student.

The video attracted students' attention because many of them wanted to see if their own universities were presented in the video. When they understood the initial aim of the video, they felt this was a really intriguing and creative production and wanted to share it with their peers for entertainment as well as to help OI children. In this case, sharing civic activities helps online students to reflect upon their feelings and ideas within their online community and thus strengthen the bond between members and

participants. At the beginning of such processes, students share these clips on the basis of their existing university networks, and then some may set up a new community to support this campaign via social media. This is an example of an individual taking initiative over a social concern within a public space and eliciting a massive response which led to the formation of a dedicated charity. The public civic space in this instance is being occupied, created, and expanded through private and personal initiative, rather than state or official sponsored initiatives.

6.2.3.3. *Sense of solidarity*

BYC focused more on supporting disadvantaged groups nationwide, like victims of earthquakes, typhoon or droughts, poor people from rural areas, school dropouts, lonely elderly people and orphans. Since the central or local governments and influential philanthropic organisations usually launch offline activities to help these groups, BYC becomes a good platform for the promotion of the activities. Some posts provide key contacts and delivery information for offline activities, so that forum users know the person(s) in charge, how to find ways to participate and how to track the donations and progress of sales. Some announce the results of activities, listing real names of contributors, company names and the amount of their contributions, in order to express gratitude to them and to encourage others to take part in. And some forward the news about successes from other media, which try to get more attention via building role-models in these stories. These posts aim to nurture a sense of solidarity along with sympathy and mutual support.

6.2.4. Lifestyle Politics

The concept of '*lifestyle politics*' is proposed in comparison to the formal and traditional political forms represented by party, election and governance (Giddens, 1991; Loader, 2007a; Bennett, 2011). It is driven by the issues emerging in everyday life situations and the power relationship between different subjects (See Section 3.2.3.4.). The following sections present what young people understand and practise as lifestyle political issues through cybervic participation.

6.2.4.1. Environmental protection

Environmental problems have become increasingly severe in contemporary Chinese society. Many interviewed students reported that they have posted photographs of the nature world where they inhabit, or commented about the issues of persistent and pervasive pollution, ecological damage, and the loss of farmland species. The observed share of these contents reveal young citizens' awareness and concerns towards offline environmental problems.

Apart from these, the research observed a typical case that young people used social media to support an environmental protest both online and offline. On 4 May 2013, a group of people rallied in the central square of Kunming, a city in Yunnan Province in South-western China, to protest against a factory that would produce paraxylene (PX), a toxic chemical³⁰. Such protests partly arise through the spread of information via social media, particularly on Weibo, saying that PX is used to create raw materials for the production of polyester film and fabrics. The Weibo posts estimated that the China National Petroleum Corporation planned to build a chemical plant in

³⁰ See BBC report at <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-22411012>>

the nearby town of Anning to produce 500,000 tonnes of PX annually, which would pollute the air quality of Kunming. Concerned about this, protestors went on the street, wore symbolic masks and brandished posters warning against the dangers of a PX spill. At the same time, along with non-street participants they launched an online protest with the hashtags of #Kunming#, #PX Out# and #My Kunming, Blue Sky and White Clouds#. Both offline and online demonstrations got strong responses, despite a lack of coverage in Chinese conventional media. The following images and conversations extracted from Weibo posts show the process of integrating online and offline civic participation.



Figure 6- 12: A Composite Picture Reporting the Anti-PX Protest

Table 6- 6: The Illustration of Figure 6-12

One banner declared “Give our beautiful Kunming back! We want to survive! We want health! Get PX out of Kunming”	Protestors holding banners
Protestors holding banners	A bird view of the protest
A bilingual banner put in both Chinese and English a slogan that said “Do not get our family and home into environmental hell!”	The main logo of the protest
The police assembling for maintain the order	Protestors holding banners



Figure 6- 13: A Composite Picture of Masked-faces for the Anti-PX Protest



Figure 6- 14: A Photograph of Two Little Girls in the Anti-PX Protest



Figure 6- 15: A Photograph of Young Ladies in the Anti-PX Protest



Figure 6- 16: Chinese City Air Quality Index Posted and Spread on Weibo

Figure 6-12 is one of the widely shared composite images in the Weibo network and among the observed students. The images showing the assembly and striking banners enable the audience, at a glance, to know who was on the scene, what protesters asked for and what happened (See Table 6-6). As seen from the banner, such a public declaration noticeably focuses on avoiding the potential pollution and against the chemical substance rather than the company or its executives.

Figure 6-13 is a montage made from multiple portraits of masked protesters. This was posted via Weibo after the protest and illustrates the degree of graphic sophistication available through social media. The first portrait is masked by a poster which says “I love Kunming”, which is affirmative and not negative. (Row 1, Column1). Part of the impact of the composite image arises from the variety of self-made masks on display, most dramatically, one man wearing an industrial mask (Row 2, Column 2). There is an image of a seemingly foreign protester (Row 4, Column 4). His mask is exactly the same as that worn by a young woman (Row 1, Column 3) suggesting a degree of organisation behind the protest. Masks with the similar design of logo can be found in two male protestors (Row 2, Column 4 and Row 3, Column 3). The composite image in effect conveys the diversity of the protesters. These portraits made a direct appeal to the Weibo users in a young age range. It is almost as though through this composite users look back upon themselves. Another striking feature is that all of these faces are looking directly into the camera at the viewer. They are therefore consciously produced for their subsequent use on social media. The protesters are aware that the impact of their action lies via subsequent social media amplification rather than the immediate and short-lived presence in a public space. While there is no evidence that the photographer is the same person

who posted the montage, it is evident that there is some connection indicating a prior idea about using these portraits for later amplification via social media.

In Figure 6-14, two little girls were photographed as they held a handwriting poster, saying “Uncles and aunties, please give me clean air!” with the word ‘clean’ highlighted in a circle. The English name of a girl, Sally Ding, is displayed on the poster, which can be seen as a pseudonym strategy to articulate a personal standpoint while masking her real identity or protecting the girl. The image (Figure 6-15) of three young masked women holding roses presents another example of how the protest was intentionally organised. The roses, symbolising love in Western culture, were used here as a symbol of peaceful resistance showing love to a beautiful environment. This contradiction draws attention to the offline protest and makes the image memorable online. Both images indicate that children and women have engaged in civic participation through tender and creative ways.

Figure 6-16 taken from a Weibo post was a real-time map of air quality copied from the World Air Quality Index. It enables a post reader to compare pollution levels in their province to elsewhere. The strength of this image is that it shows how the Yunnan Province remains one of only two Chinese provinces to have low pollution rates, shown in green colour. Yet, that would be compromised if projects such as the proposed PX plant were allowed to go ahead. As seen, this map was posted on May 5th, the day following the protest, and it attempts to provide evidence to support what the offline protesters were arguing.

Two of student interviewees from Kunming who were observed shared some of the above photographs on their Weibo profiles. One expressed his awareness that such materials can disappear very quickly after the event, commenting “Save the posts for reference” (5/5/2013). The other, like many participants, highlighted the date of the current protest chosen – May 4th –as it linked to the most symbolically resonant event, the May Fourth Movement, in Chinese political history. It acts as a further way of amplifying the significance of what would otherwise be a small localised event.

The local government held a news briefing on May 10th to inform citizens about the latest progress of dealing with the project. The mayor of Kunming said “We will make the decision in a democratic procedure. If most of our citizens say no to the PX plan, the government will stop it.”³¹ Three years have passed, and there is little news about whether or not the PX project has been built in Kunming. It seems that this cybdercivic participation has obtained a temporal offline victory, although most relevant Weibo posts have disappeared.

This single example has helped to highlight a mechanism that comes into play when online civic activism is connected to real-world civic activism. A similar example can be seen from prior protests against the PX factories in Dalian, Xiamen and Chengdu from 2011-2013. In these activities, social media acted as a medium to connect people from the extreme south to the north of China, and the young generation forced the city government to close, postpone, or adjust the plant. It can be inferred that the protest was designed for subsequent presentation and magnification via social media.

³¹ See the broadcasting of the news briefing at
<<http://www.yn.chinanews.com/pub/html/special/2013/0510/14720.html>>

Hence it would be a mistake to think of cybercivic participation as something existing in a disconnected sphere from real-life events.

6.2.3.2. Depoliticised voting and polling

Voting and polling are regarded as very important aspects of civic participation, as I discussed in Chapter 2. When considering an internet-based democracy, the approach of voting and polling has changed (see Section 3.2.3.2). Just as Oostveen and Besselaar (2004) predicted, users as voters “transmit his or her secure and secret ballot over the Internet” (p.62). And as Graham et al. (2013) found, the change is not only about the channel of voting but the form of relevant discussions.

This study has observed the provision of online voting and polling services on four social media sites, but the services have not been applied for the formal elections in China which are still dependent on offline congresses by representatives. Some online posts are related to the formal elections at national, local and university levels, such as

- forwarding the news about the election of the 18th CPC Congress;
- canvassing for local Youth League leaders or student leaders;
- addressing political candidates’ moral character; and
- announcing results of the election for student leaders.

However, these posts tend to receive very limited responses, as they only report the events, rather than inviting responses and actual votes. By contrast, the informal voting activities caught much more attention, especially on ChickenRun and Renren. They called for students to vote for entertainment competitions or the best role models in the university, such as:

- favourite celebrities;

- top-10 university singers/anchor-persons/photographers;
- top-10 university beauties;
- top-10 academically outstanding students;
- my favourite tutors/professors/administrators;
- the best/worst courses/students societies/administrative departments;
- the most/least welcomed accommodation managers/attendants; and
- the most welcomed university chefs/canteens.

These activities provided information on candidates and enabled social media users to engage with online voting with or without comments. Some of offline voting activities could take online voting results into consideration. Students were observably keen on viewing and responding to this type of poll post. The key point is that through such seemingly innocuous activities users became habituated to being involved in decision-making process through voting, and this created a familiarity with democratic forms.

Table 6- 7: A Poll about One-child Policy on BYC

Question: Some experts ask for adjusting the One-child policy in China. Do you agree?	
* Options	* Respondents (28 in total)
A) The policy should be abolished and families should be allowed to give birth to as many children as they want	2 (7.14%)
B) The policy should be maintained because China still needs population control.	7 (25%)
C) The policy should be slightly amended so that every family can have two children at most.	19 (67.86%)
* Comments (3 in total):	
User 1: Experts? Who are experts?	
User 2: It is better to have at least two children in one family.	
User 3: The one-child policy should have exited the stage of history.	

In terms of polling, most posts on the four observation sites focused on entertainment interests. Few of them were about political or policy-based issues unless they were close to young people's own experience.

The poll above was one of the few of policy-based polls on BYC that obtained responses. This is probably because many young people were actually influenced by the policy. Among respondents, 19 out of 28 agreed that the one-child policy needed to be changed in China. From the responses, one user questioned the authoritativeness of the so-called 'experts' in the proposition of the poll. Others simply repeated the need to amend the policy, but did not provide more thoughts. Here the key feature to draw attention to is the possibility of engaging in a political dialogue, or making policies involving students' daily expression of diverse and sometimes contradictory opinions.

6.2.3.3. Life-embedded political discussion

Another finding about the life political participation among Chinese young people is that it comes about randomly and unpredictably. A Renren profile is a good platform to trace latent topics, where one's life situations and interests can be disclosed. Most of the observed students logged into their Renren profile at least once per day. By reviewing their profiles, which were visible to a researcher like myself, I was able to trace when they were online and what they were doing at that point in time. Changing personal statuses and sharing something interesting are what an individual does most often, while posting blogs is a major activity on group profiles.

From my observation in January, 2012, students' statuses tended to reveal their feelings and emotions. Individuals wanted to show off his/her exciting experiences probably after having something delicious to eat, having met a

funny person, enjoyed a wonderful film, found a fancy digital game, or having started a romantic relationship. The individual might want to complain about something negative and in so doing was also seeking comfort and reassurance from friends. For example, the individual might update their status having experienced terrible weather, felt under pressure from an overloaded homework schedule, underperformed in a frustrating exam or endured an unlucky trip.

Students did not often raise intense civic topics in their updated statuses, especially certain obviously political topics. However, a student might occasionally talk about some civic-featured issues after attending a relevant class, reading a book, watching a news programme or suffering from unfair treatment. Below are some samples of students' statuses during my observation.

Student A: No voting please, we're Chinese: The government shuts down a television show in which viewers vote for the winner! - a sentence abstracted from an article in The Economics) (23/01/2012)

Student B: Well done, China! Let's support Syria...Now I'm going to have my lunch. (06/02/2012)

Student C: I got a postcard from my American friends, he wrote: "You are Jeremy Lin of Education". What's a good appraise! So Excited! (08/02/2012)

Student D: Why they cut down all the trees in front of the university library? Where will the crows live? (a photograph attached) (01/02/2012)

Student E: Kim Jong-il passed away on 17 Dec. In 7 days, you will hear a song sung all over the world: jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way! (20/12/2012)

The injection of humour into these otherwise serious posts helps to neuter the sense of anger and injustice being felt by the author. The general

approach enables such topics to be accessible to wider audiences rather than seeing them as boring and too serious. The comments range from sarcasm, “*jingle bells, jingle bells*”, to ironic “*where will the crows live?*”, to cynical, “*Now I’m going to have my lunch*”. When further interpreting five statements from the personal profiles above, it is clear that all are highlighting civic issues within personal and informal contexts. Student A clearly links the actions of a Chinese television show which encourages voting for winners to political voting processes. Students B and E were both talking about current public issues with their combination of apparent insouciance with humorous turns of phrase. The words of Student C can be interpreted as his citizenship identity that both Jeremy Shu-How Lin and him are Chinese, or Chinese and Taiwanese are actually the same. And student D makes the point about arbitrary decisions by university authorities affecting the lives of animals (crows). His post concerns abuse of power.

6.2.5. Community involvement

Communitarianism highlights the role of the community for civic life (See Section 2.3.2). Community involvement can be understood as citizens’ interaction within their community, benefiting from and contributing to it. It is sometimes overlapped with the volunteering and charitable activities, as Bachen et al. (2008) suggested. The range of community reaches local, national and global areas. In China, the involvement of national community is always being strengthened through patriotic ideas and practices. Which I have discussed in Section 6.2.1. This section focuses on students’ involvement in local and global communities.

6.2.5.1. Youth organisations and local involvement

For students, the main community is their university. Besides academic courses, youth organisations are an important vehicle for young people to be involved in the university community. Those who hold the same interests and beliefs come together to build societies and to fulfil common programmes. Many youth organisations have set up social-media-based communities to enlarge their influence. ChickenRun is a good case to examine various youth organisations which are based around universities (See Table 6-8).

Table 6- 8: The List of Boards for Youth Organisations on ChickenRun

Categories of Organisation	Boards for Students' Organisations	Notes
Official societies	Students' Union	
	Association for Students' Societies	Serving and managing societies, and integrating resources from different societies
Students media	University Newspaper	Published by student journalists
	Chunqiu Humanity Newspaper	Published by students who study history subject
	Future Educators	Published by students who study education subject
	My University	A psychological journal
	Bug's Online Movie and Television	An online interest group
	University Television	Operated by students
	University Radio	Operated by students
Academic society	Biology	
	History Society	
	Education Society	
	Law Society	
	Astronomy Society	
	Psychology Society	
	PRED Society	Population, resource, environment and development
	ACM Computer Society	
	Logics and Inference Society	
Music and Arts	Chinese Flute and Xiao Society	
	Guitar Society	
	Guzheng and Guqin Society	Traditional Chinese stringed instruments
Environmental protection	Green Society	

Sports	Baseball and Softball Society	
	Kungfu Society	
	International Chess Society	
	Roller Skating Society	
	Cycling Society	
	Automobile Society	
	Outdoor Exercises Society	
Culture and intercultural communication	Traditional Han Ethnic Costume Society	
	'I Love Postcard'	An online interest group for sharing postcards
	Kungfu novel & Fantasy fiction society	
	SAIN Society	Students' Association for International Network
	Hey, AIESEC!	The global youth network impacting the world through leadership development experiences.
	MUN Society	Model United Nations
Health	Red Cross Society of University B	
	Chinese Health Maintenance Society	
	Mental Health Association	
	Healing and Curing Society	
Leisure and recreation	Anti-Religions Society	
	Sleepless Society	An online interest group for the communication among students who sleep late.
Social practice	Student-teacher Society	
	The Great Wall Society for Students' Self-improvement	

The table above shows the diversity of youth organisations online. These boards can generally be classified into four types: *official*, *professional*, *social* and *leisure*. The first relies on official student organisations, such as the Students' Union, the Association for Students' Societies and the University Newspaper. Since they are registering with and directly led by the university level CYL and CPC, they usually launch relatively formal and big-size activities online that aim to engage all students in the campus. Online post examples include: the election and management for student societies, the online service for students' rights protection, and online voting for outstanding student prizes or for student competitions of singing, writing or cooking which are organised by official-based student.

The second type of board is linked to professional and academic student societies, like the Biology, History, Education or Law societies. Thus, students' offline activities and online posts are based on their areas of study and professional knowledge, from ecological and animal protection to historical quiz competitions, volunteer teaching, and Mock Court where the student audience make decisions like a jury. One student interviewee used to be one of the organisers of the university Mock Court, and he usually posted on the BBS to introduce the knowledge of the jury system and to recruit more society members or participants.

The third type focuses on social activities organised by students which aim to explore and solve a wider range of social problems. For instance, the MUN Society and the SAIN Society discuss contemporary global issues and possible solutions suggested by young people from different countries; the Students' Red Cross Society forum helps students with understanding and participating in medical aid and public welfare; the 'Student-teacher Society'

forum discuss various issues regarding stakeholders (student-teacher, university, government and schools) under the policy of free-pay normal student education, such as their rights and duties, their learning and developing modules, their future career and contract defaults.

The fourth type covers a variety of topics for leisure and entertainment, such as sports, music, literature and religion. The discussion and activities in these areas would not necessarily be civic-featured, but might stimulate civic awareness in a community. One interviewee, who used to be the president of the Chinese Flute and Xiao Society, reported that a university-wide mini concert organised for fans of Chinese digital games became a national-wide grand concert through the forum discussion and cooperation with other societies of traditional music from other universities.

More and more fans got the news online and actually came for the concert because they would like to enjoy beautiful melody of flute and Xiao and to watch how we fuse digital game culture and traditional Chinese musical culture (SI 3).

This example shows how a local fan group expanded their community to a national level. They integrated the most fashionable online culture (digital game) with the most classical culture (Chinese flute and Xiao) in a musical and gaming way. The success of this activity relies on and also strengthens citizens' identification of national cultural citizenship. This case once again demonstrates young people's potential to be creative and active citizens.

6.2.5.2. Global citizenship and intercultural understanding

Young people also have exposure to global issues, providing an opportunity to know what happens in the world on a daily basis and exchange their opinions through post discussions. It is the combination of receiving global

information and being able to respond, instead of fed traditional uni-directional media sources such as newspapers. Through social media, users can connect to international events and initiatives organised by a range of groups or institutions. Another radical dimension is the ability through such forums to communicate instantly and regularly with users around the world.

The BYC board '*2011 EU-China Year of Youth*' is a temporal discussion space, providing young people with information and opportunities to participate in this national-levelled international cooperative programme which aims to promote understanding and communication among Chinese and European young people. The programme includes various online and offline activities, such as a "multicultural photography online competition", "free Chinese/European book and music downloading", "my favourite Chinese/European items online auction", "internship plan in Chinese/European Top 100 enterprises", "Cycling event for environmental protection", and "Chinese/European Embassies open day for youth communication" (30/11/2011). Although this board is not the official site of "EU China Year of Youth", it had 55 topics and 176 replies with young people's questions and suggestions by the end of 2011. Young people shared their activity and experience by writing up logs and uploading their photographs onto this board. For example, a participant recorded his/her experience at a Chinese and Hungarian Volunteer Round Table and then published it to tell others how exiting this activity was.

Within ChickenRun, the most popular international exchanging activity is Model United Nations (MUN), which has a special board to itself simulating the way the United Nations Assembly operates. MUN aims to help young participants learn about international affairs through current events,

international relations, diplomacy and the United Nations agenda. In China, MUN is a university-based activity with students developing their delegation team and training their members. If a delegation performs well enough in the national competition, it will have the opportunity to join the world-level MUN together with young people from all over the world. The delegation of University B is an excellent team and obtained such opportunities several times. Thus, its board on ChickenRun attracts students' attention. Posts can be divided into three categories: the first one aims for publicity, introducing MUN, recruiting new members, and showing the achievements of the university delegation in previous world-wide MUNs. In the second, discussions present MUN topics with a focus from the university delegation, such as human rights and children's rights through education, with the aim of widening discussion from non-delegation members to broaden and strengthen their arguments. Third, forum discussions are posted by delegation members for MUN preparation (e.g. online group discussion and role-play) and for their experience sharing (e.g. travel to the University of Harvard).

These two activities are only examples of how offline global civic activities can directly connect with young people through online platforms and get a larger influence that informs and invites participants.

6.2.6. Controversial issues

Arising from the growing diversity of values within society, the range and intensity of controversial online issues seems to grow. Such issues can remain in the public arena for varying lengths of time, either until they are resolved, suppressed, lose their topicality or transform into something else. Online forums provide an ideal space for the discussion of controversial

issues because various values and beliefs exist. The relative freedom of expression seems designed to maximise the potential for controversy, as users believing one way on an issue enter into a direct relationship with users feeling another way. There are a small number of controversial issues posted on BYC. The monitor system of this forum may automatically hide posts which include sensitive words. The administrators will manually delete posts that they believe reinforce social risks, such as the current concerns with terrorism. An example of debate on a controversial issue is that of the One-Child Policy which has recently become a live issue once again as changes are taking place. Posts criticised the rationality of the policy. Others state things such as:

- the dilemma is to control population and to respect human rights at the same time;
- the aging problem comes along with the one-child policy;
- the criminal act that kills or abandons additional babies to escape from a penalty when breaking the policy;
- the possible mistakes that overstress the number not the quality of the population;
- the poor living conditions of parents who lose their only one child;
- the boycotts about killing rare animals to make luxury products (e.g. handbags of crocodile leather, liquor of tiger-bone, medicines of bear gall) and eating animals (e.g. Dog Meat Festival).

Discussion threads like these indicate critical perspectives held by students. They are characterised by participants displaying a tendency to propose problems rather than alternatives.

Other controversial issues observed on social media range from internet censorship, homosexuality, animal rights, market-driven colleges and universities. More interestingly, homosexuality, which has been a taboo topic in traditional Chinese culture and social life, has been openly discussed in special boards. The relevant posts frequently bumped up to the daily top-10 topical ranks by the many replies on ChickenRun. A thread titled “A wedding photograph of a gay couple (with a set of photographs uploaded)” in yearly top-10 topical ranks contains many positive comments like “the feel of true love”, “beautiful boys”, “bless them”, “stop discrimination” (20/3/2013). However, there are also a number of negative comments towards to homosexuality such as “disgusting”, “freak”, and “violating human ethics” (20/3/2013). Although some students posted historical stories and medical evidence to prove homosexuality is a normal thing, other participants expressed a lack of acceptance. This reveals that within society there exists a variety of opinions. Such forums create social space where discourses that previously may have been suppressed or are not present, can develop and become normalised. Positive and open expression concerning sexuality has become an established part of public discussion. In this way online forums and communities embody the possibility of widening civic political debate to encompass topics and issues that are broader than those specifically raised by organisations in authority. In other words, the forums bring into being a new civic sphere

Summary

This chapter presents an ethnographic account of various fields for youth cybercivic participation, including their structures, layouts, functions, user groups and ways of interaction. It is argued that social media acts as agora-like platforms where university students who embody themselves as avatars

inhabit this virtual world, encountering and interacting with others. The features of different social media hold different potential to support the participation. For instance, the top-down forum seems better at presenting formal and traditional civic issues, while the bottom-up forum enables the spread of other issues reflecting interests of university-based youth communities. Civic issues on Renren are more likely to be spread by acquaintances, while Sina Weibo could expand these issues into a wider range of networks.

I have presented a range of civic topics that tend to attract networked young people through these four sites. Although I have classified topical threads and conversations into six major categories, it is difficult to strictly establish boundaries between different topics. Many cybervic discussions and activities are not single-topic-driven. When young people presented content about patriotism, they were also talking about the relationship between China and other countries, which refers to global issues and international understandings. When young people shared Weibo posts triggered by an environmental project, they were also concerned about social justice in relation to citizens' rights to live and to children's rights to protection. Some boycotts of activities are also interests in entertainment and fashion accessories, crossing into semi-political concerns and cultural citizenship (Burgess et al., 2006; Goode, 2010). Thus it can be summarised here that multiple civic issues on social media overlap and interweave, and sometimes they may be simultaneously inspired by a single topic. In the next chapter, I further analyse how different civic themes are found, understood, circulated, produced and reflected upon by students. I also consider aspects of the social effects of youth cybervic participation.

CHAPTER 7: FORMS, REASONS AND OUTCOMES OF STUDENTS' CYBERCIVIC PARTICIPATION

The intriguing questions of this research are not restricted to what students talked about online or what activities they were engaged in offline, but also refer to *in what ways, for what reasons* and *to what extent* that students participated in those civic issues. This chapter considers the complex mechanism of students' cybercivic participation in three aspects. The discussion begins with an exploration of four major *strategies* that students used when taking part in cybercivic activities, which finds forms both similar to and different from traditional offline civic participation. Then the discussion moves on to consider students' *motivations or attitudes* towards cybercivic participation including reasons about why they *do* or *do not* take part. The final section probes into the actual *influences* of their cybercivic participation, listening to students' self-assessments about online and offline civic behaviours. The sources throughout the discussion are drawn from observations and the interview data.

7.1 Forms of Student Cybercivic Participation

Unsurprisingly, the research found the so-called Web 1.0 patterns used by students, such as visiting news sites, reading webpages and delivering it to friends by emails. But these strategies have been developed and integrated with new media and a wider range of civic purposes. The investigated approaches of cybercivic participation applied by students can be described with a multi-levelled model (See Figure 7-1), which includes four categories: *lurking, announcing, networked-sharing* and *community-constructing*.

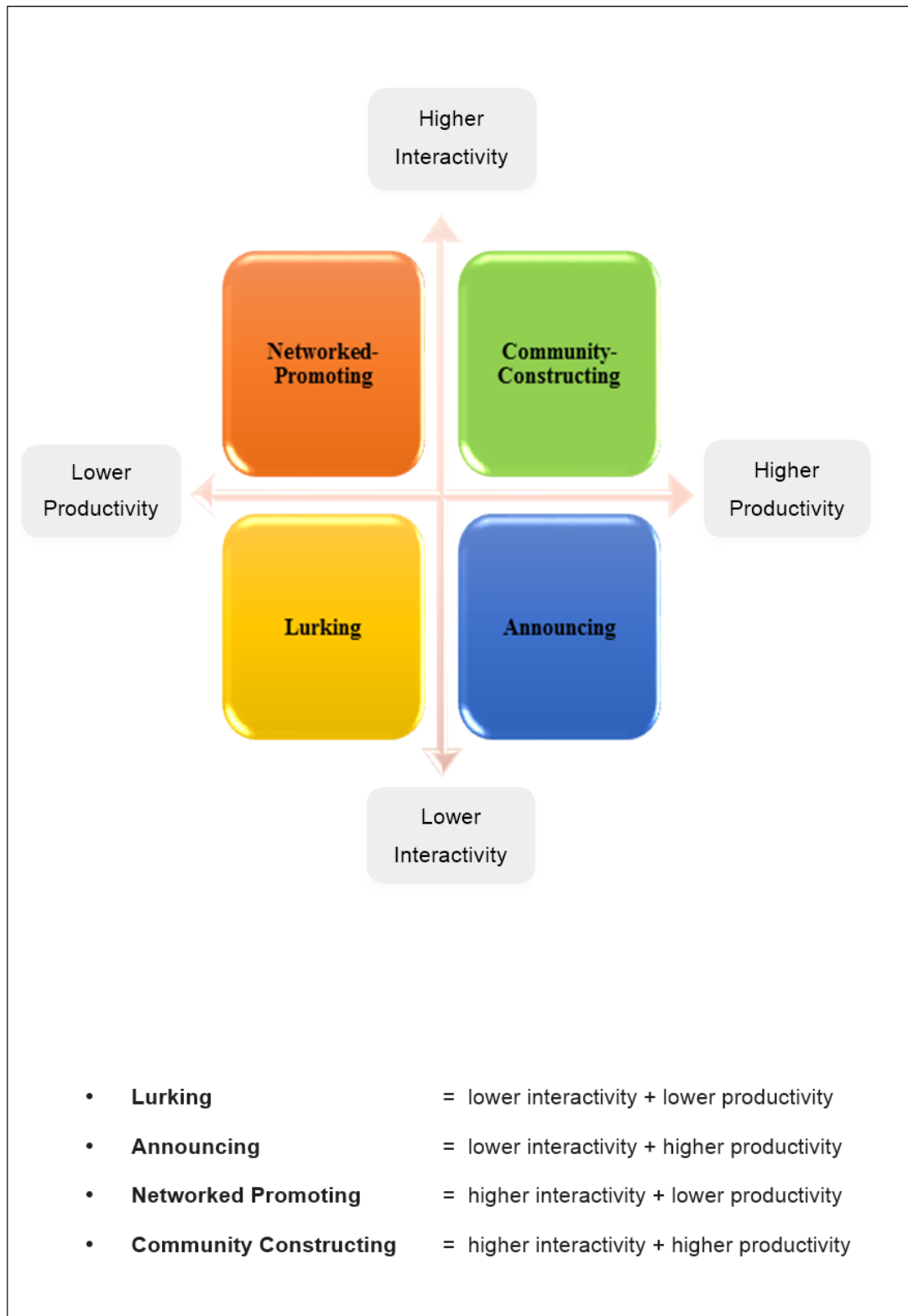


Figure 7- 1: An Initial Model of Cybervic Participation Forms

Online activities are regularly accompanied by interactions between users, such as chatting, exchanging information and sharing resources. The fundamental characteristics of social media-based activities lie in their interaction and participation. Another important feature of online activities is that the participants are not only the audience but also producers. When describing an online community, I consider the extent of that members' relationship and their engagement in and contribution to the community (Rheingold, 1993b; Hine, 2000) (See also Chapter 4). Thus, the two indicators of interactivity and productivity are taken to evaluate the behaviours of participants. Interactivity refers to the frequency and depth of students' online communication, while productivity focuses on both the quantity and quality of their contribution to the social media community.

7.1.1 Lurking

Lurking is the so-called invisible participation whereby people only read posts and view discussions and do not make active contributions such as replying and producing materials. This action in Chinese is metaphorically called 'snorkelling' or 'underwater diving' (潜水). Comparatively, there are metaphors about different actions of responding or speaking that are called 'blowing bubbles' (冒泡) and 'flooding' (灌水), respectively referring to *seldom replying* and *extended non-meaningful responding*. Although the observation and interview shows that the majority of social media users prefer to look through forum threads and networking posts as lurkers, the purposes of lurking acts are different. This chapter analyses three lurking styles according to this.

7.1.1.1. Random lurking

Random lurking is the most common form for cybercivic participation, encompassing users who initially have little idea about what kind of content or topics they are going to look at. For many students, the first thing they do when waking up and the last thing to do before going to sleep is refresh social media apps on their smart phones. They may unconsciously browse newly posted content, “sometimes looking through news, sometimes following up friends’ updated posts, and sometimes just hanging out without particular expectation” (SI 5). Student interviewees described the process of the lurking as follows:

SI 25: I keep refreshing my Weibo profile *once every two or three hours*, to follow the newest social information and witty remarks, also to trace my friends’ life statuses.

SI 26: I have a similar frequency of refreshing, even more.

...

SI 25: I just click the ‘refresh’ key, quickly skim the newly posted contents. I look through the posts to myself up-to-date with information, especially when big issues are exposed and discussed on Weibo...but I seldom make a comment.

SI 26: So do I. I prefer to not reply.

Reflecting on the above, students have considered lurking as not only a habitual manner, but also a sense of keeping pace with the times and the change of community through their random lurking. Some features of random lurking have been revealed by the students, for instance, the target of “refreshing” or “looking through” is not explicit; the information encountered may be useful or unexpected; lurkers acquire access to wider public issues; and lurkers can be informed with public issues.

It is supposed that random lurkers contribute little to civic discussions, but they are actually on the spot and may exert influence over the topic choices of other users. This can be seen from the examples of BBS news boards which aim to encourage users to access or discuss social and political news. Figure 7-2 and Figure 7-3 are screenshots taken from the news boards of BYC and ChinkenRun in the same period (6/12/2012-10/12/2012). Here the four columns in each image seen from the left-hand to the right-hand side, respectively present the themes of threads, the posting time along with the IDs of post authors, the number of views and replies, and the time and the IDs of the last respondent to the thread. The figures surrounded with the red strap line indicate the existence of thousands of lurkers, as the number of replies to each thread is very limited while the number of views are correspondingly much higher. Yet, the more viewing may correlate with the more replies. For example, the majority of threads in Figure 7-2 relate to CPC events and issues but obtained few replies. Yet, when some of them ‘hanged out’ within this board and noticed Threads 5, 13 and 14 had been respectively viewed 1255, 1250 and 1667 times, they might have been interested in looking at highly-clicked threads and providing at least one or two replies. In Figure 7-3, most of posts are social news forwarded from other mainstream media. The threads on ChickenRun elicit higher numbers of responses, comparing with those on BYC. Thread 11, concerning “A suicide of a woman jumping into a river and being saved after 20 minutes”, obtained 830 views just one day after being posted, and 34 comments. At the other end of the scale, Thread 7, about the child of a Traffic Administration Bureau officer illegally making money from their father’s position, only gained 38 views and perhaps consequently no responses.

	Thread topics	Author and time of the original post	Numbers of Replies and Views	Author and time of the last reply
1	[时事热点] 如何看待习总书记重走南巡路	gaosp 2012-12-10	0 1175	波海棠 2012-12-10 14:54
2	[时事热点] 提振精神 重任在肩——学习十八大精神的心得体会	zj0623 2012-12-10	0 1213	zj0623 2012-12-10 14:01
3	[时事热点] 切实加强领导干部作风建设	zj0623 2012-12-10	0 1053	zj0623 2012-12-10 13:49
4	[时事热点] 品味习近平总书记的十大反腐“要论”	zj0623 2012-12-10	0 1034	zj0623 2012-12-10 13:45
5	[时事热点] 英媒：这才是中国不怕美国的真正原因！	tianjin111 2012-12-9	1 1255	有花无果 2012-12-10 13:44
6	[时事热点] 广州大学城百余条蛇出没 疑系人为放生(图)	taiwancao 2012-12-10	0 1090	taiwancao 2012-12-10 08:34
7	[时事热点] 习近平深圳视察高清图	taiwancao 2012-12-9	0 1230	taiwancao 2012-12-9 22:01
8	[时事热点] 四川侦破煽动教唆胁迫自焚杀人案 达赖集团策划	艾荷 2012-12-9	0 1341	艾荷 2012-12-9 18:58
9	[时事热点] 中国对多哈气候大会结果满意	bo2007111618 2012-12-9	0 1085	帅是一种态度 2012-12-9 10:43
10	[时事热点] 美称对朝鲜卫星发射将采取“适当行动”	bo2007111618 2012-12-9	0 1011	帅是一种态度 2012-12-9 09:30
11	[时事热点] 南京将举行多项活动 悼念南京大屠杀30万遇难同胞	艾荷 2012-12-8	0 1196	艾荷 2012-12-8 22:10
12	[时事热点] 中央领导参观《复兴之路》沿途不封路！	gaosp 2012-12-7	0 1173	波海棠 2012-12-7 17:42
13	[时事热点] 中纪委新班子团队：几乎全部具备反腐经验	tianjin111 2012-12-7	1 1250	未来战士 2012-12-7 14:33
14	[时事热点] 全国城市文明程度指数排名 厦门成都青岛居前	caijing618 2012-12-3	2 1667	青青校园 2012-12-7 13:31

Figure 7- 2: A Screenshot of BYC Threads about News

	Thread topics	Author and time of the original post	Numbers of Replies and Views	Author and time of the last reply
1	2012首都十大教育新闻人物候选人何克抗	fengna 2012-12-8	7 / 114	2012-12-9 13:48 by 邱黎灯
2	发展的谎言 [环球热点]	恶象级 2012-12-8	2 / 78	2012-12-9 13:47 by 小痴儿
3	美国两学生因打架被罚手拉手在操场坐一小时	linfenxiting 2012-12-3	8 / 163	2012-12-8 22:46 by rsd
4	“切糕微博”被切，切伤公信力 [讨论专区]	长弓傲月 2012-12-6	5 / 112	2012-12-8 22:29 by rsd
5	中日海外能源“暗战” [环球热点]	恶象级 2012-12-8	1 / 62	2012-12-8 17:46 by comodo
6	新闻快报：日本釜石市附近发生7.3级地震 [环球热点]	八卦猫 2012-12-7	8 / 125	2012-12-8 16:38 by 水道源
7	北京交管局局长未被调查为协助调查 其与秘书倒卖车牌 [政法要闻]	恶象级 2012-12-8	0 / 38	2012-12-8 12:56 by 恶象级
8	莫言：获诺奖是我个人的事情 非颁给国家 [讨论专区]	把握今天 2012-12-7	6 / 206	2012-12-8 11:19 by 若小野
9	官媒发话了：做心理学实验的都先洗脑吧 [讨论专区]	qq0T 2012-12-7	13 / 365	2012-12-7 23:16 by 七重年
10	首日“一哥”变卖家产“过冬”，诺基亚卖总部大楼求生	糯米小虫 2012-12-6	11 / 532	2012-12-7 23:11 by mlkfree
11	女子穿羽绒服跳河 漂洋河面20多分钟后获救 [南网铁事]	糯米小虫 2012-12-6	34 / 830	2012-12-7 23:02 by mlkfree

Figure 7- 3: A screenshot of ChickenRun Threads News

In the figures displayed above, there is a tendency for human interest stories to predominate rather than official, economic, political news stories, which are often predominant elsewhere. The cumulative effects of lurking can and do exert an impact upon what happens within social media. Might it be that when speaking about 'lurking' care should be taken not to assume that this is an essentially passive mode? The random lurkers collectively structure the post rankings on the forum, and lurking has become a way of life for millions where the default norm is to be online.

7.1.1.2. Consuming lurking

Within this category I draw attention to the rise of the promotion and exchange of products and services online. Social media has become a marketplace, where students buy and sell a wide range of goods, substantial and virtual. Some students visit sites in order to find information about products ranging from make-up cosmetics to textbooks for their academic studies. Others might go online to purchase sport equipment or obtain tickets for a show. The subjective interests of students become linked to exchange and consumption, and much of their time is spent living within this sphere. Figure 7-4 shows thousands of replies and views in threads of movies on ChickenRun, which indicates that a great number of lurkers existed in this field grabbing resources silently.

	Thread topics	Author and time of the original post	Numbers of Replies and Views	Author and time of the last reply
1	神探Sherlock剧组BAFTA之旅【第三季终于开拍咯喂喂 欧美剧集】	bronsuer 2012-5-30	64 / 4465	2013-4-23 14:10 by ANNAANNA
2	我最爱的《实习医生格蕾》要完结了吧，求推荐新美剧 欧美剧集	花心大萝卜 2013-4-22	32 / 2660	2013-4-23 10:24 by 花心大萝卜
3	冰与火之歌 欧美剧集	201231120028 2012-11-28	21 / 1380	2013-4-19 19:24 by 200931030024
4	分享微电影 小心泪奔哦 欧美剧集	锦毛蓉 2013-4-11	14 / 704	2013-4-15 14:55 by 捷羽朝颜
5	变形金刚3的解释 欧美剧集	偷吃一口 2013-4-3	0 / 412	2013-4-3 22:27 by 偷吃一口
6	看了美剧《行尸走肉》的亲来讨论讨论吧~ 欧美剧集	捷羽朝颜 2012-12-15	71 / 3493	2013-4-1 20:12 by 捷羽朝颜
7	冰与火之歌：权力的游戏 第二季 讨论帖 欧美剧集	Irqliu 2012-5-1	5 / 538	2013-3-30 23:45 by wangjiangofbhu
8	吐槽吐槽《权力的游戏》第二季 你到底讲了神马？ 欧美剧集	Stephen 2012-6-4	5 / 2050	2013-3-30 23:42 by wangjiangofbhu
9	冰与火之歌 第二季 第九集 欧美剧集	寐儿 2012-5-29	8 / 2402	2013-3-30 23:27 by wangjiangofbhu
10	看吸血鬼日记的来八八啊 欧美剧集	黄蓉蓉 2013-3-17	21 / 1469	2013-3-27 22:49 by 完结篇
11	求推荐一些下载手机电影的网站 欧美剧集	suger 2013-3-26	0 / 310	2013-3-26 22:02 by suger
12	黑夜传说 欧美剧集	cyh1922 2013-3-15	0 / 313	2013-3-15 11:59 by cyh1922
13	《泰迪熊》影评：请给自己一颗永不长大的心 欧美剧集	梓蓉梓亦 2012-7-25	3 / 836	2013-3-11 23:49 by 坂田十四狼
14	又没喜欢看lie to me的 欧美剧集	JACKS 2013-3-3	9 / 475	2013-3-10 01:37 by 明月英话
15	求上传【云图】吧 欧美剧集	小小郭 2013-3-3	1 / 338	2013-3-4 14:18 by lovebefore

Figure 7- 4: A Screenshot of ChickenRun Threads about Films and TV Series

The above threads discussed about films and television shows, including:

- Thread 1: Sherlock (BBC television series)
- Thread 2: Grey's Anatomy (ABC television series)
- Threads 3, 7, 8 and 9: Game of Thrones (HBO television series)
- Threads 4 and 11: Mini clips and film-watching websites
- Thread 5: The Transformers (Film)
- Thread 6: The Walking Dead (Film)
- Thread 10: The Vampire Diaries (American television series)
- Thread 12: Underworld (Film)
- Thread 13: Lie to Me (American television series)
- Thread 14: Ted (Film)
- Thread 15: Cloud Atlas (Film)

All threads listed here refer to English-speaking films or television series produced by American and British companies, although this board of BBS is not particularly set-up for sharing foreign films and television shows. These cultural products attract a great number of young consumers online who act as lurkers to just enjoy the relevant resources. In Threads 1 and 6, the vast views shows the existence of lurkers (4465 views and 3493 views), which have influenced a relatively higher numbers of respondents (64 replies and 71 replies), compared with other threads. The lurkers in such instances are likely to be fans of films and shows, knowing about what they are looking for rather than randomly choosing a discussion topic. Although no one contributed to the topical discussions in Threads 5, 11 and 12, the posted films are very popular among students, as hundreds of lurkers were observed consuming the post contents or downloading the resources. To a degree the lurkers remain passive, but they nevertheless formed part of this online community. The act of consuming lurking can stimulate replies and influence the rank of a thread on the BBS, which helps to widely circulate information so that the films and shows do not just rely upon producer-led publicity. Similar cases have also been found in Renren and Weibo, where the majority of lurkers consumed interesting resources without saying anything or responding to the person who originally shared the contents.

One way of assessing this massive phenomenon of consuming lurking is to see it as embedding values into the everyday life of market orientations. Such online consumption habituates users into making choices, seeking items, reviewing and assessing their relative values, making commitments to buy or not, possibly sharing with others and thus spreading information – all processes that have a direct relationship to aspects of civic behaviours. If a

person becomes habituated to choose in their personal life it may be that this will one day expand into thinking that they should also have choice in the public sphere. This type of activity structures deeply-seated ideological outlooks such as feeling that one has a right to choose what one likes, or to communicate with whoever they please in an open forum or even to produce and distribute what they like. The power of social media is its speed and reach, making it almost uncontrollable by authorities.

The patterns of consuming participation can shape young citizens' identities. It is possible for a person to purchase certain styles and brands of clothing, listen to certain forms of music, and search information about traveling abroad. Two student interviewees mentioned that they often consume different sources via social media, watching Korean films and reality shows, listening to Spanish dance music, purchasing British styles of clothes and French perfume, and finding discount information about the holidays in Thailand, Japanese foods and teas (SI 24 & 25). The individual thus becomes intercultural in aspects of their identity. Some perceived such forms of cultural consumption as posing a threat to a perceived authentic Chinese identity (SI 28, 29 & TI 2). But already, among Chinese internet users, such consumption patterns and interests via online sources have spurred them to become citizens with intercultural senses rather than solely Chinese citizens. The case of online film consumption reminds us to rethink the power of popular culture and its consumption, which would not be a form of passive civic participation (Hermes, 2000, 2005), but carries and shapes young citizens' cultural identities.

7.1.1.3. Deliberative lurking

From the interviews, deliberative lurking as a further type of participation has become apparent. It often happens when social media users disagree with viewpoints in an online post but do not want to correct them, when they suspect the information is wrong within the posts but do not affirm, or when they feel speaking out may reveal their identities or cause negative effects. This form of lurking cannot ever be witnessed online as it relates to the reasons of non-participation that need to be listened and accessed via interview accounts. An example of this is as follows:

Interviewer: Why do you say “I would rather keep on lurking”?

SI 32: I lately realised that what I used to say online is a bit silly and very easy to mislead audience. Sometimes, I just immediately respond to the posts without careful thinking. Or I quickly share something which may contain false information or rumours...

Interviewer: Can you give any example about the misleading rumours?

SI 32: There are many. Can the recent news of KFC be counted in? The one that said KFC served customers with the meat of monster chicken which have four drumsticks and six wings.

Interviewer: I think so. Did you share that Weibo post, the one that includes many astonishing pictures of the monster chicken?

SI 32: Yes, I did. I was shocked by those pictures. Other rumours [that I shared] include the news that steam buns were stuffed with paper scraps instead of meat, and that the police beat up pedlars on the streets... After several times of spreading such rumours, I think it's better to say *nothing* until the truth has been proven.

The conversation above suggests that social news referring to public welfare easily stimulates online participation, particularly when it is about quality of food and public security. However, the interviewed student changed her participative attitude and actions to lurking after being cheated by false information, which made her become a rumour-maker by spreading this kind

of information. It can be interpreted that she has not endorsed participation as a good thing and she began to doubt untrue and unreliable viewpoints, considering the quality of information and caring about spreading misleading information.

This passive and deliberative tendency has also been found in other interviews. Unlike SI 32, who stepped backward from lurking and waited for the truth to be proven, two students showed their efforts to testify information behind the apparent lurking and mentioned the tension between deliberative lurking and active responsible participation.

I won't comment on anything I don't understand or shocking news where I know little about the context, although I did so when I was younger, I mean, compared with two years ago. I feel saying nothing is better than saying something unsure... [Because] at least it can avoid negative and dangerous outcomes caused by unconfirmed information (SI 22).

It takes me a long time to search the original news source and then publish relatively reliable information to my Renren networks... The speed of spreading rumours is much faster than the speed of correcting them... I feel keeping in silence online can help slow down such a crazy rumour-spreading process (SI 21).

For the present study, deliberative lurking is important because students' attempts to not spread lies touch upon civic awareness, in terms of a sense of social responsibility in cyberspace. Although this form of participation is still labelled with lower interactivity and lower productivity, its social influence and educational significance is more than positive. Thus, I agree with what these interviewees have implied: deliberative lurking with careful thinking, doubting and reflecting can also be regarded as an *active cybercivic participation*.

7.1.2 Announcing

The second category of cyberscivic participation is that of announcing, which means unidirectional communication via broadcasting messages (Graham et al., 2013). Announcing is making a formal public statement, such as pasting a post on a notice board or giving a public speech (See Chapter 2).

Announcing activities in cyberspace aim to publish formal contents to the public, but their approaches of delivering messages have been seen in informal and flexible ways, or from private channels into public domains.

Compared with lurking, the notable contribution of announcing is to change cyberscivic participation from being seemingly invisible to being evidently visible through producing online materials. Yet, as announcing obtains very few replies, the interaction between announcers and audience remains invisible. The approaches towards making announcements depend on different structures and layouts of social media sites.

7.1.2.1. Forum soloing

It is common to find the use of announcing for civic themes that feature on the BBSs, which I describe as *forum soloing*. The simple understanding of this participation form is that long statements related to public issues are published by individual users in order to inform the public. All registered users of BBSs are allowed to become announcers. The structure of the BBS is similar to the offline notice board which has a main function of making announcements to the local community. However, the offline notice board needs a regular review and replacement of its contents, taking down announcements that have expired and putting up new ones, because of the limited board space, whereas when it comes to online notice boards,

announcements can be presented and maintained for a longer time, unless they are deleted by authors or moderators.

The research has observed three features of forum soloing which distinguish civic announcing from general posting. First, the contents of announcements are public-directed rather than individual-centred. Second, the ways of expressing announcements are relatively formal and structured rather than informal and disordered. Third, the replies to the announcements remain few. One typical example of forum soloing is when a topical thread contains hundreds of posts but all published by one author. This single announcer sometimes looks like a lonely blog writer who keeps publishing despite eliciting zero comments. Figure 7-5 shows three screenshots captured from the observed BBSs, demonstrating the participation form of forum soloing.

Sole authorship:
Posts in one thread are all edited and published by the same author

Well-composed:
Posts are designed to present or argue one theme, in a certain sequence

No interruption:
Replies are allowed but they only follow the soloing at the end of the thread



Figure 7- 5: Screenshots from BYC and ChickenRun Showing Forum Soloing

The thread image on the left-hand side displays the topical thread on BYC titled; *“Appreciating historical photographs and paintings and learning the history of CPC”* (see also Table 6-1 in Chapter 6). The original thread contains 23 posts in total all published by one author, using the same format of combining texts and images. The thread image in the middle drawn from BYC introduces *“100 Significant War Stories in Chinese History”*, which contains historical narratives collected and edited by the same author and then published as 100 separate posts. Both of these threads have presented the materials chronologically and made the posts look like electronic story leaflets which provide the background, key events and relevant analysis about each historical story. The third screenshot on the right-hand side is taken from ChickenRun, which presents and analyses the difficulties of student social mobility. The thread consists of ten soloing posts published by one university student, who provides five story posts along with five interpretative posts. He presented why and how his friends from middle-class or upper-class families can find better jobs than those from socio-economically disadvantaged families. In this example, the approach to soloing combines exemplification and analysis so that the layout of the thread presents a case-by-case sequence.

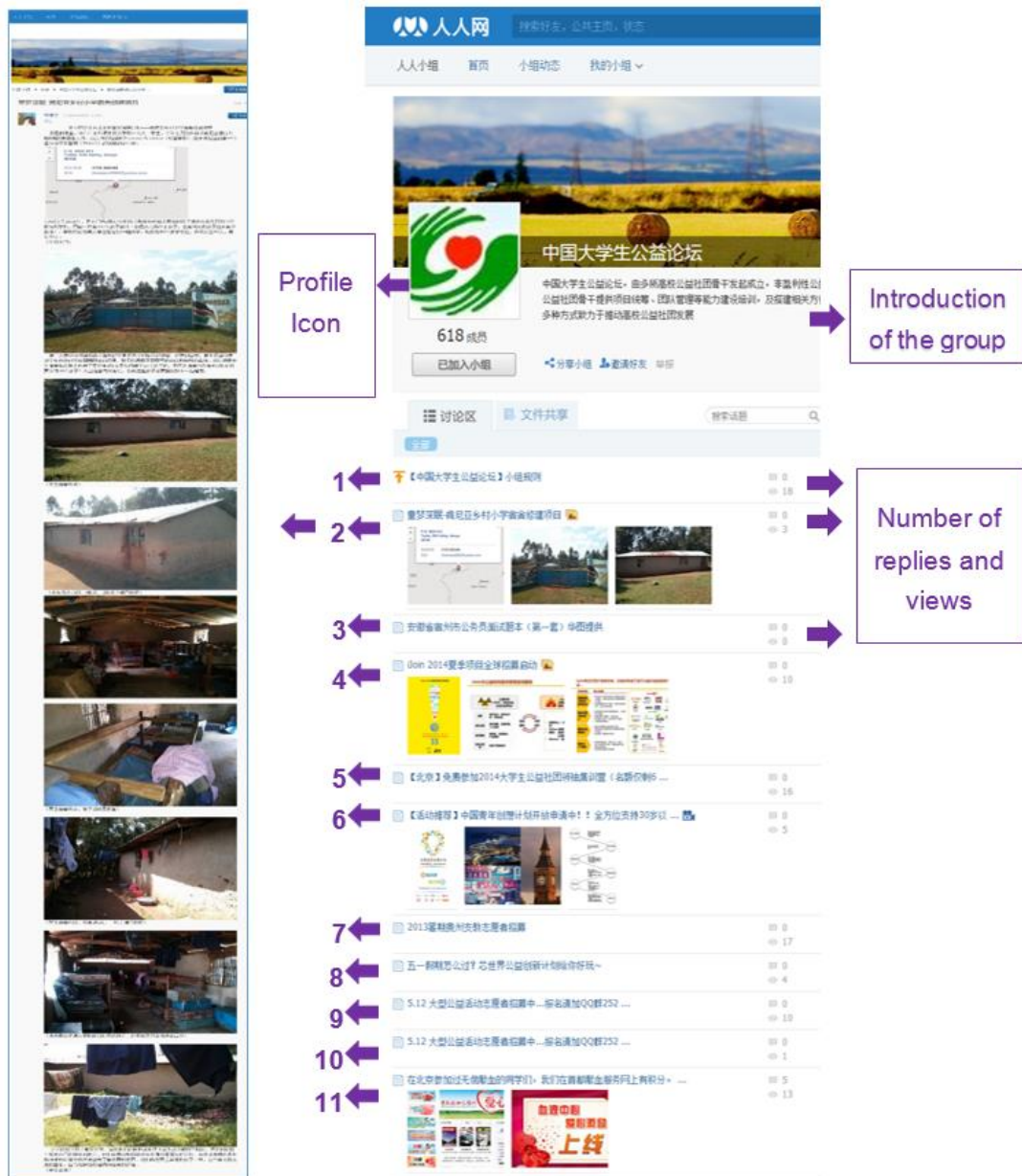
Many forum users observed on BYC and ChickenRun keep soloing even if they receive few replies. Some thread authors specifically asked other users not to reply until he or she completed the whole process of soloing. In this way, the authors have opportunities to be heard and respected, and the audience can read through the structured information and avoid the interruption of irrelevant contents. Student interviewees also found forum soloing was an effective way to help deliver ideas because this enabled them to “make a long enough and fairly strong statement with thousands of

words including knowledge or useful information” (SI 4) and to “understand something thoroughly without being interrupted by those idiotic posts with very simple and nonsense replies, such as ‘Ah~ah~’, ‘I Like it’ and ‘Good! Good!’ ” (SI 8). The above examples show that forum soloing can be a good way for a sole author to provide rich information to completely express opinions and construct civic knowledge.

7.1.2.2. News feeding

The strategy of announcing is also taken by users of SNSs, usually observed as *news feeding*. Unlike the forum where users have to find a particular topical board and occupy the whole thread for soloing, SNSs allow users to make announcements through their own profiles and feed their friends updated content. Every personal profile can act as a notice board within a certain network; newly published content on a person’s profile will be delivered to his or her followers’ News Feed pages. This procedure makes updated news as subscribed announcements that the followers are forced to read, or at least glance at, once they log in. This is a very dynamic process in which hundreds of users may post during the same period so that earlier posts are submerged by later ones very quickly.

Many youth groups established on SNSs regularly take the action of news feeding to broadcast and advertise their group interests. Some of them are linked to offline organisations such as Student Unions, youth volunteer organisations and youth patriotic groups. So their preferences for news feeding focus on the relevant civic activities coming from there. These groups also combine various ways of making announcements.



1. Rules for group discussion
2. Presentation about the reconstruction projects for rural schools in Kenya
3. Studying materials for the provincial examination of civil servants
4. Advertisement for *iJoin* (the global public welfare project in 2014 summer)
5. Application information about 2014 training camp for youth organisation leaders
6. Application information about *ThinkBig Initiative* (Chinese youth innovation project)
- 7-10. Recruitment for various volunteer projects
11. Online registration and bonus redemption for blood donation in Red Cross

Figure 7- 6: Screenshots of a Renren Group Profile about News Feeding

The screenshot in Figure 7-6 shows an example of SNS news feeding. A group of university students who engage in public welfare set up a Renren profile for communication, attracting 618 followers till the end of May, 2013. The group members keep posting on the profile to ‘feed’ the followers. Through analysing the above 11 posts, we can see the following news feeding strategies:

(1) *Making a self-portrait*. Student founders named their Renren group “Chinese University Students’ Public Forum (CUPF)”³², using the same name as their offline youth organisation. They also use the badge of the organisation as the profile icon. Every time the group publishes a post, the name and the icon, along with an abstract of the post are shown on friends’ News Feed pages. Before the post is viewed, the name and the icon together play a role of self-portrait which allows SNS friends to easily recognise who is announcing. The importance of making an effective and eye-catching SNS self-portrait has been noticed by this group of students, and was also addressed by interviewees in the following sections.

(2) *Presenting a self-statement*. The name and the icon of CUPF link to the group profile, where there is a brief statement about the group:

CUPF is a non-profit organisation set up by student leaders from different universities in China. It aims to promote the development of public service via university societies and to train student leaders in the fields of project arrangement, team management and online communication (texts extracted from Figure 7-6).

³² Here I have applied the original English name of this youth group, which was given by its founders. This group was initially named in Chinese as “中国大学生公益论坛”. A more accurate translation of this name would be “The Forum of Public Welfare for Chinese University Students”. Although its original English name does not contain the terms public service, public welfare or volunteering, the group in fact uses these visions and missions.

When SNS friends visit the CUPF profile, they will see this self-statement and quickly get to know what CUPF works for. Although this statement does not directly appear in the News Feed page, it can be regarded as a fixed announcement that is always on the profile in support of daily news feeding.

(3) *Setting a sticky post*: Another fixed announcement found in this case is a sticky post about the rules of group discussion. It has been fixed at the top of all posts. In this case, the sticky post addressed the vision of CUPF, which is “To nurture a sense of social responsibility among youth, to spread the idea of public welfare and philanthropy” (texts extracted from Post 1 in Figure 7-6). It also announced a set of dos and don'ts, such as

- do - more communication with members;
- do - respect others;
- do - join in group discussions in a calm mood;
- don't - post irrelevant content or commercial advertisements;
- don't - use violent, offensive and insulting language.

Usually, the sticky post contains content that the profile holder wants to display to the followers. This announcement provided basic guidance for students to build an online community continually doing public welfare.

(4) *Broadcasting activities*: Students broadcasted their offline civic activities on this online platform, acting as independent journalists. They post on the group profile to report their experience of participation and then ask for a wider range of help. Post 2 in Figure 7-6 is such an example, written by a university sophomore who joined a six-week volunteer project in a school named T.A. in Eldoret, Kenya. The post includes many photographs to

describe the conditions in which the children lived, where they experienced poor standards bedding for sleeping (see the left-hand-side images). The main aim of the volunteer project was to help repair and re-build student accommodation in T.A. This Chinese student applied visual materials plus literal descriptions to announce what she had seen in T.A and what she had learnt through the project.

(5) *Advertising activities*: At the end of the Post 2, the student calls for donations for this school's reconstruction project and provides details about raising money including different ways of donating, different amounts of donations and their usage, information of bank accounts, and the provision of receipts, confirmation letters, and handicraft gifts. It can be seen that the student took further steps to produce publicity for the project. The strategy of advertising activities is widely used by SNS networked students. Posts 4, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 in Figure 7-6 advertise diverse projects involving volunteer recruitment, leadership course applications, and youth innovation projects.

(6) *Recommending resources*: An SNS group can also play the role of an information centre where students upload information and resources in the same way as they do on forums. Since this SNS group is close interest-driven, students tend to select and recommend resources that are more suitable to their peer-group. For example, Post 3 recommends a package of study materials for the provincial examination for civil servants. Since many of university students consider working as civil servants after their graduation, this examination has become a popular feature. Many students, like the author of Post 3, would announce relevant news and appropriate materials to help their peers prepare for the exam.

(7) *Providing guidance*: Some posts contain suggestions and guidance to help networked friends understand policies or participate in civic activities step by step. They provide problem-solving approaches, sometimes in an individual but helpful way. For example Post 11, written by a student who donated blood, announces how students can register with the Red Cross Blood Centre online, and how they can redeem a bonus or souvenir with their blood donation certification. As the student says in the post, not many people know this information, so she posted to inform friends and provide screenshot guidance for the different steps of the registration and redemption process on the website.

The strategies observed in this case are also used by other SNS groups, as well as by individual SNS users. The key function of this way of cybervic participation is to inform a community. Compared with news feeding by a group, those by individuals may not always concern public issues. Instead, most of the time they just post their selfies or travel experiences. It may be difficult to recognise individual news feeding as cybervic announcing. However, if the selfie and travel relate to a civic featured activity, this may be an exception. Going back to the example of the students' Weibo protest for environmental protection (see Section 6.2.4), the taking of selfies and broadcasting of individual actions during that protest have become an announcement "I am on the spot". Therefore to distinguish the form of cybervic participation one has to consider its purpose and context.

7.1.3.3. Structured instructing

The study has found many structured ways of making announcements via social media. The use of the term 'structured' here implies a consciously-designed and sequential approach to the making of announcements. This

form of participation aims to provide specific and detailed instructions to citizens about what *good behaviours* are. A typical example of this category is publishing and addressing netiquettes, which is the set of polite customs and rules that users are suggested to follow when communicate online. The research found different versions of netiquettes on the four observed sites. As BYC, Renren and Weibo are run by the government or companies, their netiquettes are regulated by administrative teams containing many detailed legal rules and regulations. By contrast, the netiquettes of ChickenRun are creatively made by university students. Table 7-1 presents ten widely-spread rules of netiquettes originally proposed by the internet author Virginia Shea³³ and applied by students on ChickenRun. The students translated the rules from English into Chinese, and then provided their own interpretations to each rule, in order to make them applicable to the forum and to help their peers to better understand and practise netiquettes. For instance, they emphasised the importance of Rule 1 on its international dimension of “common space”, implicitly raising the civic awareness of a wider and global community. In Rule 4 they explained why repeatedly raising and answering questions online could be perceived as being a non-respectful action. They also used Chinese idioms to describe what impolite or good online behaviours look like, such as “a king of flooding” (灌水王)³⁴ in Rule 5, “a *Pofu* hysterically shouting or cursing in the street” (泼妇骂街)³⁵ in Rule 7, and “treat our comrade as warmly as spring wind does” (对待同志要像春天般温暖)³⁶ in Rule 10. This structured instructing lays out the moral ground for cyber citizens to commonly ‘live’ together.

³³ <http://www.albion.com/netiquette/corerules.html>

³⁴ This term refers to a person who keeps posting nonsense and useless information.

³⁵ A *Pofu* means a shrew, which is a traditional Chinese stereotype of a fierce and irritated woman.

³⁶ This well-known Chinese quotation refers to kindly and tolerantly treating others, and was originally written by LEI Feng, who was portrayed as a role model of a selfless and modest citizen who devoted himself to the CPC and PRC.

Table 7- 1: Student-edited Netiquettes

<p>Rule 1: Remember the existence of the human</p> <p>The Internet provides a <i>common space</i> for people from all over the world to get together. This advanced new technology easily makes an illusion that we are communicating with screens, instead of with people, so that our behaviours online become vulgar and discourteous...Never post anything you wouldn't say to people face to face.</p>
<p>Rule 2: Adhere to the same standards of behaviour online that you follow in real life</p> <p>The majority of people comply with rules and regulations in real life, so they should also do so in online life. Morality and legislation online are the same as those which occur offline. Do not take it for granted to lower moral standards when communicating online.</p>
<p>Rule 3: Know where you are in cyberspace</p> <p>Different online forums have different rules. What you can do on one forum may not be appropriate for other forums. Our advice would be: please firstly lurk others' speeches and acts to know about the atmosphere of this forum and what users are allowed to do.</p>
<p>Rule 4: Respect other people's time and bandwidth</p> <p>Before raising a question on the forum, you should firstly spend some time on finding possible answers. Similar questions have probably been asked and answered many times. Don't be self-centred and waste others' time and resources to respond to your questions...<i>Don't repeat and repackage</i> as others may have done this already!</p>
<p>Rule 5: Make yourself look good online</p> <p>When communicating online you won't be judged by your appearance, but your words. Please pay attention to what you write. If you are not familiar with a topic, please read books to get into the field, rather than write something that is nonsense and frivolous which makes you look like '<i>a king of flooding</i>' so that others laugh at you and dislike you. Please check grammar and spelling. Never use provocative or dirty words. Don't take rudeness as straightforwardness. Don't take impudence as braveness.</p>
<p>Rule 6: Share expert knowledge</p> <p>Raising an interesting and insightful question is a way of sharing knowledge, as such a question can enlighten thinking and stimulate answers. It's good to share the results of your questions, especially when you get responses through email [or other peer-to-peer messages]. Sharing expert knowledge and good resources will make you happy.</p>
<p>Rule 7: Help keep flame wars under control</p> <p>Arguing and fighting usually happens online. We should convince people by reasoning, and make others sincerely convinced. Don't do personal attacks. Otherwise, you will make yourself look like '<i>a Pofu</i> [a shrew] hysterically shouting or cursing in the street'.</p>
<p>Rule 8: Respect other people's privacy</p> <p>Chatting history records a part of privacy. If you know someone who is using a pseudonym, it is a bad to reveal his or her real name to the public. If you see a secret on someone's personal computer or email account by accident, you should not publicise it.</p>
<p>Rule 9: Don't abuse your power</p> <p>Administrators have more power than others. They should use their power carefully and aim to improve public services. Never forget that the power comes with responsibilities.</p>
<p>Rule 10: Be forgiving of other people's mistakes</p> <p>We were all network newbies once, we all made mistakes before. When you see others' mistakes, like a spelling error, or an unnecessarily long post, please be kind about it. If you feel the necessity to say something, you'd be better to correct the person privately (e.g. sending an email) and in an appropriate tone. Everyone has self-esteem and doesn't want to lose face. We should "<i>treat our comrade as warmly as spring wind does</i>".</p>

From the above it can be seen that certain values predominate, including mutual respect, tolerance, care in expression, and sharing on an equal basis, which are of direct relevance to the issues of cybercivic learning. Although students' explanations of some rules seem inappropriate and the use of some prejudicial phrases can be questioned for some reasons (further discussed in Section 7.1.4), this case of student-edited online instruction has encoded fundamental social and civic values for good cyber citizens, which inadvertently reveals that what often actually happens is the reverse of this.

The instruction of netiquettes was structured in details and contextualised to serve student users of the forum. However, very few users notice or respond to it. As several of interviewees reported, they saw this netiquette post as a sticky post placed on the top of the threads, but they have never clicked on it or looked through the post. From this, we can see the limitations of this form of cybercivic participation once again, as the announcements are easily ignored, even though they are literally productive, elaborate, information-rich and well-designed.

7.1.3 Networked-promoting

Promoting in daily life refers to encouraging people to like, buy, use or support something. This approach applied to civic participation means publicising citizenship-related ideas, products or activities and encouraging people to believe, support or engage. The study finds that social media-based promoting relies on interactive support from networked groups. Social media users receive information and deliver it to their own networks in a variety of ways, and then their networked friends repeat this delivery so that information about civic opinions and activities is continually spread and strengthened. This implies that the success of promoting depends on an

effective snow-balling promotion which is collectively promoted by networked participants, consciously or unconsciously. However, it is not necessary for participants to produce new content. I therefore feature this approach with higher interactivity plus lower productivity. I have observed three indicators to describe such a networked promoting: bumping-up of posts, clicks of 'like', and the silent shares, which I will now further analyse.

7.1.3.1. Bumping up

One frequently used way of promoting a forum post is called *bumping up*. The default sequence of presenting topical threads depends on the time of the last reply. A thread will automatically jump to the top of the forum board once it gets a reply. Many forum users continuously reply to their interesting threads in order to keep returning them to the top of the board and make them more easily seen by others. In Chinese, the action of bumping up is expressed as a metaphor of leaping up or lifting up something onto the top. In English, it has been suggested that 'bump' is an acronym of 'bring up my post'.³⁷

The aim of bumping up is to easily make a topic hot and popular. Most of the time, it is not necessary to provide particular opinions or meaningful information in a bumping-up post. Rather, some simple replies will quickly bring the topic back to the beginning of the thread list. In the cases from my observation, some phrases (see Table 7-2) were frequently used by students for bumping up the threads, which originated from BBS conversations and are sometimes seen in SNS interactions.

³⁷ See The Free Dictionary on: <<http://acronyms.thefreedictionary.com/BUMP>>

Table 7- 2: Examples of the Bumping-up Phrases Used in Social Media

Original Phrase in Chinese	Translation of Phrase in English	Meaning of the Phrase
沙发!	Sofa!	I am the first respondent.
板凳!	Bench!	I am the second respondent.
地板!	Floor!	I am the following respondent.
地下室!	Basement!	I am the late-coming respondent.
支持楼主!	Support the Louzhu!	'Louzhu' means the original author of the post.
顶起!	Dingqi!	The Chinese word means 'bumping up' or jack up
顶!	Ding!	The abbreviation of Dingqi.
好贴!	Good Post!	
稀饭 (喜欢)!	Porridge (I like it)!	'Porridge' is one of homophonic words of 'like' in Chinese.

These phrases have become online idiomatic expressions which are commonly seen in all topical threads, not just responding to civic topics. This indicates once again that some forms of cybercivic participation with implicit metaphor and humour have been mixed with everyday online interactions, which are not as easy to distinguish from non-civic activities as might be expected. (Livingstone et al., 2005; Banaji & Buckingham, 2010).

Some interviewees saw this act of promotion as a *collective online carnival* in which students “posted under a topic thread just for fun” (SI 4) or “for making eye-catching news within the forum” (SI 7). Both of them participated in bumping up a thread to be one of top ten topics. The case that they reviewed and successfully achieved is the thread about a gay couple’s wedding which I discussed in Section 6.2.6. This kind of controversial civic issue usually attracts a great number of interested bystanders who

superficially engage in the topic, waiting for its continuous fermentation and feeling themselves as hot topic makers.

Other interviewees showed their dislike of the act of bumping up because it was always full of *flooding posts* that seem short, repetitive and less thoughtful. They doubted whether this meaningless kind of post for the purpose of promoting could be recognised as civic participation as

... [it] contains less valuable information and assertions (SI 5).

... [it] has not provided any political and social preference (SI 8).

... [it] wastes other's time to look through meaningless posts and takes longer to find out the effective information (SI 9).

Literally speaking, most bumping-up posts lack profound civic awareness besides the simple purpose of promoting something in a community, especially flooding posts. However, one of the interviewees put forward an interesting idea that

The flooding posts can contain multiple meanings which could express joy, support, encouragement, irony, anger, and so on. You won't understand them unless you are familiar with the environment (SI 4).

This reveals a difficulty both for online participants and researchers to understand cybercivic participation, which is that a simple act of promoting may include various motivations or emotions behind the apparent participation.

Another example of bumping up is from paid commentators who are employed to promote a post or an opinion for specific commercial or political purposes. The interviewees noticed this phenomena, which is widely discussed in Chinese cyber space. This study did not produce as many examples as hoped for because of the difficulty in distinguishing who the paid promoters are. Yet, later in this chapter (see Section 7.3.2), I will

provide some students' narratives about the promoting fight between opposite groups which consist of the paid promoters who are manipulating the propensity of cybercivic culture.

Students have noted positive and negative influences of bumping up. This approach shows an obvious standpoint in which citizens networked together to support someone, some organisations or some opinions. Since the opposing voices would be inevitable, the simple act of bumping up can also induce negative responses full of disagreements or insults. But as I explained before, the opposing replies will also bump the thread up to the top, helping the promotion and even enlarging the popularity of the topic. This implies a unique feature of cybercivic participation that a non-supportive act may conversely make a supportive result.

7.1.3.2. Clicking 'Like'

Every post published on Renren and Weibo is signalled with the icons of 'Like', 'Share' and 'Comment'. They respectively imply simple responses to the original post, notification to other participants, and communication with the post author and other participants. Among these actions, 'Like' is the easiest option that just needs one mouse click.

Unlike bumping up, clicking 'Like' has no obvious effect on taking a post to the top of a News Feed page within a network. But if a user clicks 'Like' for a post, his or her networked friends will be able to see what the user is interested in. Also, he or she will receive notifications when the networked friends 'Like' the same post. This approach seems to be the simplest way of recommending content to friends and knowing those who have the same interests.

From the observation, the study can only apparently understand the act of clicking 'Like' as an attitude of liking something. However, when listening to interviewees, it has found that this simple form of SNS-based participation has multiple meanings. For instance, the main function of this act is to express that a participant has 'read' and 'noticed' the post, which some say is the reason they click 'Like':

- I think the post [you] just published is cool (SI 9).
- I'm also interested in what you are looking at (SI 3).
- I keep eyes on whatever my good friend posted (SI 17).
- I'm online, waiting for someone's updates (SI 37).

Clicking 'Like' can also imply a discursive, dissenting or ironic attitude towards friends' posts. The latent meanings of 'Like' are explained by students below:

- The click of 'Like' means a lot. Sometimes it means I don't want to talk or to make comments to your post (SI 3).
- Some post was too stupid to motivate me to give any response, so I just clicked 'Like'... [for instance,] one of my friends posted an album of photos about Thailand, including hundreds of her terribly narcissistic selfies (SI 40).
- I click 'Like' because I just want to show my kindness to a friend. It doesn't mean I like the content they posted (SI 41).

These examples show the complexity of a simple act of online participation and the difficulty decoding the meanings of those 'Likes'. Unless citizens are deeply engaged in the communication and know participants very well, they do not fully interpret and reflect such forms of networked-promoting.

7.1.3.3. *Sharing without comments*

A more visible promoting interaction is to share civic content with others. Gauntlett and Horsley (2004) argue that sharing can be recognised as participation where people take positive actions to be engaged in an online conversation and expect to enlarge the impact of the topic. Through sharing, people are gradually building up a civic network based on common interests, even though this is a loose network in which citizens just copy and forward content to others without comments and they may not know each other. Every time a post is shared, it increases the possibility of getting further attention.

Sharing really makes changes to the community. One case is where the observed students on Renren engaged in sharing videos about a boy dancing in front of university gates, which I analysed in Chapter 6 (see Section 6.2.3). Initially, most of the students viewed the videos for fun. While they realised the intention of the video, many of them were likely to share it with their peers to help Osteogenesis Imperfecta (OI) children. By 31 August 2012, one of the videos had been viewed 381,462 times and shared 37,534 times among Renren networks. This collective cybervic participation became the headline news broadcasted in mainstream media very soon after. The dancing boy and his campaign of public welfare got more attention, so he set up public profiles on Renren and Weibo in order to further spread the need of OI children and ask for more social care. In this case, silent online viewing and sharing represents a kind of positive participatory action, which helped a young person's initiative campaign become a national-wide public topic. Therefore it would be inaccurate to dismiss sharing as 'passive' because it can and does contribute towards shaping cybervic culture and influence the development of a civil society.

Just as one of student interviewee remarked, “I think online sharing has represented a kind of public spirit that we together make good things benefit more people or we together help someone in need by every single click of sharing” (SI 8). However, although the act of sharing to some extent represents a kind of attitude, it could not articulate citizens’ attitude or appeals and not help the problem-solving, unless the further comments and discussions come along with shares.

7.1.4. Community-constructing

Comparing the above three approaches, the study has found a more interactive and productive way of cybervic participation, which is defined as *community-constructing*. The concept of community has broadened into both online and offline settings, local, national and global. The notion of constructing refers to an active action which requires citizens to work collaboratively and contribute. I regard this form as a higher level of cybervic participation, which will not only benefit the online community but also the offline community. Chinese young people in social media have applied four approaches to constructing their civic communities that are observed and reported in the study below.

7.1.4.1. Reciprocal sharing

Reciprocal sharing is different from unidirectional and non-responsive forms of sharing. The key point is mutual support. Students who take this form of cybervic participation are clear about who will be their potential audience, why they are sharing, what they are asking or arguing for, and what possible responses that they expect to obtain or what potential influences they expect to make. Through this way, students aim to set up a mutually-beneficial local

community in social media environment and strengthen community involvement in their peer group.

Typical examples of reciprocal sharing can be found within networks of alumni or interest groups, where young people have explicit purposes to share and obtain information, such as information about examinations, job-hunting, or forthcoming events of hobby groups. Most of the observed boards on BYC were set up to encourage university students to exchange information and enrich their local community. For instance, the board of '*Campus Life*' was renamed as '*University Life*' when BYC updated its server and layout in 2013, emphasising university as a local community of mutual support. Other university-related boards have also been set up for exchanges of information among particular target groups, including '*University News Agency*', '*University Volunteers Club*' and '*Job-hunting Service*'. ChickenRun boards have more specific categories set up for reciprocal sharing, where students exchange information within interest groups, which I discussed in Chapter 6 (see Table 6-9).

Another key point of this approach is to share knowledge and insights. One example is of an interviewee who was interested in Chinese traditional medicine. He introduced many posts concerning a particular herb and linked this with ideas about traditional Chinese culture. He always commented on his shared posts, pointing out the perceived errors within the posts and providing reasons and analyses. He regarded himself as "someone who aims to scientifically study and explain Chinese traditional medicine and offer an authoritative viewpoint based on serious studies" (SI 42). Another example was the interviewee from an ethnic minority group Hui People. He responded to stereotyped and negative expressions about his group

whenever they were criticised after a terrorist incident, asserting a principled personal position and supporting the reputation of the group of which he was a member (SI 44). Both students got responses of agreement and disagreement on their posts. Their networked friends keep sharing what they shared and commented, and make further comments. In such ways, they believed “the correct opinions and knowledge are being shared in a dialogue via social media” (SI 42) and “the misleading information would possibly be eliminated” (SI 44). Although we could not judge what the correct knowledge is and whether the misunderstanding still exists or not, we have seen students’ efforts to affect this via the process of reciprocal sharing.

Moreover, students (SI 41, 42, 44 & 45) recognised some strategies for making frequently-shared posts that trigger public interest. Some of them reported that their posts had successfully gained more views through using the following tactics in their daily activities online:

- making a striking title for the post
- selecting materials carefully
- making the layout reader-friendly
- addressing some topics like a column writer
- adding pictures and photographs
- keeping regular updates and responses

Each of the above processes involves making conscious and creative decisions. Individual students are critically selecting and sharing for an audience, some of whom they know. They set out to make their voice heard and their viewpoints recognised. They then become contributors among many others who share without comments. The students expected the purposeful and tactful form of reciprocal sharing to stimulate ongoing dialogue to keep the community interactive and thoughtful.

7.1.4.2. Reflective discussion

Reflective discussion is a way for people to profoundly exchange their opinions and resources through social media, which can enrich civic knowledge and inspire conversation within the community. Young people who take this approach tend to express their opinions independently, carefully and critically, not just following and promoting what has been posted in their networks. Where a reflective discussion happens online, it is possible to observe deliberative civic conversations that Habermas ([1992] 1996) argued for. Reflective discussion also embodies some capabilities of civic participation discussed in Chapter 2, such as experience-sharing and critical thinking.

Students online are observed to understand public issues from different perspectives, particularly for those normative civic issues taken for granted as public good. Table 7-3 below is a topical post about volunteering teaching extracted from ChickenRun in March 2013 which shows the process of students' online reflective discussions. Initially, one student was seeking information. This attracted some commentators who had participated in the volunteering teaching programme to post their experiences. They seemed willing to be engaged in the discussion and to offer further help to their peers. The sharing of the experience also stimulated other students to question the present policy and backup service for volunteers, and then opened up a debate. Although this thread discussion did not develop any appropriate solutions for the difficulty of volunteering work in reality, it addressed the need to make changes.

Table 7- 3: An Example of Reflective Discussion on ChickenRun

Users	Posts	Strategies in use
User 1:	I really want to find volunteering work in this summer vacation. Does anyone know about this?	Raising questions and asking for help
User 2:	There's a project named 'Teaching for China' organised by a NGO. You can have a look.	Providing information
User 3:	Many of our alumni used to teach children in labour migrants' schools in suburban areas of Beijing. Just ask senior students in your department.	Providing information and the approach to the further help
User 4:	I once worked as a volunteer teacher in a small country in Gansu Province. I learnt a lot through that one-month project. My colleagues are still working there. You can contact them (websites and contacting emails provided).	Sharing experience and offering contact information
User 5:	@ User 1. I come from Western China. I'm also looking for a volunteering opportunity near my hometown.	Finding common interest and seeking information
User 1:	@ User 4. How about the conditions of the country where you stayed?	Seeking more information
User 4:	@ User 1. Very poor. We five girls slept in a room where there was no real bed, but only a big bunk pieced with 10 desks. It took at least two hours to walk to the nearest town for buying daily supplies.	Sharing experience with details
User 6 :	@ User 4. Fortunately, I didn't apply for this tough volunteer work.	Negative and uninterested response
User 7:	Why does the government always broadcast a policy in one way, but put it into practice in another way?	Questioning to complain
User 8:	Many volunteers choose this work because of moral motivation. But when they meet such disappointing problems in practice, how can they keep their passion and sense of responsibilities?	Highlighting the dilemma
User 9:	I agree that the policy should be improved to support volunteers more!	Calling for change making
User 5:	@ User 4. I really want to go to a poor region. Because it is the place that needs people like us.	Appreciating the peer's experience
User 10:	@ User 5. Me too. I want to stay there for longer, not just taking a volunteering job as a kind of showing-off experience.	Expressing a wish and reflecting the motivation of volunteering

From the BBS thread above, we can see an interactive and productive online conversation in which student users inspired each other to reflect on the significance of volunteering work. Some users applied the format of “@someone” to highlight that they were particularly talking to someone or commenting on someone’s posts. This way of social media-based communication built an internal discourse network between some participants, such as for Users 1, 4, 5, 6 and 10, besides the network of all of thread participants. Within a very short time, ten users using different strategies contributed to the topic. They seek, question, break up and protect the idealism of volunteering work. Their discussions reveal diverse attitudes towards the current volunteering system and produce more questions hidden between the lines for further discussion, for instance:

- What kinds of volunteering work can university students do?
- What is the significance of volunteering work in the poor and underdeveloped regions?
- What possible dilemmas face volunteers?
- Who should be responsible for improving volunteers’ working and living conditions (e.g. NGOs, government or other stakeholders)?
- What are the motivations of doing volunteer work?

The exchange of opinions can help young people collectively create a micro-community where they inspire and influence each other, raising more questions amongst themselves, challenging the normative answers, and trying to rebuild some common opinions in the community. Other examples related to reflective discussion can be found in Chapter 6 (see Section 6.2.1.4) and Chapter 8 (see Section 8.2.3.1).

7.1.4.3. Working as moderators

The importance of online moderation has been highlighted by Ferguson (2007) as the process of coordination that ensures effective and equal participation, which is a key feature to distinguish a deliberative online community with respect from a loose chat room without rules and regulations. The main tasks for the forum moderator include hosting deliberative discussions, dealing with conflicts and promoting informed citizenship (pp.160-166). In this sense, working as moderators is an active form of cybervic participation because a citizen directly makes a contribution to constructing and maintaining an online community.

Compared with Ferguson's study, this research finds that student moderators have more work to do in Chinese social media environments. Three of the interviewee students reported that they were working as part-time moderators for BBS boards (SI 6 & 7) and SNS profiles of interest groups (SI 22). None of them were professional administrators or studying computer sciences or ICT, but were interested in working online regularly to communicate with others and help build the online community. In order to maintain effective and orderly communication, they undertook a wide range of tasks including:

- *building platforms for discussions*: creating, moving, splitting or merging boards; setting up group networks; and categorising topics;
- *hosting deliberative discussions*: posting to stimulate topical discussion; commenting on others' posts to stimulate conversation;
- *guiding the community*: answering users' questions; providing supporting resources; interpreting the policy and regulation of social media; praising or rewarding users who behaved well;

- *dealing with conflicts*: dealing with complaints; tackling verbal disputes between users; warning or giving punishment to the users who made illegal or sensitive speech or abused other users;
- *balancing the power*: removing illegal or offensive content; tidying up or closing boards in order to terminate discussions when necessary; facilitating or opposing online censorship.

The three students recognised that their identity as moderators in fact contained multiple roles, such as “facilitator”, “arbitrators”, “cleaner of junk posts”, “butler of virtual home”, “representative of authority” or even “online cops”. However, they did not fully agree on these roles and thought some of them were misunderstood by other students. For example, the reason the moderators are ironically called “online cops” is because sometimes they need to find and delete illegal posts, but “the post authors were not satisfied with such a moderation and would argue with the moderators” (SI 7). This reveals a contradiction between the freedom of online speech and the legitimacy of online moderation. The student moderators preferred to value their “independent or neutral positions” between the authority and so-called grassroots users, although this is difficult to achieve. Working as moderators has brought challenges to students, while also giving them skills in online communication and sensibility toward legal and illegal civic participation. Maybe for this reason, one of the student moderators successfully obtained a full-time job after his graduation at one of China’s most influential media companies, working as an assistant administrator responsible for social media management (SI 6). To some extent, working as online moderators can be seen as a constructive form of *orderly cyberscivic participation* within a current political and legal system.

7.1.4.4. Benefiting offline communities

Other more active cybervic participation forms are featured in students' ability to transfer between online and offline actions. This approach is similar to what Montgomery and Gottlieb-Robles (2006) called 'youth activism', which means the young grassroots online activists become involved in interactions between online and offline efforts. Some students investigated in this study have successfully organised public activities and campaigns through social media, expanding their appeals and responsibilities from online to offline settings.

One observed example is fundraising through social media. Students firstly initiate a topical proposal and post it on diverse online platforms, and then carry into real world settings. For instance, a widely spread forum post on BYC refers to a donation campaign "*If you eat less fruit every day*", which called on its participants to eat less fruit, drink fewer bottles of cola, send fewer text messages and do less clothes shopping, in order to save money. The aim of this campaign was to help disabled and drop-out children by collecting and delivering the donated money and items to the children in need. Volunteers of this campaign provided their contact details by posting online. They took the responsibility of informing the offline achievement of the campaign, for instance, how many online participants had contacted offline volunteers, how much money had been raised, and how many donated items students received. Through this activity, participants of the online community were connected with those in the offline community. They collaboratively worked together, building a new network that particularly benefitted disadvantaged young people.

It can be seen that this approach of cybercivic participation has combined many of the approaches discussed in the previous sections. The key point of this form is the *integration* of online and offline activities, interactive and productive strategies, as well as individual civic interests and public common good.

7.2. Reasons for Student Cybercivic Participation

From the above investigation, we have seen different ranges and levels of youth engagement in civic topics and activities through social media. This section explores some factors behind such differences, based on Chinese university students' perspectives. Previous scholars (Selwyn, 2004; Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Vraga et al., 2014) have demonstrated that both *technological* and *socioeconomic* factors (see Chapter 3) affect youth cybercivic participation, while this study focuses on the factors related to cybercivic capabilities. Being asked the reasons why they did or did not take part in discussions and activities, students provided diverse answers, which primarily referred to their interests, needs, sense of civic efficacy, habits of social media use, relationships with peers, and knowledge, values and skills gained from formal education.

7.2.1. Offline civic interests

The first and most important reason behind university students paying attention to civic issues online is that they are interested in the topics. The factors that arouse interests are various, while whether someone makes continuous and continual cybercivic participation significantly depends on their offline interests. Those who are keen on political and social topics and

care for the public community in their daily life reported that they often take part in online civic activities.

Many examples are provided by student interviewees who are members of online interest groups. Their online lurking and communication activities focus on the themes that they regularly or recently “discussed with family and friends” (SI 2), “read from books” (SI 40), “shared within their movie clubs” (SI 16 & 17) and “practised in their leisure time, such as the protection for the environment and endangered species” (SI 1 & 9). These offline lifestyle activities seem to easily fit into students’ online interactions.

Some students who worked for youth organisations like the Student Union or welfare societies displayed a relatively high level of interest towards cybercivic participation. Since youth organisations regularly launch activities, their student members often help with their online promotion, for example by “voting for the ten most outstanding instructors”, “sharing information on Renren profile for boycotting unsafe foods” and “running an online flea market and raising funds for charity”. (SI 6). Although there are many online activities, students paid more attention to those “launched by” or “related to” their own organisations (SI 2 & SI 33), which indicates online promoting serves offline activities.

The study has also identified a gender difference in offline civic interests which mirrors students’ online preferences. Among interviewees, men were more likely to be involved in online civic discussions than women. Male informants asserted: “That is a men’s game!”, “We boys love to view and have a kind of SNS discussion on diverse public topics, like politics and military affairs” (SI 13 & 14). By contrast, women students felt uneasy engaging with “so called

citizenship, which consists of a set of big and vague topics which men always talk about” (SI 17). Girls’ sustained interests online were more grounded in aspects of their personal lives, such as food, cosmetics, shopping and fashion (SI 18 & 19). However, this gender difference was not absolutely constant.

7.2.2. Personal needs in the public

Cybercivic participation was not always driven by students’ concerns for the public, but by their personal needs or individual civic rights when interacting with them. The more interactive and productive forms of cybercivic participation especially depend on students’ stronger inner motivation related to their personal interest and appeals.

One motivation for students to express opinions is to become the centre of attention in their online community. This can be achieved by establishing a frequent online presence, by commenting on hot issues, and by rebelling against normative civic values. Student interviewees found that online posts “keeping in step with breaking news” or “denouncing the government of any country” would be welcomed (SI 4 & 12). Thus, some students kept publishing such posts in order to “attract hundreds of fans” and “to make themselves like super stars in their networks” (SI 4 & 12). It is easy for actively cynical posters to gain reputations of “brave commentators” or “opinion leaders” or “cynic youth (愤青)”, which can be seen as “admirable” or “grandstanding” titles (SI 4, 12, 42 & 43). Once these posters attracted enough followers, no matter what they posted, they would obtain a number of ‘Likes’, ‘Shares’ and comments. This process seems like “celebrity politics” (Loader & Mercea, 2011) in a smaller range of networks where cybercivic participation is led by some peer idols.

Another reason for youth cybervic participation is the struggle for personal rights. For example in one case a student photographer asked for protection of his copyright, as his photographs were being used for university publicity without his agreement. He published a personal status message on Renren to complain that his authorship and copyright had been totally ignored by university administrators. The wide circulation of his status message was noticed by the university administrators who finally acknowledged his copyright.

These two simple cases indicate that one's personal civic interest, expression and action can trigger collective action and make a hot issue more public. In other words, youth cybervic participation is not always derived from reasons of citizenship.

7.2.3. Sense of civic efficacy

Students' previous participation experience, no matter how successful or unsuccessful, would affect their current and future attitude towards cybervic participation. Those who have earned online responses or offline support are more likely to continue the civic conversations and actions, because they feel themselves were good at talking about the issue or good at solving out the problem. This can be explained with the notion of '*sense of political efficacy*' (see also Chapter 3).

A teacher interviewee noticed the tendency of cybervic participation where "if students feel that their participatory actions can affect political decision-making and help to solve problems, they may be inspired to continue participating" (TI 3). However, in many cases, students choose a path of non-participation because they still feel "speechless" when referring to

political and social issues, both online and offline. They have few opportunities to live as “a real citizen” or “a political being”, so they lack direct experience of civic participatory strategies like presenting, demonstrating and negotiating (SI 22 & TI 2). This suggests a reason for the wide existence of lurkers.

Moreover, student interviewees explained the reasons why that they are engaged more in some activities while being disconnected from others. For instance, they felt that expressing and discussing environmental problems was safer, less problematic, and more easily accessible than political issues. For some, specifically political issues such as governance and bureaucratic systems were more difficult because of their opaqueness, whereas environmental issues were more overt (SI 1, 16 & 42). They would rather express the view of feeling more relaxed and comfortable speaking about environmental issues. As such sentiments are widely felt, it leads to posts receiving greater response rates, partly also because respondents have shared similar experiences.

Young people also take part in civic activities due to an “illusory sense of civic efficacy”, in which their peer group play vital roles. Student interviewees noted that sometimes they share civic-featured topics or took part in online civic discussions “because many of their networked friends did so” (SI 18 & 19). Such peer pressure pushed them to follow the majority and let them feel they were “making popular and valuable civic conversation online”. But they did not realise their influence was very limited in a small community. In other words, they actually were not as empowered as they imagined.

7.2.4. 'Residence' or 'migration' within social media

Some students get used to visiting certain BBS boards or SNS groups regularly because they feel they belong to a sub-community where some participants have mutual discussions and know each other, building a relatively stable network.

Students tended to take active forms of participation in the platforms where their friends were usually present. Comparing the extent of youth cybersocial participation on BYC and ChickenRun, the attitudes of interviewees are dramatically different. Most of them know little about BYC, some of them have never even heard of it. The participants once visited BYC because their university or instructors introduced it to them, or they had something that needed to be published on BYC for their society's publicity. These students reflected that BYC is able to provide "more authentic and reliable information", especially listing "documents related to policies, national programme and important political and social events" (SI 6, 7 & 11). However, students did not feel comfortable staying on this platform. For one thing, there were fewer friends with whom to have interactive discussions. For another, there was a strict monitor system. As one said,

When you have something to say, every post, even a short text has to be checked and approved by the site administrator or by someone else, which usually took two or three working days. If you are lucky, your post could be seen on the forum. Very inconvenient to post!' (SI 6)

It seems that students who visited BYC trusted its content but not its network and community. They felt it was too uncomfortable and inconvenient to post a message, so they would rather give up posting on that site.

When asking student interviewees to talk about ChickenRun, the situation was different. All interviewees from University B knew this student forum.

The majority of them visited ChickenRun very frequently because their friends and schoolmates did so. Unlike BYC, there was not as much information about national civic activities. Yet, ChickenRun offered students a “relatively free discussion on political and social issues”, an “independent space only for students”, “an interesting mutual studying platform”, and “opportunities to see so many different, special, weird and rebellious ideas” (SI 1, 3 & 7). Even though students fully understood their forum posts would possibly be monitored, they tended to continually discuss and not think they would get into trouble because of their posts. They believed that as long as they “keep in a normal tune without vicious words” and “do not go against the law”, their online posts would be acceptable (SI 3). In addition, they felt that the moderators had become more tolerant than before when they caught a student who posted content that was too radical on the forum (SI 1 & 3). With the evolution of social media platforms, many students gave up participation in BBSs, moving to SNSs. The decision behind their migration media always depends on where they have more acquaintances. What could be surmised here is that citizenship is a sense of belonging (Osler & Starkey, 2005), so students’ cybercivic participation addresses on their digital citizenship and belonging to a social media community.

7.2.5. Capability divide instead of digital divide

Finally, the study suggested that students’ capabilities, namely their knowledge background, familiarity towards civic topics and their civic values and skills, influence their cybercivic participation. These factors are related to education. The higher level of education gained, the more likely individuals will use the Internet for work and study (Gerodimos & Ward, 2007).

Some civic issues are based on young people's professional backgrounds. It means young people tend to be more interested in civic affairs related to their majors. In some cases, when students search for information and discuss their course assignments on Renren, they may meet up and pay attention to civic issues related to their areas of study. In other cases, when a general civic topic needs certain professional knowledge to understand it, students may be also willing to engage in it.

For instance, a student studying natural resources and local economics shares articles and photographs about environmental protection on Renren (SI 1). Students who are doing agricultural research pay more attention to civic issues about the countryside, farmers, and agricultural policy, such as the development of rural economics, the reform of agricultural tax, and farmers' living circumstances (SI 10, 11 & 12). Students who majored in veterinary medicine often post and share animal pictures on Renren in order to persuade people to treat animals well and protect them (SI 8 & 9). However, a student studying computer science seldom considers politics and citizenship because it is too far away from him and too complicated to understand (SI 6).

Students reported that education made them aware of civic issues. Take patriotism as an example; Chinese students experience different forms of patriotism education from primary school to university. In some countries, patriotism is regarded as a controversy. According to Haynes (2009), patriotism as a positive emotion can help with the building of national identity and citizens' sense of belonging, but it may also overemphasise single national identity, thus undermining intercultural and international understanding and hindering the development of global citizenship. It is even

said that patriotism can potentially lead to a militaristic government that maintains a powerful military capability for expanding national interests, and require citizens to devote themselves to the nation no matter what. For complex reasons, the theme of patriotism is not always advocated in Europe. Especially when teaching patriotism in schools, there is a difficulty in balancing unconditional love and rational judgement to a nation (Hand, 2011).

However, in contemporary China, patriotism is perceived as an indispensable theme for understanding citizenship and citizenship education, which is regarded as the core of the Chinese national ethos in relation to national self-respect, dignity, pride and solidarity. Patriotic expressions and activities used to be very important aspects of civic participation in Chinese modern history when Chinese citizens took actions of anti-colonisation and anti-aggression. Such efforts for national liberation have been transferred to the effort for national rejuvenation, just like what Chinese citizens are carrying out now (Haolei Wang & MOEPRC, 2009). Since the release of CPS's 18th National Congress Report (J. Hu, 2012), patriotism has been officially raised as one of twelve core socialist values³⁸, in order to guide Chinese citizens to cultivate their moralities and construct a positive relationship between individuals and the nation (Hu, 2012). Xi Jinping, the President of China, continues to emphasise patriotism as the core of national spirit and as important to achieve "The Chinese Dream" (Liu et al., 2015; Xi, 2015). Patriotism is thus very important in the Chinese context, and this to some extent explains why students concern themselves with patriotic topics. In short, this study found that the influence of the digital divide on youth cybercivic participation has decreased, but it still exists. The gap between

³⁸ See the contents of core socialist values in Section 1.2.2.

students' civic capabilities makes some of them not participate in topical discussions. Education does matter, as it can provide students with needed basic knowledge, skills and values before they encounter civic activities online.

7.3. Impacts of Student Cybercivic Participation

This section discusses the outcomes of student cybercivic participation and the possible influences on the making of *networked citizens* (Loader et al., 2014) and the construction of *digital citizenship* (Ribble & Bailey, 2011) in their community. From the interviewees' perspectives, the process of cybercivic participation has improved their civic knowledge, attitude and behaviours, but at the same time, they are encountering new challenges caused by their deep involvement in social-media-based civic life.

7.3.1. Getting informed while feeling confused

The first aspect of this impact review is about whether or not student cybercivic participation has helped develop their civic knowledge. On the one hand, students regarded themselves as more *intelligent* and *knowledgeable* because they have vast accesses to information. One student said:

...as so much information is available, we will not easily be cheated. The facts provided by university tutors, authorities and by government could be easily checked online and verified with our friends (SI 6).

Also, some students were clear about where they could find what kind of civic knowledge. For instance, they stated that BYC is "a good platform of authoritative information and resources" where they are "informed with officially-driven civic issues and activities" (SI 7 & 11). They encountered life-

style civic knowledge by chance in leisure and entertainment activities, as some of them reported that “online strategy games World of Warcraft and StarCraft can deliver basic ideas about the elements of building a tribes and a nation” (SI 14) and “commercial activities online contain the wisdom of citizenship” (SI 23). Bennett et al. (2006) noted that civic interests may be undermined among online entertainment and consumption, but these students demonstrated that they actually can absorb useful resources for constructing identities of digital citizens in different fields.

On the other hand, many students reported that they were confused about civic issues in this age of information overload. They did not feel able to tell what authentic knowledge was or what source of information was reliable and trusted. Especially when a public event happens, opinions vary and every online commentator sticks to their own standpoint, so students found it difficult to make a choice about relevant knowledge:

I’m always confused ... I don’t know whose voice to believe. So I don’t know on which side I should stand. (SI 23).

There are many cases that the so-called authoritative knowledge that we believed for many years has been claimed as rumours...some historical events that we were taught since childhood are recently claimed as fake or fictional stories (SI 48).

The multiple sources of information and various interactions among networked friends mean young people are experiencing *trust crises* when lurking or joining in online public discussions. As well as covering knowledge, this trust crisis covers social relationships between information makers or knowledge producers, which young people doubt.

7.3.2. Learning critical thinking while being brainwashed

The second aspect of impact that the study focuses on is *participation with critical thinking*, which is advocated by public sphere theorists and educators of digital citizenship (Bennett et al., 2009; Rheingold, 2012; Habermas, [1962] 1989). Some student interviewees reported that “following up the development of a public event” and “joining in online discussions in depth” is helpful for training critical thinking because “the newly dug-out facts and ideas are continuously pushing our brain work” (SI 22, 23, 28 & 46). They believed that “truth does not fear contention”. Particularly for “dealing with controversial topics”, “the more the truth is debated, the clearer it becomes” (ibid.). Their experiences in online reflective debates have given them insights in understanding complicated civic issues.

What is written below is a case³⁹ of students’ critical thinking skills being improved by their long-term online engagement in political issues. Students (SI 21, 22, 32, 47) realised the phenomenon of *group polarisation* (Sunstein, 2001), which is embodied in China as a fight between two polarised groups of online participants: *the Fifty-Cent Party* (FCP, 五毛党) and *the American-Cent Party* (ACP, 美分党). It is said that the FCP are paid by Chinese government to spread pro-government posts, while the ACP are paid by the American government or other American organisations to spread posts against the Chinese government or against China (Cook, 2011). Such pro- or anti- government sentiment has been intensified between *the Self-fund Fifty-Cent Party* (自干五) or *the Public Intellectuals* (公知). These two polarised groups voluntarily post, without any payment, their standpoints of

³⁹ The case must be read as tentative only, because the authenticity of the background information needs to be further investigated.

patriotism and cosmopolitanism respectively. Two student interviewees present their viewpoints on this:

I think most of my friends can easily recognise who the members of Fifty-Cent Party are. For example, those who registered several days ago with few posts but who always bump up a post several times or those who always make 'flooding' posts (灌水贴) (SI 3).

Weibo is a dangerous place where if I say something good about the authority, I may be labelled as a member of the Fifty-Cent Party. Similarly, if I bump up for a post delivering so-called Western values, I will be called American Dog (SI 47).

Both students have noticed that the fight between 'Fifty-Cent Party' and 'American-Cent Party' has become more intense and polarised. These two terms are used to judge or abuse others. They have sensibilities and skills to distinguish polarised groups and to reflect the apparent phenomenon that citizens actively participate in online civic activities. They also noticed a possibility of brainwashing which would be led by these polarised groups. Thus they were reminded of the importance of critical thinking. This case of ACP/FCP suggests that students are developing a certain degree of scepticism and criticality to what they encounter online.

By contrast, some interviewees expressed a reluctance to join civic debates and intelligence training because they felt reflective thinking was too "time-consuming", "complicated" and "troublesome", "producing endless quarrels" (SI 24 & 25). Obviously, not all students are capable of this form of cybervic participation or willing to engage in it.

7.3.3. Feeling empowered while staying powerless

Thirdly, as Buckingham and de Block (2007) argue, the expected potential of empowerment for cyber citizens is limited. It has been seen that cybercivic participation empowers citizens with opportunities of free expression and community involvement, but not many opportunities to make changes in society. Students felt that they were powerful online, but helpless offline.

Those who were 'empowered' were more likely to view themselves as informed participants or regulation breakers. One student interviewee provided an example of a widely-spread Weibo post that said:

Every user plays a role like an empire on Weibo. Every time when you fresh Weibo news, a mass of social and political problems, policies, proposals and bills would flood in your smartphone to be looked through. You never know what kind of knotty problem would be presented in the throne (SI 26).

The student thought this post very funny while precisely describing that lurking on Weibo is like the emperor reading and commenting on memorials of throne. Both activities contain a similar processes; clicking Like/ticking for approval, sharing to peers/forwarding to other sections, and making comments/making decisions. Thus, participation on Weibo does make ordinary participants feel they have been involved in big public issues and has expanded citizens' rights to be informed.

Another example about students' feelings of empowerment is related to internet censorship. It is widely reported worldwide that many governments take extensive measures to monitor and control citizens' use of the internet (James, 2009). In China, the measures include filtering information, blocking sections of foreign websites such as Google, Facebook and YouTube, and

prohibiting words or phrases deemed to be sensitive from being published online.

The university students who participated in the research admitted that internet censorship influences their civic participation and learning of citizenship. The situations that are cited most frequently as annoying include not being allowed to search for and publish certain information, content shared with friends disappearing, and contributions being deleted by moderators on the sites for being too radical. Although students understand that all these bans relate to content that is perceived to be violating the laws and regulations of the state, some of them still expect and strive for more creative freedom and rights. Their tactics include:

- using a pseudonym or abbreviation for searching, instead of using a banned word;
- commenting on sensitive events with humour and irony;
- getting access to Facebook and YouTube by using Virtual Private Network (VPN), a special connection technology that break through the Firewall, which is metaphorically called 'Over the Wall' (翻墙);
- forwarding posts from foreign sites to domestic sites.

These actions can be seen as active civic participation by which students use creative problem-solving skills in order to secure their rights to information freedom. This form of participation leads to further questions: whether struggling for freedom trumps respecting the laws in youth SNS civic participation; where the boundary or bottom line of cybercivic participation lies; and how to deal with other invisible controls besides the control from the authorities, such as the control from commercial and technological stakeholders. However, students have not paid attention to these controversial questions.

Although students are expanding their rights to be informed and to freedom of expression in cyber space, the actual opportunities for them to be heard are not as many as they imagine. One challenge is the ‘*Spiral of Silence*’ (Noelle-Neumann, 1984), a phenomenon of mass communication, which explains that collective behaviour leads to some dominant opinions being amplified, while voices of other groups become weaker. In many cases, students were concerned that they would be “judged or criticised by the majority” and “unable to persuade others” as being involved in some online spirals of discussion (SI 4 & 9). To speak out in public needs courage and a set of strategies, especially when facing the dominant opinions of the crowd. But the pressure from the online mass results in young people losing their courage of civic participation and sinking into silence. Moreover, the power that students feel online is not equivalent to that they feel offline.

I feel it is more difficult with offline civic participation. I could be a public opinion leader in my virtual community, but I’m still nobody in the reality. (SI 22).

Many young people like SI 22 prefer talking online over taking action offline, as offline civic participation is more complex and challenging and the channels for open expression are fewer or more difficult to know.

7.3.4. Flaming: a terrible outcome of participation

Finally, there is one the very negative impact of cybervic participation: *online flaming*. This refers to a strongly irritating expression of opinion or personal attack holding back no emotions. Students found that some civic-featured posts on their social media networks may be difficult to keep within the parameters of rational discourse and critical thinking based on supporting evidence.

One student interviewee mentioned he once organised an online discussion group on Renren, and invited networked students to research and discuss about the reform in Chinese educational system and medical and health service. But he found that

...a great number of students only insist on their own opinions, paying no attention to evidence and only believing what has been planted in their minds (SI 21).

More disappointingly, he was orally abused by some participants when he put forward different opinions from theirs. They did not read his post carefully but arbitrarily criticised one or two of his viewpoints and labelled him both as a FCP member and an ACP member. In the end he gave up this online discussion group.

I couldn't bear someone's dirty nonsense. So I had to shut down my Renren discussion group (SI 21).

One of his friends who knows the process provided a further explanation for why SI 21 was attacked by online "smart mobs" (Rheingold, 2002).

Too many people do not really want to listen to your opinion. Instead, the online mobs only give vent to their anger via swearing online, adopting the platform that you built (SI 22).

In the wider online community, students take passive strategies to avoid abuse. They have realised the danger of "saying something online different from others or making others angry" is that dissenters easily become "the target of a manhunt" whose private lives may be searched and exposed online by the networked mobs (SI 3, 4, 7, and 9). Thus, it seems wise to keep quiet online or to take the civic propensity "Don't talk about national affairs" (see Section 2.5.1.), although this may betray the spirit of public sphere.

Summary

This chapter has attempted to answer three of the study's research questions. It discusses the observed and reported forms and strategies of cybercivic participation applied by Chinese university students. The key point of lurking is to encounter something of interest but not produce any visible contents, while announcing aims to produce texts and to advocate ideas but not necessarily to obtain responses. Considering the interaction among participants, networked promoting is a very popular category of cybercivic participation depending on citizens' collective actions. Finally, community-constructing is a higher level of cybercivic participation which emphasises students' collaboration for building civic communities both online and offline. These different forms of engaging in cybercivic communities are only for analysis purposes. In practice, these approaches are not completely separate. Rather, participants may combine these approaches in their daily lives online.

The other two themes of this chapter are the reasons for and results of youth cybercivic participation. Some similar online civic propensity investigated in previous literature was also found in the sample of Chinese students. While students' capability has been addressed as a key factor to make good cybercivic participation, since youth cybercivic participation is an ongoing process, it is not easy at this stage to evaluate its impact on the whole society but on making respective and responsible cyber citizens. A number of advantages and limitations of the current situation of youth cybercivic participation have been found, which suggest taking an educational perspective into account. The next chapter will discuss what we can learn from these youth experiences.

CHAPTER 8: POTENTIAL PARADIGMS OF CYBERCIVIC LEARNING AT UNIVERSITY

Previous chapters have provided many cases of Chinese youth cybercivic participation grounded in a vastly expansive public spheres. The results have revealed that the Chinese digital generation are pursuing and learning citizenship in different ways to that of the previous generation. I introduce the phrase *cybercivic learning* to describe the process of *learning through cybercivic participation*. Unlike the 'traditional' civic learning approaches that rely on fixed curricula, assigned textbooks, and instructions given by teachers in the classroom, *cybercivic learning* encourages learners to integrate formal and informal modes, to acquire civic knowledge, values and skills from their online practice and lived experience, and to contribute in communities including cyberspace, university, and the broader society.

This chapter focuses on such implications for education. In the first three sections, I draw on Bennett's two paradigms (see Table 3-7) and add a new third paradigm, in order to analyse examples of Chinese students' cybercivic participation. I develop a framework of cybercivic learning (See Table 8-1) which consists of three paradigms: *dutiful cybercivic learning (DCL)*, *actualising cybercivic learning (ACL)*, and *reflective cybercivic learning (RCL)*. Each paradigm of this working model indicates a set of learning elements to be considered for the innovation of citizenship education. Then I highlight some principles in support of cybercivic learning drawn from interviews with tutors working at universities. At the end of the chapter, I restate changes and challenges of educational tasks that prepare young people to become cybercivic learners.

Table 8- 1: Paradigms of Cybercivic Learning for Chinese University Students

Paradigms	Topics/Knowledge	Learning Methods	Learning Outcomes
Dutiful Cybercivic Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> public policy government party voting state legal system moral duty historical events cultural issues laws, rules and regulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> lurking mainstreamed news feeding announcement-reading online civic courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> institutional knowledge rationality respect obedience responsibility
Actualising Cybercivic Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> entertainment job-hunting shopping examination tips volunteering charity political consuming celebrity politics environmental movements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> lurking information sharing lifestyle political discussing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> informal civic knowledge civic interests self-expression freedom of speech reciprocity tolerance
Reflective Cybercivic Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> institutional knowledge life-style knowledge professional knowledge collaborative knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> announcement reproducing community-building campaign-organising action-taking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> constructed civic knowledge critical thinking deliberative debating problem-solving decision-making negotiation mutual support community involvement ethics of participation

8.1. Dutiful Cybercivic Learning: An Authoritative Paradigm

The first learning mode investigated in this research is *dutiful cybercivic learning (DCL)*. I define this style as a process of learning to be *good citizens* (Section 2.6) and *dutiful citizens* (Section 3.3.3). Students, through the use of social media, become familiar with a set of external normative standards, which are usually formatted by authorities. The research indicates that many students often visited or followed social media sites of mainstream political institutions and news agencies. Students tended to trust the established reputations of these organisations for the authenticity and quality of information. Although some students showed a degree of scepticism towards official discourse, they admitted that the official channels had validity and legitimacy to some extent. DCL encourages the study of institutionalised civic knowledge or values, which may appear in the form of explicit guidelines or stages. The learning focuses on connecting participants with civic issues arising from social or political news, public policies, government developments, innovations of the Parties (CPC and other democratic parties), concerns with the state legal system and the moral commitments of citizens. DCL primarily takes place through the following three methods.

8.1.1. Subscribing to mainstreamed News Feeds

News reading is one of effective approaches for citizens to learn about their local, national or international communities. A great number of students reported that they no longer intentionally access news through traditional media, such as newspapers, radio, television programmes or conventional read-only websites. Instead, they use social media to familiarise themselves with the public world, enabling them to access and contribute to the latest eye-catching news immediately.

Mainstreamed news representing authoritative perspectives can be customised and delivered to young people. Since student interviewees have become accustomed to using the News Feeds services provided by SNSs, many of them have subscribed to daily newsletters edited by SNS journalist teams and pushed by SNS companies. Such daily newsletters are a default service provided to ordinary users. For instance, when students log into their Renren and Weibo accounts, daily headlines along with popular social, political, entertainment news that are selected or recommended by the sites would be automatically “shown on the homepage when opening the internet explorer”, “in a pop-up window”, or “in [users’] personal message boxes” (SI 23, 24 & 29). Looking through the subscribed news, students feel that they are fed with information and public opinions. While forwarding and sharing the news, students also feed others in wider online networks.

Some students believe the pop-up news provided by big SNS companies to be relatively reliable and trustable. They assumed that “the pop-up window as a summary of breaking news must be selected and produced by professional website editors” (SI 24) and “governments and SNS companies have the rights to decide what kind of news should or should not be involved in the window” (SI 43). The content of the news “has to be agreed by SNS administrator team of SNS companies” (SI 40), or at least “has to be in accordance with Chinese news censorship laws and regulations” (SI 28). They also found that “the texts and tones of SNS newsletters are usually close to the news reports by mainstream media like newspaper or television” which more or less “represent a kind of official perspective and attitude” (SI 29). In this case, editors play a professional and authoritative role, so the subscribed newsletters and pop-up windows demonstrate officially approved

content for dutiful cybercivic learning.

In order to access diverse news sources, many students followed and subscribed to Weibo accounts run by professional news agencies, newspaper or journal groups, broadcasting corporations and television stations, which are new channels or platforms of traditional media. When choosing news producers from Weibo, students tended to consider the reputation of these traditional media outlets and the quality of their editors or presenters. They listed several factors that may influence the news producers they followed on Weibo, including “the provision of authentic facts”, “detailed background information of news”, “objective stand”, “sharp and profound opinions” and “frequent and useful updates” (SI 2, 5, 42, 43 & 44). These factors together define reliable and responsible information producers for young people. By contrast, students admitted that the news published by individual users would not be always authentic and trustworthy. Many of them pay attention to individually produced news only when it is widely spread within their peer networks, including very locally relevant matters that have not been reported by the mainstreamed channels. Although there are many sources of News Feed information, the integration of traditional news media and social media can provide youth with opportunities to approach public issues and listen to authoritative voices. Despite this, student interviewees reported that they were not always satisfied with the quality of newsletters since news feeding at a glance seems more like “fast-food news”, providing “less context information” and “blurry insights” (SI 2, 6 & 19). In order to know detailed information, they need to learn from formatted announcements.

8.1.2. Absorbing formatted announcements

Absorbing announcements means that students not only *read* that kind of media text but also *improve* or *re-produce* the materials. For some students, the term announcement implies “information-rich”, “trustable” and even “official”, usually published by a government, an authority, an organisation, by individual users who represent these institutional agents, or by people who produce structuralised pro-government and pro-social content (SI 2, 21, 25 & 43). The official announcements come in different forms, such as the collection of mainstreamed news, completed texts or documents of policies, laws or regulations, and the explanations about public events from those authoritative organisations.

Top-down forums have distinct advantages for learning from longer announcements because they exhibit detailed matters that can be stored and sorted for future access. Since BYC is a state-managed forum, in terms of national civic activities, students feel information published is more reliable. From the observation, I have summarised five main types of announcement posts on this site:

- *news*: long political and social news selected and forwarded by the administrative team from other mainstream news websites
- *projects*: official recruitment information for local and national civic projects, such as the West Volunteering Plan, University Graduates as Village-Officials and the Rural Area Supporting Projects;
- *policy*: national policy publicity and relevant interpretation, such as case studies about the projects above;
- *institutional knowledge*: knowledge about the Communist Party, the Chinese political system, law and regulations, military affairs, history and culture, and those which relate especially to the civil service examination;
- *peer experience*: experience-sharing from successful volunteers, officials, and youth activists

These posts provide students with both relevant and comprehensive information for this mode of dutiful cybervolunteering. Students who intended to apply for jobs as volunteers or village-officials and who prepared for civil service examinations admitted that they used to visit BYC. However, they seldom left comments on this top-down forum because every comment needed to be censored and approved by the forum administrators. Students did not have the patience to stay on the forum until their comments were allowed to be published two or three days later. They only visited this forum when they needed to collect specific topical materials (SI 6, 21 & 45). Therefore BYC is more like an information centre for storing knowledge than an open public discussion space for exchanging opinions.

At the level of making announcements, students are able to search and select authoritative materials and re-produce them. Taking students' posts on ChickenRun as an example, many regulations and policies have become localised and more suitable for students' peer groups. For example, students specifically edited and published 'ChickenRun Netiquette' as a guide for all forum users (See Table 7-1); they also edited and published the 'Handbook of Public Service and Volunteering Work' (See Table 8-2).

Table 8- 2: Contents Page of Students' Online Handbook of Public Welfare

<p>Chapter 1. Basic Knowledge about Volunteering Work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Definitions of volunteer service, duties and volunteers• Public welfare and public service activities• Charity and charitable organizations• The relationship and difference between public welfare and charity• Five features of volunteer work• Different types of volunteer work <p>Chapter 2. Requirements for Volunteering Work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Basic conditions and requirements• Register to be a volunteer• Ethics and qualification of a volunteer <p>Chapter 3. Values of Volunteering Work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positive impact on the society• Positive impact on individuals• The spirit of volunteering work• Cases of volunteering work <p>Chapter 4. Values of Public Service Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Basic principles of public service activities• Organisations in support of public service activities

Such student-edited hand books are a successful example of how official civic knowledge calling for civic responsibility displayed on top-down sites has been transferred into user-friendly and youth-accessible knowledge for its further display on bottom-up forums. In this way, these handbooks help their users understand official and formal civic knowledge more easily. This case indicates that DCL can be applied in an interactive and peer-to-peer approach. However, its limitation rests on those “very long, rigid, boring”

announcements which are “full of stereotyped expressions and difficult to be understood” (SI 27 & 36). This reminds the poster and moderators of the importance of making announcements shorter and more interesting.

8.1.3. Studying online citizenship courses

The present research suggests that social media has already become an effective mechanism to expand the classroom-based curriculum for citizenship education and involvement in civic affairs. Students now discuss their courses related to citizenship issues and topics on BBSs and SNSs. During my observations, students looked for study materials online and shared their experiences of CPC Party Lectures, which are part of a compulsory training course for student Party membership candidates. Before becoming a probationary member of the CPC, students have to attend the course and pass the examination. Some observed students had asked about the time and schedule of the course on ChickenRun; some had asked existing members about their interests and motivations for joining the Party; some complained that the contents of the course were too boring or too difficult to understand; and some shared their class notes and references for the examination. Although the online conversations among students tended to focus upon information and exchanging materials over topical discussions, this way of learning about CPC is more accessible, especially for beginners who know little about the procedure to join CPC.

Another example is Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). MOOCs were introduced in China in 2013. This series of interesting courses along with their dialogical teaching strategies have stimulated university students' interests in a wide range of civic topics. A MOOC called 'Justice' provided by Harvard University is one of the most popular courses spread and discussed

among my sample students. Translations are made available for those who wish to participate. The students engage in online discussions about the course through social media. For example, students were very interested in the 'trolley problem' featured in the course, concerning the choices a train driver might be faced with when a train is out of control. During my observation I saw several post threads on Renren and ChickenRun discussing this conundrum, which students found difficult to resolve morally. I observed that students had learnt to put it into their life practice and think about the solution. For instance, they started discussing how to allocate electricity and water to different cities, and how to solve the air pollution in Beijing while not negatively affecting other cities. The engagement with such online courses creates a positive starting point for students to consider controversial issues and problems.

Although DCL is featured with a responsibility-driven model with reliable information and well-organised knowledge, this style is also criticised for being an indoctrination-driven system rather than communication-driven (Coleman, 2008). This, however, does not deal with the issue of the majority of students who feel disengaged and uninvolved, and who therefore fall further behind in civic awareness from those who take an active and continuing interest.

8.2. Actualising Cybercivic Learning: An Interactive Paradigm

The second mode, *actualising cybercivic learning (ACL)*, is related to students' everyday online interactions, primarily focusing on interest-driven activities. It is also related to citizens' unintended and unexpected participation experience, which is one of the pre-conditions for building a

democratic society where people have opportunities to hear of different opinions and to realise standpoints (Sunstein, 2001). I would regard this cybercivic participation as a kind of hidden curriculum for citizenship education. Only if citizens have access to the widest range of information and collaboratively engage in public life, will they be able to form tolerant perspectives and better understand each other.

8.2.1. Learning from lurking

The majority of interviewed students reported the starting-point of their cybercivic learning would be through lurking, as they can easily access lots of information to become familiar with public affairs happening locally, nationally and globally, and hear different opinions. Moreover, lurking may expand their civic interests on those eye-catching topics, inspiring them to further search or digest information that they may never have thought about otherwise. As students below said:

I had never heard of a group in China called ‘the left behind Children’ until I saw an article calling attention to these children, whose parents migrate to big cities to earn their bread, but leave the children in rural areas living with grandparents or neighbours (SI 5).

I’m a football fan. I used to think that the Chinese football team’s poor performance was due to Chinese football players’ weaker bodies and less effective training strategies. Yet I started to accuse ‘the state-run system’ for the failure when I saw BBS threads about the corruption scandal of the Chinese Football Association (SI 43).

Although both students seldom respond to topics online, they admitted that their opinions and attitudes had been changed by silently observing a series of topics. SI 5 started to be concerned by and sympathetic to socio-economic disadvantaged groups, while SI 43 transferred his attention from purely sports issues to the political wrestling behind sports. These cases illustrate that students can form the bases of civic knowledge when they

acquire updated information and opinions online (Bachen et al., 2008).

However, lurker-viewing does not always lead students to acquire normative outlooks in relation to their civic awareness and knowledge, because of their exclusive and fragmented reading in the loose structures of the online community (Loader, 2007b; Rheingold, 2012). In some cases, lurker-viewing has been customised by the website, which can automatically record a user's viewing preference and push similar information to them. Many of the students interviewed have the experience of continually viewing homogeneous content within a period because the website kept telling them "you probably like this..." or "your friends have viewed this..." Often, they cannot help clicking and viewing when such prompts are presented to them. Although the medium creates the possibility of familiarising oneself with more information, in practice, the information can only be shared with those who are willing to receive it. Thus, the online community of exchange sometimes serves narrow interests and closes off alternative views. Sunstein (2001) describes this homogeneousness as *information cocoons*, where students stick to certain topics, and believe what they like and what they agree is the only truth, instead of exploring a wider range of views.

8.2.2. Learning from networked sharing

Information- and resource-sharing represents the basic spirit of social media. *Exchanging electronic information* has been defined as one of the nine themes of digital citizenship in social media spaces (Ribble, Bailey, & Ross, 2004). Thus, sharing is not only an important aim of cybercivic learning, but also an approach to fulfil the aim of nurturing digital citizens. Both *learning to share* and *sharing for learning* can benefit ACL. Information-sharing stimulates self-expression in a public space, which is the beginning of every

civic conversation. Sharing may imply agreeing, supporting, exchanging, or opening space for further discussion, so it does not necessarily imply expressing a fixed attitude. Students like sharing information that they think is interesting, astonishing or useful within their online social networks. Sometimes they share information, “just for fun or habitual mouse-clicks without any special intention”, other times they share it for a “particular audience and with particular meanings”, to arouse public interest, help people in need or contribute to the community (SI 3 & 4). A concrete example provided by one tutor interviewee (TI) indicates how students help their peers in need via information-sharing:

Students in our university widely shared a notification about student loans and scholarships within online networks. Relevant policies were originally published on our university website and then disseminated through BBSs and SNSs... students online told their own stories of applying for the funding and provided successful tips for the application (TI 1).

This same tutor explained the high competition in these applications of loan and scholarship. But she was pleased to see that “students are sharing and learning the value of reciprocity”, which is a feature of democratic citizenship. When students share something online, they are not looking for rewards or responses but to benefit others. Other aspects of interest include “job hunting advice”, “discount shopping news”, and “examination tips” (SI 23, 25 & 26). This is a special idea of *sharing with equivalence*. Students strengthen beliefs about mutual help and cooperation, which can help them better accommodate their local community.

In a further stage of sharing, students start to realise the importance of critical thinking. They gradually learn to identify authentic and valuable information from their daily sharing experiences. A student reported that there were “too many sources of information from which to choose” and they

were “always in a feeling of information overload”, but added that “the more sources of information I gained, the easier for me to tell which one is closer to the truth” (SI 43). They also pay attention to the copyright of online materials. When sharing something uncertain, “tracing back to an original copyright can help test whether the resource is reliable or not” (SI 21). Also, respecting copyrights means respecting human rights in the aspect of expression and publication rights. As one student reported

I used to share online materials and opinions without saying where it comes from, until once my friend sent me a message, to ask for his name and copyright to be shown in one of my forum posts (SI 45).

There are also negative aspects of sharing for cybercivic learning. One is that general information-sharing may focus exclusively on personalised interests instead of upon public and civic issues. Another is similar to the problem of lurker-viewing, namely the crisis of *collective polarisation*, because students are more likely to share within their own online social networks, exchanging homogeneous contents, rather than with a wide range of groups (Livingstone, Bober, & Helsper, 2005). A narrowing access to information may also negatively influence the quality of civic discussion.

8.2.3. Lifestyle political discussing

Lifestyle political discussing has been highlighted in my research as a distinct feature of youth cybercivic participation. By *lifestyle politics* (Giddens, 1991), I refer to the involvement in a broad range of issues related with family, friends, work mates. This can also encompass active interests and concerns relating to immediate local community. Some examples in Chapters 6 and 7 have been related to this field, this section will expand upon the understanding of cybercivic learning from lifestyle politics.

On the surface, although it may appear that students favour discussing leisure and cultural topics, they are not politically apathetic. What happens is a disengagement from mainstream political discourses and activities (Loader et al., 2014a). Chinese students have reported that they paid attention to online topics of volunteering, charity fundraising events, celebrity interventions, and environmental movements. With the aid and involvement of these patterns of cybercivic participation, students are acquiring and gaining lived and practical knowledge of civic affairs, while also developing skill and values. These can sometimes be different from those they were taught through classroom-situated, formal citizenship education.

Firstly, students can learn from unofficial civic activity and opinions. This includes *personalised* and *fragmental* political and social insights, in contrast to more structured knowledge provided by authorities, mainstream media or a university curriculum. Students who are often actively engaged in online discussions reviewed their gossip threads with others and agreed that discussion can become a learning process for acquiring knowledge about civic affairs. For example, several female students in the study liked online shopping and usually talked about shopping-related issues on their university forums. At the beginning, their conversation focused more on “what brands of clothes and cosmetics are on sale” or “how to get more discount or vouchers when buying a product” (SI 2, 4 & 5). When they found that some student sellers on the university forum were selling products for particular charity purposes, they were more likely to buy these products, such as to help blind and deaf-mute children or help children whose parents are in prison. During their inquiries to purchase such items, they talked with sellers and other buyers online, and got to know:

- what special care these disadvantaged children need;

- what policies and conditions should follow for charity selling online;
- how a charity organisation worked;
- how an ordinary student can open a charity shop online;
- what advantages and difficulties an online charity seller may encounter

They admitted that this discussing and purchasing process helped them better understand the online charity bazaar. In this case, students gained both official and non-official knowledge from different channels.

Secondly, students come to learn the values of freedom of speech, inclusion and tolerance from online lifestyle political discussions. The study observed that students prefer to use relatively loose and flexible patterns of expression in their online discussions. There is a new digital and civic literacy that emphasises not only text reading and writing, but also the sense and ability to listen and respect others, and the need to inclusively and tolerantly respond to different voices (Selwyn, 2002; Loader et al., 2014a). The example below extracted from ChickenRun shows that the bottom-up BBSs in particular encourage spontaneous community-based interaction. Since the majority of users know that this forum particularly serves students in the university or those who have connections with the university, they were actively discuss on the platform in order to deal with some everyday-life issues. Table 8-3 is about how students complained about “the worst university services” and cared about their rights to live in a high-quality lives.

Table 8- 3: A Posted Poll about University Services on ChickenRun

Poll: What is the worst and the least welcome service section in the university?		
Options	Ballots (n=630)	Percentage (%)
University hospital	108	17.14
Supermarket in the campus	74	11.75
University restaurants	54	8.57
Academic Affairs Office	50	7.94
Information Network Service Centre	43	6.83
Total	329	52.23

Comments extracted from the tread:

- Ah! No wonder university hospital! Once a doctor gave me medicine immediately, without even asking and examining my illness.
- University hospital is the place most close to 'heaven'.
- Not all restaurants have bad service.
- I totally agree to count in the Academic Affairs Office. One of the staff whose job is to help students select courses always keeps a straight face, chews gum, and turns a deaf ear towards our requests. I really wish he could realise and change his unfriendly attitude.
- I know that staff member in the Academic Affairs Office, I personally feel he's supportive. His impatience may be just because he's in a bad mood or very stressed.

Among 630 viewers, there 235 respondents participated in multi-choice ballots. The 390 ballots demonstrate that students, as members of the university community and consumers of university services, do care and join in the polling closely related to their lived world. They are also willing to list more detailed reasons about their choices, describe the different situations that they face, and seek for mutual understanding, along with direct critiques, humorous ironies, or deliberative advice. Their participation in daily affairs is an example of the lifestyle politics.

Although civic learning from lifestyle politics has not been included in formal citizenship education in China. University tutors have revealed awareness of “the educational significance of the real life problems” and suggested tutors should “talk with our students or maybe join their online discussion” in order to take advantages of this learning route to help students.

Every kind of life problem that students meet and talk about online could be an opportunity for them to learn about the society...Education should not always be done in a serious and rigorous way (TI 4).

I do not believe all students' interaction online can be called deliberative discussion, let alone democratic debate. If they haven't been taught any basic logic of debate and principle of critical thinking, to what extent they could benefit from peer discussion rather than waste time on endless useless quarrels? (TI 3).

The two statements above indicate clearly the degree of contrast that exists within the faculty in relation to the emergence of social media. One tutor was open to the positive aspects, reflecting on recent cultural and technological developments. The other revealed a resistance and lack of appreciation of the inherent structures that exist within online spaces, insisting that insist that “some formal learning guides are necessary” (TI 3).

The main advantage of actualising paradigms is the possibility of student-centred participation and learning, promoting interactive and participatory online civic culture. The themes and ways of learning have not been given or designed by authorities or tutors, but decided and constructed by students themselves. Livingstone et al. (2005) raised the question of whether a loose and flexible online community can facilitate an effective civic learning result, instead of general and superficial interaction. The cases above from Chinese students have provided some positive answers to it.

8.3. Reflective Cybercivic Learning: An Integrating Paradigm

Both dutiful and actualising paradigms have demonstrated advantages in help with learning citizenship, while have revealed possible limitations of reconfiguring democratic practice among networked young citizen. In this section, I try to develop the third paradigm, *reflective cybercivic learning (RCL)*, which aims to integrate the above two paradigms and to facilitate young people to become competent information producers who are willing and able to deliver qualified information and to maximise the positive impacts of information. I would argue that learning to be reflective digital citizens needs an enhanced degree of critical thinking. This requires young people to firstly become interested and informed citizens, being able to approach and understand a growing number of civic issues, so they are willing and able to be involved in the processes of change-making. Compared with the other two models, the most essential feature of RCL is the ability to *keep reflection* and *take action* so that young people make positive contributions to their online and offline communities. Although this level of cybercivic learning can be interpreted as being over-idealistic, several examples that emerged from the research show that students were able to bridge their online and offline practices, the space between their official and unofficial knowledge, and their informal and formal civic learning.

8.3.1. Reflecting and improving announcements

In the DCL paradigm, students received information from announcements, especially from authoritative materials published by moderators, professional editors, or opinion leaders in a certain network. In the RCL paradigm, students tried to further understand or question these authoritative materials. Additionally, they found a way to improve, correct or reproduce the

announcements. The study observed that on bottom-up forums, students forwarded national policies or legal regulations and then provided locally adapted guidance to be more suitable for student peer groups. For instance, students kept searching and editing relevant concepts and information of the student-edited online volunteering handbook (See Table 8-2 in Section 8.1.2) so that knowledge about public welfare and volunteering work were updated. Some students kept reflecting on rules and netiquettes and corrected impertinent expressions (See Table 8-4 below, related to Table 7-1).

Table 8- 4: A Reflective Discussion on ChickenRun Netiquettes

Users	Post
User 1:	[The original text of the Chicken Netiquettes]
User 2:	Rules seem great. But the person who edited the netiquettes seems not respectful...
User 3 (reply to User 1):	Surprisingly find a netiquette like this with a prejudice and disparagement on women.
User 4 (reply to User 1):	A mistake in Rule 5! Banzhu (moderator) yourself instructed that "Never use provocative or dirty words". What do you mean by "the king of flooding"?
...	...
User 1 (reply to all post):	Thank you all for pointing these details out! I realised we were so wrong four years late. I have amended the original post. The updated version is available now.

As some expressions in the original text seem too offensive, the following commentators keep questioning the post and persuading the original poster to correct the announcement of netiquettes. For example, User 3 felt very uncomfortable about the use of the gender-discriminative metaphor of 'Pofu', which is a traditional Chinese stereotype of a fierce and irritated woman like a shrew. User 2 and User 4 disagreed with the subjective and arbitrary judgement on others so they reminded the original poster who was also the

board moderator, to announce netiquettes in a respectful way. The gendered references and provocative words in the original post struck students as surprising and indicated a less developed public discussion concerning the respectful values of civic life. However, a promising result is that User 1 finally realised the problem and improved the netiquettes, although this learning process took a long time.

The changes made to the online announcements show RCL can be collaborative, as students successfully transferred official or normative civic information into user-friendly and youth-accessible knowledge and highlighted the right style of presenting civic values. Incorporated with live cases and practical strategies from students' perspective, these reproduced announcements can attract more students to understand and engaged in official and formal civic activities.

8.3.2. Constructing online intellectual communities

In the ACL paradigm, we have seen lifestyle knowledge shared within youth networks. But most of them seem to be pieces of information or fragmental knowledge that students encountered by chance. RCL aims to organise and integrate these fragments. Some examples have been seen in the previous chapters, in which students set up professional and interest online groups, teaching and learning in their online peer groups (see Section 6.2.5). This section will discuss another two examples to further explain the possibility of reflectively learning from participation in lifestyle issues. One is provided by a student interviewee, who is good at English reading and translation, so he usually gets access to overseas websites to look through information (SI 23). When he found something that he thought as “in high-quality”, he translated them into Chinese and posted them on the social media platforms he often

visited, including his university BBS, Renren and Weibo. The most frequently published posts were about history. He felt it was interesting to see historical narratives from different perspectives and wanted to share them with his friends. But he did not recognise his forwarding and translating work as civic participation, because he would rather call himself “an information porter” instead of “a producer of knowledge”. The only thing that he used to do and defined as cybercivic participation was to donate to Wikipedia.

The only thing that I did online that can be recognised as civic participation is that I donated to Wikipedia RMB 50 Yuan every year. I think the contributors of Wikipedia deserve my respect as they make many tiny or apparently-nonsense questions look like research questions and provide knowledge-based answers in professional and academic style with references (SI 23).

The student pointed out a basis of online civic participation, which is *collective intelligence and wisdom* (Rheingold, 2012; Jenkins et al., 2015). This intelligence needs “rational spirit”, “research perspective” and “reciprocal collaboration”, which are “seldom seen in Chinese online discussion” (SI 23). Only in this way, could historical and social prejudice be eliminated and contemporary problems be solved. He also implies that we have a long way to go to build an online intellectual community in China, although the next example gives some positive insights in this area.

The case below is drawn from observations on Renren and ChickenRun, showing how a life puzzle related to individual rights became a cybercivic discussion based on students’ professional knowledge. The case began with the difficulties of purchasing train tickets during the Chinese New Year. The process of the students’ discussion can be summarised as below:

- A student complaint about her difficulty buying a ticket;

- Students responded to the original post to share their similar experience and to make complaints about the long waiting time;
- A student studying Mathematics calculated different probabilities of getting a ticket under the current ticket allocation system;
- Students studying Management analysed the problems of the ticket sale system, such as: complicated procedures, limited numbers of train, unequal allocation, the monopoly by some companies and individuals for additional profit making;
- Students shared successful experiences and practical strategies, like queuing from midnight at the train station or from early morning at the university box office;
- Students found that the newly launched online ticket-buying system seemed convenient, but not suitable for rural migrant workers who do not have access to the Internet and are not able to use online tools;
- Students called for setting up a volunteering group to help rural migrant workers purchase train tickets via a telephone sale system;
- Students made suggestions for policy change in rail transportation.

The discussion presents the potential to raise a deliberative model of democratic debate on student-led social media which includes active discussion of problems, conflicts, and claims of need or interest (G. Yang, 2009). Some students made contributions to the discussion based on their professional knowledge and skills. Some addressed the *digital divide*, and tried to help migrant workers, a digitally and socioeconomically disadvantaged group. The most remarkable thing is they sought possible critical-thinking and problem-solving approaches under the current policy framework. In short, this case led to the forming of an online intellectual community where young people work together and mutually support each other based on their knowledge. This also creates the possibility that social

media can act as *social glue* that links people from different backgrounds together (Sunstein, 2001). Although this online case has not been observed to lead to offline civic action, it indicates the way in which personal life concerns become shared social concerns.

8.3.3. Learning for power shifts between online and offline

The idealist aim of the RCL paradigm is to empower students both in online and offline communities, although this is never easy. A few cases in this study have presented such a possibility, revealing that students are teaching and learning civic knowledge, skills and values in their online community, transferring their civic capabilities between online and offline settings. Although there is little evidence in the study showing that online participation is the only one or the most important learning approach that influences offline participation, or vice versa, the following examples provide successful narratives about learning for power shifts between online and offline.

Interviewed students mentioned that they had collaboratively learned civic skills during their cybercivic participation when integrating online and offline activities. When their online expressions and discussions led to or linked with offline actions, they felt especially that they had successfully informed or taught their peer groups about important civic issues. One student posted online about the problem of slippery floors in university public bathrooms, which often made students fall down and get hurt. Her post got many replies, with some students studying the different materials of anti-slippery mats and making suggestions for the university administrators. These posts were widely forwarded by students and eventually noticed by the administrators.

Someone working at public-service sectors replied to our posts and promised that they would solve this problem as soon as possible.

Finally, non-slip mats were put in place. This is the first time that I know who [which sector] is responsible for student welfare and how to communicate with them (SI 6).

Before this event, this student even did not know the name of the university sector of public-service. But she learned from her online peers that in fact there is a direct line to the sector. The student who posted contact information is the one who called the sector and asked them to check the online posts where students were discussing the problem.

In the process, students not only learned some basic information but also different communication skills. By integrating online and offline strategies, the students' appeals got a satisfactory solution.

Another student used to work in an environmental protection society at her university. Their society initiated an offline campaign called 'One hour for the Earth' on 22 April (The Earth Day), calling for energy saving actions among students. Since many of the students were neither familiar with their society, nor with the mission and vision of the campaign, the online campaigners in her society needed to publicise relevant information and knowledge, such as the origin of The Earth Day, statistic reports about energy consumption all over the world, the university's current energy consumption, the introduction of the society, and the aims, values and action points of its campaign. The student reported:

We published posts on ChickenRun, Renren and Weibo, for publicity. We encouraged students to shut down all of the lights from 8:00pm to 9:00pm on 22 April in the campus. When we saw the whole campus became dark in that one hour, I knew we got a great success (SI 2).

This is another case of learning from lifestyle politics, with students learning not only environment knowledge but also campaigning skills.

Although the influence of one single campaign is limited, students who participated either online or offline would be aware of the worldwide problem

of energy wasting. The society members, like SI 2, may also realise their ability to transfer online civic participation into offline responses and consequences. In the process they have also developed their critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. Additionally they have become accomplished communicators, negotiators and campaign leaders.

The above examples of RCL (*reflective*) illustrate how cybercivic learning can be developed in three ways: (1) a unidirectional or top-down way in which the authoritative posters make announcements to students; (2) an interactive way in which students inform each other, and (3) a constructive and bottom-up way where students make suggestions to authorities. There is relationship between institutional and lifestyle civic knowledge, between the online and offline actions. This paradigm addresses students' ability to reflect, which leads to a broadening awareness of civic values, such as international understanding, justice and tolerance, freedom of expression, individual rights, and social responsibility.

8.4. Supporting Principles for Cybercivic Learning

The potential of cybercivic learning has been noticed by university tutors. They represent educators who have begun to think of the implications that these learning styles could bring to formal citizenship education at university level. Most tutors in this study agree that social media has become one of main channels through which students come to understand public life and become *politically socialised* (Bennett, 2007). This may lead to the learning mode developing from teacher-centred to *student-centred* (Dewey, [1916] 2004). Tutor interviewees felt involved in this tremendous educational transformation. This section presents an outline of supporting principles for cybercivic learning from tutor' reflections.

8.4.1. Mutual respect

The first principle in support of cybercivic learning proposed by tutors is *mutual respect*. Tutors highlighted that educators should respect the value of students' use of social media for civic engagement purposes. This is because university staff have little choice but to accept that their students are "digital natives" who have become "native speakers" of computer and internet languages (Prensky, 2001). In the sense that students have come to rely upon the social media for knowledge acquiring, Tutor 4 displayed an acceptance of a changed knowledge landscape when he said,

I'm sure 100% students in my class are Netizens who get online everyday...The Internet is a window for them to view the world. Today it is not possible to close it down (T1 4).

We can see from how T4 speaks that he seeks to express his ideas through analogy, calling the Internet "a window". He concludes by affirming "it is not possible to close" the fundamental change that has taken place. Implicit in this realisation is an acceptance that he has little choice but to respect students' learning lifestyles and adapt his pedagogy.

Another tutor also recognised the inherent educational potential of these forms of engagement;

They [students] are very good at searching information from various sources, and they know how to earn more Clicks...They have particular ways of *cognition* and *communication*. I personally think we should respect and encourage students' creative ideas in online practice (T1 2).

This tutor employed the terms of "cognition" drawn from psychological discourses and "communication" from social discourses, in order to emphasise how in his view the changes that have taken place are wide-ranging and broadly significant. Having entered into a social-science form of

expression he then reverts to the more informal by saying “I personally...” to indicate his own positioning in relation to such changes. He uses appropriate terminology such as “searching”, “uploading”, “clicks”, indicating his familiarity with contemporary internet-speak.

Osler and Starkey (2005) argue that respect in education fields should involve *respect for students’ freedom of thought and expression*, which is also an essential theme in citizenship education. I would argue that the technological change will render the adoption of this view as necessary, as time moves on in line with the feelings expressed by T1 4. Students at university are “keen to express” (T1 2), especially when it comes to public issues, they just “can’t help having a say to show their opinions and attitude” (T3). As tutors pointed out, “if students only have a few ways to express offline, they can only be heard online” (T4) and “they should be allowed to speak out online” (T5). These tutors agree that students’ freedom of expression should be respected.

However, another tutor proposed different viewpoint which emphasised the importance of mutual respect. He would rather define respect as a kind of “conditional respect”, which means:

...before students have a free saying online, they should learn to respect others, considering if their words might hurt others, for example by exposing someone’s privacy such as their real name, home address or mobile number, or insulting others with offensive words (T1 2).

Therefore, mutual respect, as highlighted here, should involve not only respecting for freedom of speech but also *respecting for others’ dignity*.

8.4.2. Participatory understanding

The second principle suggested by tutors is that cybercivic learning should be based on *participatory understanding* between participants. On one hand, this principle emphasises that both teachers and students should get involved in and familiar with the cyberspace. As a tutor said “there is little point of someone commenting upon cybercivic activity from a position outside of that field” (TI 1). Another tutor reflected the rapid developments of online culture that take place within cyberspace:

If I escape from online space for several days, maybe I will be totally confused by students’ expressions, because they may have transferred to new hot topics and created new jargon (TI 3).

The fluid and transforming context requires educators to keep pace with students’ online participation, because if they do not, they risk becoming unable to both learn from and learn with students.

On the other hand, the principle of participatory understanding requires educators to get familiar with youth culture and to understand that students may learn ahead of their teachers and tutors. If teachers and tutors fail to keep pace with online topical discussions, they run the risk of becoming bystanders as their students move with the times. For cybercivic learning, what tutors should do is to ‘engage with youth’ instead of ‘engage youth’ (Coleman, 2007a). This implies students have built a specific field in which tutors should make effort to understand, instead of letting students follow tutors, as one tutor responded:

If you think university students are socially and politically apathetic and naive, or if you try traditional indoctrination to wake up their sense of social responsibility, you will be totally wrong (TI 4).

The tutor suggested that educators should take a different perspective to look at the problems of political apathy and innocence (Bennett, 2008b;

Loader et al., 2014b), which happen in the offline classroom of moral and citizenship education in present China. He pointed out the limitation of the unidirectional pedagogic teaching approach and implied the need to participate and understand what students are learning in the online environment. Otherwise teachers run the risk of being “totally wrong”.

In addition, this principle means learners should be deeply *engaged in the context* of the civic issues, in order to deeply understand the varied backgrounds and complex causes about the issues. Participative understanding may help them choose appropriate strategies and deal with problems more wisely. However, the contradiction is that students within cyberspace usually access limited knowledge because they over-rely on the convenience of information acquisition, seldom doing research on the relevant events. These concerns were reflected by tutors:

How can you expect to know the whole context and all the truth of events within a 140-word post on Weibo. Many people including my students are used to sharing posts without any further inquiries' (TI 3).

As the search engines and SNSs are too convenient for information acquisition and sharing, it seems there's no need for students to think in depth. Students never even check the authenticity of the information, just directly spreading this news to their networks (TI 2).

Under this principle, when speaking of *cybercivic learning*, we should consider equipping students with capabilities of engaging with social media, with peer or sub-culture groups, and with the context of the issues. For this purpose, strategies for investigating and critically ascertaining is are necessary. This therefore opens new requirements for the tutors to promote their roles and support student civic engagement, rather than being a negative bystander criticising from the outside.

8.4.3. Gentle intervention

The third principle proposed can be summarised as *gentle intervention*. The tutors admitted that it was necessary to provide students with some *guides* to help them achieve effective and constructive cybercivic learning, while the guiding should be *gentle and interactive*, instead of didactic.

Confronted with the complexity of civic problems and the diversity of values and protocols, tutors addressed the importance of being sensitive, tolerant and careful to assist students in dealing with confusion and conflicts during their cybercivic participation. The tutor interviewees offered examples of how they gently guide students online when they had difficulties in an online community, for instance by,

- responding to students' online discussion (TI 1);
- writing an analytic post to mediate over-radical expressions (TI 3);
- talking with students privately via online instant message (TI 6);
- talking to students in person if it is really necessary, and if I can match students' online and offline identities (TI 4)
- [and] setting up a specific class session and inviting students for offline discussion, related to recent online hot issues (TI 1).

During these online and offline dialogical approaches, tutors expected to deliver instructions or guides to students. However, they met some dilemmas. On one hand, they are required by university to supervise students' network public opinions. One of the tutors took charge of internet administration work in his university. He reported that sometimes he had to order the deletion of BBS posts published by students. Consequently, he would face a queue of students, coming to his office to ask why their posts were deleted. He explained to students that those deleted posts contained

sensitive words or content prohibited by the law or government. Also, sighing with resignation in the face of regulations, he would try to explain the complex reasons while appearing to take the side of the student. For example, he reminded of students that “there are some hidden reasons, as you already know, and so do” (TI 2). This kind of gentle and humorous offline communication aims to resolve students’ antagonistic feelings so that the students would leave the tutor’s office without being blamed. In such ways systemic tensions are managed without undue conflict, as neither party to the dispute has the ability to change the circumstances.

On the other hand, if tutors are refused or resisted by students, even the gentle intervention does not ease tensions.

Many students do not want to be controlled, supervised and guided, no matter online and offline, because they insist that they have become adult and ask for more freedom (TI 1).

Although the tutor is clear about his role of educator who should intervene and guide the students’ online behaviours, he sometimes feels unable to do what he hopes to do. The main reason, he concluded, is *the generation gap*, which actually includes various ‘gaps’ also mentioned by other tutors. For instance, there are differences between students’ and tutors’ habits of using social media and in the domains of civic topics. Students prefer to simply click ‘like’, to use emoticons to express attitude without putting any text, to care about the outside world beyond the boundary of campus and nation, and to apply creative phrases or meaningless symbols which the elder generation would call “the language from Mars” (TI 5, 7 & 8). If tutors are unable to understand youth civic culture, it may be difficult for them to take the action of intervention.

As above, three general principles summarised by tutor interviewees in the research show a set of recommendations for students' cybercivic learning. According to Osler and Starkey (2005), principles of democratic participation agreed in a society can represent personal and cultural beliefs about democracy and help schools and institutions reflectively examine their citizenship education system. These principles seem to be more or less idealistic and utopian, but point to a possible way in future in support of effective and enriched civic learning.

8.5. Media Literacy Education for Cyber Citizenship

This chapter so far has revealed a trend of learning innovation in citizenship education. While Chinese educational institutions are struggling to improve the taught programmes related to citizenship education in order to interest students, a great number of students have been finding other pathways to civic learning built upon social media. Some educators, like the tutor interviewees involved in my research, have realised the changes of civic learning and attempted to facilitate the learning process. However, when discussing the potential learning paradigms as above, I do not mean that cybercivic learning will replace the institutional citizenship programmes in higher education. Rather, I strongly suggest that the formal education system adopts elements of cybercivic learning for its own reconstruction during what is effectively an age of social media. Meanwhile, the working model of cybercivic learning needs specific designs for pedagogical purpose. In other words, the improvement of citizenship education should incorporate ideas of 'media literacy education' (Buckingham, 2003), especially of digital literacy education (Kahne et al., 2012) and 'connected learning' (Ito et al., 2013; Jenkins et al., 2015). This section articulates key tasks of the improvement in each paradigm of cybercivic learning, which would prepare young people to

become competent learners and to fulfil their cyber citizenship.

Firstly, the idea of dutiful cybercivic learning implies the task of nurturing ‘good cyber citizens’ who prefer to respect authoritative or traditional values, acquire institutional civic knowledge, and ‘responsibly’ serve both online and offline communities. This is a particularly important educational aim in China where patriotism and Socialist citizenship are advocated, and citizens are encouraged to take *orderly civic participation* in the field of mainstreamed politics. As the meaning of dutiful citizenship is continually updated and being re-presented in social media, the conventional classroom-based citizenship education should pay attention to young people’s online learning experiences. According to Buckingham (2003), one of the core elements of media literacy is the ability to ‘read’ the media text in specific social and cultural contexts. The dutiful paradigm should facilitate young people to *rationally ‘read’ authoritative information* spread in cyberspace, so that they are willing to take part in structured activities that are organised by or beneficial to official agencies, such as the Party, the government, and the nation. Jenkins and his colleagues (2015) argue for ‘the connected classroom’ in which teaching programmes cannot be isolated from the online and offline society. It is appropriate that the current political and ideological courses at Chinese universities should bring in strategies of ‘participatory learning’ (Ito et al., 2013; Jenkins et al., 2015), encouraging students to share and analyse their cybercivic learning experience at class, in respect to moral, social and political responsibilities.

Secondly, the actualising cybercivic learning implies the task of nurturing ‘interested cyber citizens’ who have basic awareness and informal knowledge of civic participation, pursuing civic rights and contributing to their

communities through life-style activities, such as consumption, entertainment and environmental protection. In the Chinese context, the potential of this kind of cultural citizenship (Burgess et al., 2006) has been neglected in the formal curriculum as the mainstream understanding of civic participation refers to political participation. However, as my research has demonstrated, young people are seeking to build new forms of civic participation via social media, which might be driven by personal interest, peer interaction, and community culture. From the perspective of connected learning (Ito et al., 2013), I would argue that the actualising paradigm can lower access to citizenship education, arouse learners' interests to culturally relevant topics, represent voices of young people, and increase youth autonomy. It also helps to connect students' digital lives with their civic engagement, academic achievement and career development (Jenkins et al., 2015). In addition, it is expected to advance students' ability to *creatively* use digital media (Buckingham, 2003). Due to its informal and life-based features, this learning paradigm should be applied in higher education to enrich formal teaching programmes in the fields of media literacy and citizenship, and to encourage learners' self-expression and peer-interaction.

Finally, through integrating and improving the two above paradigms, reflective cybervic learning implies proving a higher status for media literacy education. It aims to nurture 'active cyber citizens' who possess critical and creative capabilities for civic participation. Trained by this learning programme, students will strengthen the awareness of civic participation and spirit of public sphere. They will become able to acquire *constructed knowledge* through digital media and to continually update their knowledge, instead of sticking to stereotypes or following through fragmented information. They are expected to learn skills of *critical thinking* and *active*

participation (Buckingham, 2003). However, there are some misunderstandings about these two phrases in the Chinese linguistic, social and political context. The Chinese word of ‘critical’ (批判的, *pipan de*) has been commonly understood as an attitude of vicious criticism, in relation to offensive speeches or activities to attack others. And the Chinese word of ‘active’ (激进的, *Jijin de*) involves the meaning of anti-government and anti-social actions. Thus, ‘active civic participation’ in China would be suppressed as it is an antonym of ‘orderly civic participation’ that is officially advocated action. Although, the emphasis on critical thinking and active participation could lead to negative results as people imagined in Chinese civic practice, the core element of these skills refers to *reflection*, which can help young people to find more professional, deliberative and collaborative ways to engage in civic activities based on using social media (Rheingold, 2012; Ito et al., 2013). With reflection, young people may use critical-thinking skills to make an agreeable and supportive decision based on reliable evidence, and they may also practise active participation in a silent and non-participatory way (see the example of deliberative lurking in Chapter 7). Therefore, when applying the reflective paradigm in Chinese higher education, we should clarify its definition and learning contents in order to make sure the paradigm suits Chinese social and political context.

Summary

This chapter has described three paradigms of cybercivic learning, which showcases the potential of *learning through participation* in the wider field of citizenship education. The characteristics and key elements of each learning approach are summarised in Table 8-1. These learning models can improve and challenge traditional forms of citizenship education at university level. Bennett et al. (2009) have argued that the challenges arise from

technological changes along with social and political shifts, which means students will acquire civic knowledge, skills and values both from their living world, including cyberspace, and from the inputs of their formal education. This chapter has demonstrated that each learning mode has its advantages and limitations, and the more effective way of learning citizenship from cybercivic participation would be to combine *dutiful* learning and *actualising* learning into *reflective* learning. The lived online experience of students and their offline education experiences are both important but could benefit from being linked or integrated. Therefore, I argue that it is the time for Chinese universities to consider applying digital media literacy education into conventional *political and ideological education*, in order to update citizenship education to catch up with the emerging norms of the social media age. The programme based on the working model of cybercivic learning would be one possible approach. Universities and tutors are eventually likely to have to accommodate this technological and learning revolution through which young citizens are growing up digitally in a more autonomous, responsible and reflective way.

CHAPTER 9 CONCLUSION

This research has reported the rising tide of Chinese cybercivic participation and its educational implications. It was initially designed to explore the possibility that young citizens, who engage with civic affairs and learn to be citizens through the use of social media, would lead the innovation of civic culture and the development of democratic society. This aim has been embodied as the key research question “*How do Chinese university students employ social media for their civic participation?*” The question has been divided into five sub-questions in terms of *issues, forms, factors, impacts, and educational implications* of students’ cybercivic participation (Section 1.4, Chapter 1). In this concluding chapter, I firstly review how the research questions were answered in previous chapters. Then I highlight the arguments drawn from previous chapters. I also discuss implications of the research for improving teaching and learning cyber citizenship in higher education. Finally I present some limitations of the research and provide recommendations for future research.

9.1. Networked and Collaborative Young Citizens

The study is initially driven by personal experience as a member of the ‘Digital and Net Generation’ (Tapscott, 1998; Buckingham & Willett, 2006), and also inspired by theoretical notions in relation to studies in citizenship and media education, such as the ‘public sphere’ (Habermas, [1962] 1989), ‘cyber-democracy’ (Ferdinand, 2003), the ‘civic web’ (Banaji & Buckingham, 2010, 2013), and ‘civic life/learning online’ (Bennett, 2008b; Bennett et al., 2009). When I reflected on these notions within the context of China, I found that national education policy has begun to notice the tendencies of ICT-

based education and of civic awareness education respectively (Section 1.2.2). However, it has not reached the combination of new media literacy and citizenship in practice. The possibility of this combination needs to be investigated based on young people's perspective and lived experiences, which requires an empirical study. Bearing these ideas in mind, I propose the notion of *cybercivic participation* in Chapter 1 (Section 1.3.4), meaning that civic engagement takes place through the channels of online platforms while embedded with offline civic affairs. Cybercivic participation is also seen as a way to construct an online public sphere where citizens are learning collaboratively for rational and reflective public discourses as well as online and offline community involvement.

This raised complex questions about whether we should view cybercivic participation as a withdrawal from 'traditional' or 'mainstream' forms of civic participation, or whether this represents a major extension of civic engagement. To clarify what *civic participation* means, in Chapter 2, I go back to classical theories both in Western and Chinese perspectives. First is the theory of the *public sphere* (See Figure 2-1), which respects freedom of association and freedom of expression for both individuals and the media. It gives citizens an essentially democratic space for equal rights to negotiate, debate and deal with public affairs together (Habermas, 1974, 1989). This concept helps the research understand civic participation, focusing on citizens' collective *discussions* and collaborative *acts* for common good. Other theories help to form the framework of understanding civic participation from its relevant *rights*, *responsibility* and *capability* (See Table 2-2), considering the multiple fields, conditions and approaches of civic participation. The key notion applied in the Chinese context is *orderly civic*

participation, which emphasises citizens' participative responsibilities over rights (Section 2.5).

The current empirical literature in Chapter 3 has shown how the rise of social media revitalised conventional political activities represented by participating in elections, or joining political parties and parliamentary institutions, while considering the social and cultural activities that are re-shaping the concept of what constitutes the civic, such as volunteering, philanthropy, community involvement, demonstrating, signing petitions and boycotting products (Dahlgren, 2007b; Bennett, 2008b; Tapscott, 2009; Loader et al., 2014b; Middaugh & Kirshner, 2015). However, many previous studies present difficulties and contradictions on the practice of young people becoming informed, equipped and empowered, so they take the dimension of education and learning into account. Their arguments can be summarised as learning *about*, *through* and *for* digital citizenship, discussing not only the use of technology and networked communicating skills, but also the understandings of civic knowledge and values including information and online ethics (Rheingold, 2008; Selwyn, 2008; Bennett et al., 2009; Ribble & Bailey, 2011). In comparison, most of the relevant research in China rests on a narrowing concept of citizenship and studies civic participation in the field of political science, though some attention has been paid to adult citizens' daily expressions and actions in entertainment activities (Y. Hu, 2008; B. Wang & Wang, 2012; Wu, 2014). The literature confirms that youth online participation has already exercised challenges to mainstream forms of political and ideological education at university level, thus an educational transformation is needed (M. Chen, 2012; Hongbo Wang, 2012). In this sense, this thesis can be read as a response to the growing global debate

on online civic participation and possibly be one of the first attempts to propose the model of cybercivic learning in Chinese higher education.

Any attempt to understand a new and emerging social phenomena benefits from being grounded in the experiences and perceptions of those who are part of the social group under investigation. Based on this constructionism philosophy of empirical studies, the present study used virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Hallett & Barber, 2013) to analyse cases of Chinese cybercivic culture. Through online observations and offline interviews, data was collected from the real environments of social media and from young people's reflective responses. Chapter 4 explains the process of conducting research on a small sample of young people's online and offline experiences. Such a new methodological approach presented some challenges and ethical issues (see Section 5.2 & 5.3). As the virtual world mirrors and extends ethical relationships and cultures in the real world, the field pushes the boundaries of social investigation in the age of the Internet. One of the most significant contributions of the study is that of Chapter 5, which provides educational and Internet researchers with some suggestions for the development of institutionally and culturally situated ethical guidelines.

The key research question previously mentioned can be understood from five dimensions and has been answered in Chapter 6-8. Chapter 6 revealed that Chinese university students online can approach a wide range of civic topics. Some key findings are listed below:

- The features of different social media have particular potential to support different types of civic participation. Students' preferences of

media using are switching from *topical-driven* to *relationship-driven* participation, from *top-down* sites to *bottom-up* sites (Section 6.1).

- Being involved in online topical discussions, the students are continually strengthening their role as *national citizens* (Section 6.2.1 & 6.2.2.) and constructing their civic identities as *local* and *global* citizens (Section 6.2.2 & 6.2.5), which indicates their sense of civic responsibility towards the nation and communities.
- Through organising or joining in online activities related to offline campaigns, students have realised their legal and social rights of expression and association (Section 6.2.3 & 6.2.4) and they have presented both active and cynical civic attitudes to the topics of social justice and lifestyle politics.
- Students have also discussed controversial issues online, showing that they have become confused but more tolerant to the diversity of civic values (Section 6.2.6).

Chapter 7 has further explored the forms, reasons and outcomes of Chinese youth cybercivic participation. Seen from the four-quadrant diagram (Figure 7-1), there are four forms of participation:

- *Lurking*, which usually seems less interactive and productive (Section 7.1.1). Apart from the random or interested surfing online, some lurking actions can be understood as *passive active participation*, which means young citizens may rationally and deliberately choose not to participate in discussions, being responsible to online society and caring about others.
- *Announcing*, which is a one-way delivery of civic topics and activities, similar to the web-based publication in the age of Web 1.0 (Section

7.1.2). It is not necessary to get interactive responses because students who apply this strategy focus on producing content to make other citizens informed.

- *Promoting*, which refers to networked promoting, and looks more like an online carnival among peer students (Section 7.1.3). They have tried various strategies to make some civic posts or activities to be popular. This highly interactive participation can collectively influence civic topics or public opinions within a period, but can lack original and profound civic expressions
- *Community-construction*, which is a higher level of cybercivic participation in the model (Section 7.1.4). The good practices of online community involvement include purposefully sharing for reciprocity, reflective discussion for deliberation, working as moderators, and taking online civic actions offline to benefit offline communities.

In terms of the reasons for cybercivic participation, the study has manifested some similar findings shown in previous research, such as students' interests of cybercivic participation being related to their offline topical preferences (Section 7.2.1), rooted in their personal anticipation or appeals (Section 7.2.2), and influenced by their previous experience of participation and relevant feelings (Section 7.2.3). As the boundary between online and offline, private and public, successful or unsuccessful has become blurred, students cannot easily escape from playing the role of cyber citizens, though some of them are not willing to do so anyway. Their sense of belonging (Section 7.3.4) and capability of mutual understanding and problem-solving (Section 7.4.5) influences their future participation. The outcomes of their cybercivic participation reveal a series of contradictions and confusions that they have experienced (Section 7.3). Therefore Chapter 8 explores another

perspective to dig out the possibility for students to learn from their successes and confusions in cybervic participation.

Chapter 8 has identified three potential paradigms of cybervic learning which showcase the potential of *learning through participation* (See Table 8-1). Within the Chinese context, contents and forms arising from cybervic participation among university students are changing and challenging traditional citizenship education at university level. These paradigms have presented how learning would take place and where civic knowledge, skills and values would come from. Integrating the perspectives from university students, tutors and the researcher, this chapter suggests educators should pay attention to the possibility of citizenship learning through social media.

9.2. Contributions to the Knowledge World: Multiple Capabilities of Cybervic Participation

This research contributes to knowledge in the fields of citizenship education and media literacy education. In theory, I have developed the concept of civic participation in the context of cyber society where young citizens are digitally networked, collaboratively understanding and constructing cyber citizenship in different ways. I provide a working model to understand cyber citizenship and cybervic learning on the basis of cybervic participation. Some key arguments can be visualised in Figure 9-1 and Figure 9-2.

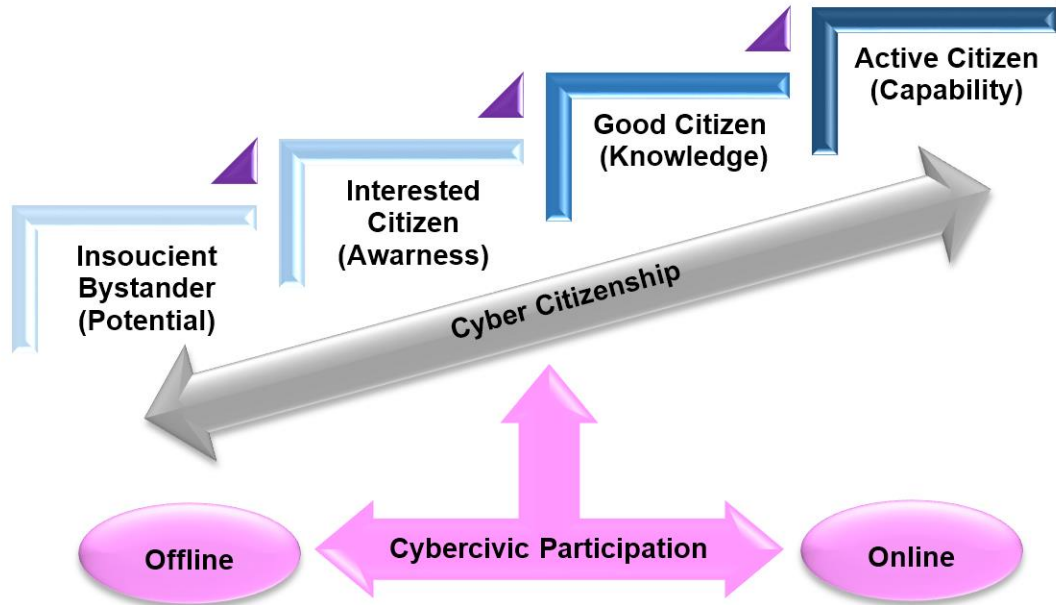


Figure 9- 1: Cybercivic Participation and Cyber Citizenship

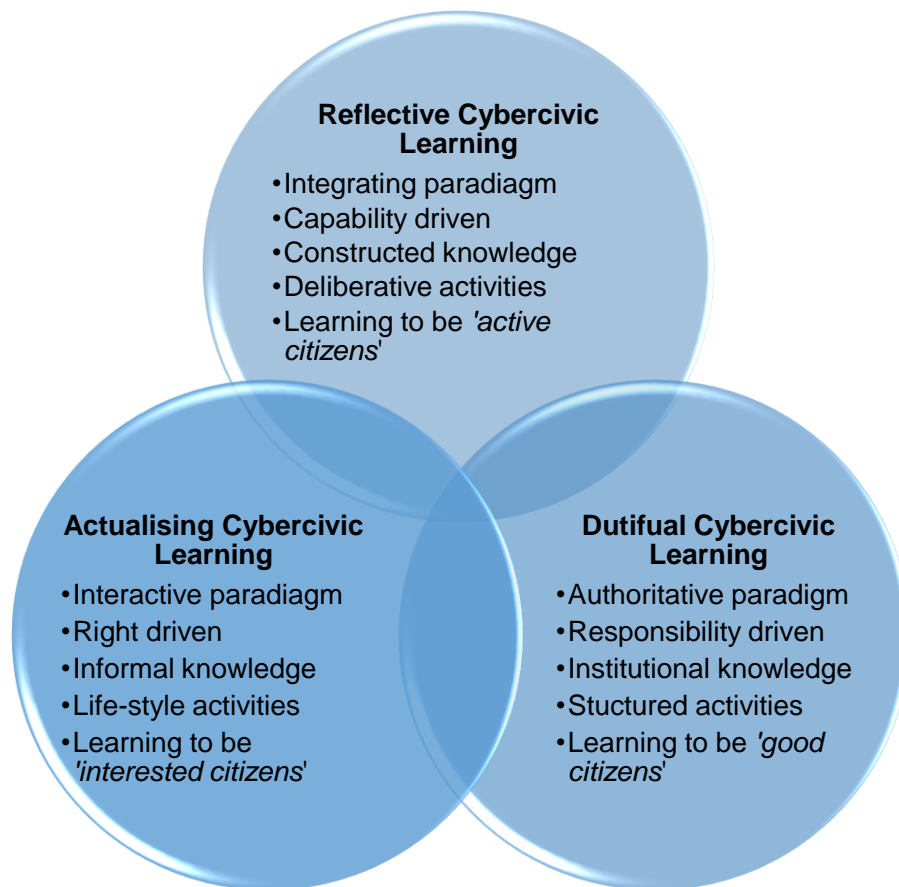


Figure 9- 2: An Explanatory Structure of Cybercivic Learning

Firstly, the research has proposed the notion of *cybercivic participation* to denote a potential way of revitalising civic life through cyber-networked discussions and activities. The concept is slightly different from the previous notions of 'online civic participation' (Banaji & Buckingham, 2010) and 'online civic learning' (Bennett et al., 2009). Combining the words of 'cyber' and 'civic', this newly created phrase addresses the fact that online and offline civic practice have been entwined with each other, which may happen both on social media (online) and via social media (offline), simultaneously or asynchronously. It will become increasingly difficult to find purely online or offline civic activities as future generations become increasingly dependent on new media in their daily lives. Moreover, this notion includes an expanded understanding towards the 'publicity' of civic participation, since an individual discursive expression online may cause forthcoming collective responses or actions. Cybercivic participation has sometimes *blurred the boundary of the private and the public*. The notion also promotes 'cybercivic learning', emphasising situated and collaborative learning from cyber-related contents of citizenship. This is a phenomenon that may increasingly come to the fore of the attention of those researching cultural and educational developments.

The second contribution to theory is that four categories of citizenship have been observed in current social media environment where there are also disengaged, passive, good and active citizens which discussed in Chapter 2 (Section 2.6). This demonstrated that the development of technology has not bring totally different types of cyber citizenship. To a large extent, social media only engage those who are already engaged in public activities (Livingstone, 2009b). Yet, social media can also 'disengage' those who are already actively engaged. This research has revealed a more modulated and

complex picture with individuals fluctuating between identities and adopting varying stances as the issues and settings affected their involvement.

- The apparently passive citizens may contain *insouciant bystanders* who are surfing online without specific civic interests (e.g. random lurkers) and *interested participants* who have interests and awareness to be engaged but may not take substantial actions (e.g. information consumers and promoters). In this case, the latter category cannot be recognised as completely passive citizens.
- The meaning of ‘*good citizens*’ can be expanded with the cases found in China. They are not only loyal followers receiving conventional and structured civic knowledge (e.g. announcement readers) but also smart change makers within the current political structure who act to be good in active ways (e.g. critical patriots and orderly activists).
- Finally, the *active citizens* have more integrated civic capabilities of critical-thinking, decision-making and problem-solving (e.g. reflective campaigns). Yet, the active citizens with reflection may also present as passive, restrained or resistant. Their non-participation aims to avoid making online flaming or undermining social solidarity (e.g. deliberative lurker). This is what I called *passively active citizens* with a Chinese civic spirit of rationality and harmony.

There are three additional points to be highlighted: (1) these categories are not mutual exclusive but may be presented by the same person or group; (2) the categories are not stable but may be floated due to citizens’ motivations of, accessibility and familiarity to the different civic activities; (3) the development of cyber citizenship is not a linear process but may be a U-turn or round-trip. However, the study argues that the three learning models may bridge four categories of cyber citizenship.

Finally, under the perspective of participatory capabilities (Section 2.4), this research has developed a preliminary framework of cybercivic learning drawn from students lived experience (see Table 8-1), which has enriched the previous categories (Section 3.3). The framework includes:

- *actualising cybercivic learning*, which is a more interactive approach, potentially to improve students' civic interests and awareness, lifestyle and non-institutional civic knowledge, and civic skills of self-expression, mutual support and reciprocity.
- *dutiful cybercivic learning*, which is a more authoritative approach, potentially to improve students' acquirement of institutional knowledge, civic values and skills of appreciating traditional culture, respecting rules and regulation, and taking obligations.
- *reflective cybercivic learning*, which is a more influential approach integrated with the above two models, potentially to improve students' comprehensive civic capabilities, such as creative media using, deliberative debating, reflective problem solving, online-offline community constructing, and responsible action taking.

Although the three categories of cybercivic learning through participation have been found in the research, most examples are related to the previous two categories, showing that Chinese university students are more likely to engage with actualising and dutiful models. In conclusion, I argue that social media have expanded and diversified youth civic awareness and knowledge, but have not automatically developed youth civic capabilities. Consequently, citizenship education should explore a new model of *reflective cybercivic learning* which integrates and improves dutiful and actualising civic learning. This suggests rethinking the educative value of learning through discussing

and doing, namely a combination of dialogic and pragmatic approaches (Dewey, [1916] 2002). Therefore the research has also raised a challenge to teaching and learning citizenship in higher education as we have seen contrasts between youth-centred constructed cybercivic learning and teacher-centred institutional civic pedagogies.

9.3. Implications for Teaching and Learning Cyber Citizenship at Universities

This research located in the field of education and youth study has made recommendations for improving conventional citizenship education in China. It may encourage Chinese university administrators, tutors and students to collaboratively update their current civic learning programmes. It may also inspire educational stakeholders in other countries with similar or different social and political conditions to China. The implications for teaching and learning cyber citizenship can be summarised in the following three aspects.

Firstly, the research suggests a positive and progressive perspective to look at young people in the digital age. There was an immanent assumption within education and youth studies that young people have to be educated, normally by authoritative adults, such as senior people, teachers and experienced experts. However, my research identifies current civic education programmes based on a transmission model being challenged by forms of involvement in social media. Young people no longer necessarily learn from the old or so-called experienced people, who may be ignorant of new media. This by no means underestimates the role of the older or non-digital generations, but addresses the fact that young people learn from another world: their virtual communities, their online peer groups, and their everyday experience in cyberspace.

Secondly, this research addresses a learning approach of 'learning from participation'. Although it is preliminary research based in Chinese cyberspace, it has indicated that young people are learning contents, values and strategies of civic participation through their use of social media. Many of the elements drawn from their lived experience have been listed in Table 8-1 which have provided educational aims, themes and methods, in order to serve the future design of relevant curricula at university level. Furthermore, there will be a possibility for university lecturers to develop a course including both online and offline teaching based on Table 8-1 particularly encouraging the practice of youth cybervolunteering and discussing the theory of participation-based civic learning.

Thirdly, this research by no means denies the value of formal teaching programmes of citizenship education. Instead, this research can provide a new perspective for policy makers, curriculum designers, and teaching fellows in Chinese political and ideological courses. One of the ways of improving traditional teaching contents and pedagogical approaches is to connect them with digital media, students' interests, participative experience and career development (Ito et al., 2013). This would be a good attempt to put textbook-based learning contents into real-life situations, to encourage students to think deeply and to take real action to contribute to their community and nation. In this way, they will have potential to become responsible, autonomous, critical and creative learners and to fulfil their cyber citizenship, being interested citizens, good citizens, and active citizens, instead of insouciant bystanders, presented citizens and cynical citizens.

9.4. Implications for Future Research

This empirical study based in the Chinese context has made an effort to capture a preliminary picture of youth cybercivic participation, but it has inevitably met a set of limitations in this process. I summarise the four challenges that I have encountered and indicate some implications for future research. The first challenge comes from the theoretical and ideological differences in understanding relevant concepts of citizenship between China and so-called Western countries. The theoretical framework of this study was mainly constructed based on Western theories and empirical research, although I have tried to highlight some Chinese contextualised concepts, such as orderly civic participation, patriotism, and political and ideological education. Future researchers may question the validity of using Western frameworks to analyse and test cases drawn from China. To solve this limitation, in future a grounded theory which specifically analyses the online civic discourse in China might be helpful. Due to the global flow of theories, it is also helpful to build a localised theoretical framework of civic participation which integrates globally common elements that using in China.

The second limitation lies with the selection of methodology and the sample. As qualitative research based on a virtual ethnographic study, this study meets problems of generalisation and representativeness, like other small-sample-based studies. It will be criticised for being unscientific, less valid than quantitative research, and over subjective based, on personal experiences (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Therefore, future research can make efforts to apply mixed-methods to enlarge the sample size and increase the diversity of data. Research methods like questionnaire-based surveys and quantitative network analysis would be helpful. In terms of the diversity of data, future research should also consider involving multiple levels of Chinese universities because students may produce different civic cultures.

Since the sample chosen in this study are students from first-tier universities, their performance online may differ from those second-tier or third-tier universities or colleges, as suggested by one tutor interviewee (TI 4). This point demonstrates the great diversity among Chinese university students, which reminds us of the importance to make educational suggestions according to students' actual digital presence and civic propensity.

Thirdly, although the current categories of cybercivic participation and learning are presented for analytic purposes, they may have some practical implications for teachers, researchers, administrators, policy makers and other stakeholders who work in the field of higher education. The elements of cybercivic learning found in the study can be applied for innovating current curriculum in the field of moral, political and citizenship education in China. Yet, the real situation of youth cybercivic participation and learning is much more complicated. When putting these models into educational practice, future research needs to discuss a specific course design both online and offline, and to consider its connections with offline citizenship education.

Last but not least, the greatest challenges a researcher faces here is the fact that the culture of social media has been continually evolving during the period of investigation. It has been nearly a decade since my first interest in researching Chinese digital citizens, during which time the first digital generation born in 1980s China have matured and many of them have become parents. At the beginning of the conduction of my research, the selected cases of social media were very powerful in China while nowadays they have become decadent platforms. However, the younger generation are always standing forward as pioneers of navigating new media. This requires the field of research to be developed in scale, speed and intensity. The

research process is therefore dynamic and rarely allows the researcher to become complacent or to reach static conclusions (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Future research should not only consider the newly developed platforms of social media, for instance, WeChat [微信] and Zhihu [知乎] in China, but also reflect social concepts and phenomena that have emerged accompanying the rapid transformations of youth cybervic culture, such as collaborative and situated civic learning, citizenship education in MOOCs, and virtual community-based learning, which I have implied in the current study.

In order to fulfil the educational expectation that the use of social media would benefit youth civic participation and citizenship education (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Loader et al., 2014b; Ru & Hu, 2016), and that the media literacy education will benefit democratic citizenship and social justice (Shujah, 2008, p. 358; Middaugh & Kirshner, 2015), relevant theories and practices must be innovatively applied to design possible educational programmes after the completion of the current research.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Examples of Literature Analysis

Research on Online Electoral Campaigns

Country and Election	Election Year	Finding and Debate	Reference
US: Presidential Campaigns	2004	This election witnessed a dramatic reversal of youth political engagement. The Internet acted as a promise to provide political information and stimulate interests of political discussion; but problems remained, such as the lack of youth-oriented contents and pathways.	Xenos and Bennett (2007)
	2008	Youth voting was continuously climbing in this election and was significantly influenced by Web 2.0 technologies that created more interactive forms of political communication. Politicians and young people could become friends online, having direct conversations. Young people as supporters or resisters innovated election-related activities, such as writing blogs, making new clips, and participating in protests. This could be remarked as <i>Democracy 2.0</i> .	Tapscott (2009)
		YouTube debates and CNN's dial-testing debates built discursive spheres for citizens' direct questions to candidates and exchanges of opinions, through which citizens reported their sense of political efficacy increased.	Kirk and Schill (2011)
		Compared with the previous parent-driven socialisation process, young people demonstrated their independence in political engagement and decision-making during this election. ICTs played an increasingly vital role in shaping youth political attitudes, challenging parental dominance and schools' influences.	Vraga et al. (2014)
2012	Studying five American political discussion forums, the author argued that during the presidential election young people did not get enough opportunities to improve their values of openness, equality and freedom	Robinson (2013)	

		of expression. This was primarily because the forum patterns and contents were dominated by prevalent hegemonic values (e.g. individualism, competition, consumerism, and reductionism).	
UK: General Election	2005	The Internet was used in the election campaign for information-gathering, political communication and influence-making (e.g. voting or persuading others voting). Young people (aged 18-25) were more likely to be engaged in these online processes than their elders (aged 26-76). However, both studies found a lower ratio of young net users who actually voted in the election than older internet users who did so. The lower voting rate was also found among female net users and users with lower education levels.	Mesch and Coleman (2007) Coleman (2007b)
	2010	Citizens used Twitter to think about the election during and just after the election leaders' debate, and to discuss long-term political issues, such as credibility, trust and power. Citizen-users acted as information providers and interpreters, breaking down the boundary between political elites and non-elites.	Ampofo et al. (2011)
		British politicians and candidates used Twitter to communicate with voters, for example mobilizing, helping and consulting them. A small group of politicians built a close relationship with citizens. Yet this study did not particularly discuss young people's responses to politicians' tweets.	Graham et al. (2013)
Finland: National Election	2007	During this election, "a substantial part of the Finnish adult population is <i>only politically active via the Internet</i> " (p.896). Young people and women's participation relied more on the Internet. Finnish Internet users presented a higher level of political competence than traditional activists.	Christensen and Bengtsson (2011)
Germany: State Parliament Election	2011	Four groups of Twitter users were evaluated as influential participants: "professional journalists, political parties, individual citizens, and civil society groups or individual activists" (p.818). They posted more tweets and made more negative	Dang-Xuan et al. (2013)

		appraisals to politicians than the non-influential group. Political expressions on Twitter were found to be significantly emotional.	
Australia: Queensland State Election	2012	The Twitter hashtag strategy was used by specific candidates and party organizations in order to stimulate election-related debates and social campaigns. However, the hashtag was ultimately dominated by a small community who were interested in their own rights, instead of the wider electorates'.	Bruns and Highfield (2013)

Appendix 2. Observation Schedule

List of questions for online participant observation

1. The organisation of the sites?
 - Presentation
 - Structure
 - Layout
 - Introduction

2. Main participants?
 - Producers
 - Audiences
 - Relationship between participants

3. Activities?
 - Discussions
 - Offline actions
 - Online & offline interactions

4. What themes arose from the online observation?
5. What are similarities/difference between observation data and interview data?
6. How do I feel during the observation?
7. What puzzles are left?
8. Is there anything I need to know more about?

Appendix 3. A letter for recruiting interview participants



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“中国青年公民的网络参与现状及其教育路径研究”课题

关于征集访谈对象的说明

尊敬的老师:

您好!

我是英国伦敦大学教育研究院 (Institute of Education, University of London) 在读博士生林可。作为“2010 年国家建设高水平大学公派研究生项目”录取的公派留学人员 (由北京师范大学派出, 国家留学基金委资助培养), 我目前在英国主要从事公民教育、媒介素养教育方面的研究工作。

我在博士阶段的课题为: “中国青年公民的网络参与现状及其教育路径研究——以 8 所高校在校大学生为例”¹。该研究旨在了解青年学生如何利用互联网参与社会公共事务讨论, 参加学校、地区及国家层面的政治、文化、公益活动等; 剖析互联网对于提升公民民主素养的积极与消极作用; 评估在网络参与的过程中青年学生所表现出的公民素养 (知识、技能、价值观) 以及遇到的问题; 探讨如何将新媒体与教育相结合, 培养“具有社会主义民主法治、自由平等、公平正义理念的合格公民”², 以期在网络时代的高等教育、高校学生工作提供相应建议。

由于研究需要, 我将于今年 4 月-5 月回国调研, 拟在全国四个城市的八所高校开展访谈调研。为此, 我想烦劳您帮忙邀请贵校的一部分学生和教师参与此次调研。所有参与者将获得一份小礼品。调研分两部分, 基本要求和情况如下:

¹ 该课题是中国教育部哲学社会科学重大攻关项目“社会主义核心价值观体系融入国民教育的路径、方法创新研究”的子课题之一; 也是英国国际民主公民教育研究中心(International Centre for Education for Democratic Citizenship)的重点课题之一, 英文题目为: Young People's Cyber Civic Participation in China——Exploring the practice of university students and the citizenship education for them.

² 《中国共产党十七大报告》和《国家中长期教育改革和发展规划纲要 (2010-2012 年)》中所提出的公民教育目标。

1. 学生访谈:

- 对象: 在校本科生或研究生
- 人数: 5-10 人
- 专业: 不限
- 访谈形式: 单独访谈或集体访谈
- 访谈时间: 40 分钟-1 小时

2. 教师访谈:

- 对象: 教师 (可以是主管学生工作的班主任、辅导员、党委团委老师, 也可以是教授政治、法律、教育等相关课程的教师, 或是对此研究课题感兴趣的其他教师)
- 人数: 2-5 人
- 访谈形式: 单独访谈
- 访谈时间: 30-40 分钟

我郑重承诺, 我将严格遵守中国和英国的学术研究伦理规范: 第一, 此次调研所得的全部资料数据仅作学术研究之用。第二, 保证尊重学生和教师的隐私, 在研究报告和论文中凡涉及参与调研者的个人信息, 均匿名处理或以数字编码代替。第三, 妥善保存数据, 确保数据安全。第四, 待研究结束后, 向参与调研的学校反馈调查结果。

期望得到您的帮助与支持! 非常感谢!

林可

2012 年 3 月

联系方式: linke0058@163.com

Appendix 4. Consent form

**“中国青年公民的网络参与现状及其教育路径研究”课题
调查对象征求同意函
2012年4月**

亲爱的同学/老师:

你好!

我是英国伦敦大学教育学院(Institute of Education, University of London)在读博士生林可。我正在进行一项关于青年网络公民参与的课题研究,诚挚邀请您作为调查对象,分享您在网上参与公民活动的经验与看法。我将对您进行一次面对面的访谈,时间约为40分钟至1小时。访谈采用半结构式,我会向您提出一些问题,您也可以根据自身情况和想法自由作答。

访谈期间,我需要利用录音设备进行数据的记录与保存。我郑重承诺,全部数据仅作学术研究之用,用于支持我的博士论文。我保证尊重你的隐私,研究报告将对您的全部个人信息进行匿名处理。

访谈之后,我希望与您保持联络。我会在网络社交媒体开展观察研究,希望您成为我的观察对象,您的言论和行为有可能被观察与记录。但如果未经您允许,我将不会记录您的网络言行。

如果您有任何关于访谈和研究的问题,欢迎随时联系我。

非常感谢您的合作!

林可

伦敦大学教育研究院 博士候选人

1. 如果您已经理解我的研究目标,并且同意参加访谈,请在下方方框勾选“是”。

如果不同意参加,则选择“否”。

- 是
 否

2. 如果你希望在访谈之后继续与我保持联系,并愿意成为本研究的观察对象,请勾选“是”,并留下您常用的社交媒体账号,我将向您发送在线好友申请。

如果您不希望加入后续研究,请勾选“否”。

- 是。我的人人网账号:
 是。我的新浪微博账号:
 是。我的其他社交媒体账号:
 否。

April, 2012

Research on Chinese University Students' Cyber Civic Participation

Consent form (Template)

Dear students/teachers,

I am currently a PhD student at Institute of Education, University of London. In order to know your opinions and actions about Internet-based civic participation, I would like to ask you a set of questions in this interview, which will last 40 minutes to 1 hour. This is a semi-structured interview. Please feel free to answer questions and share your opinions. Your response will be very important in supporting my PhD research project.

During the interview, I need to use digital recorder to record our conversation. I promise that all of information about you will only be used for my research. Also, I will ensure that your privacy is respected by anonymity or using pseudonym in my research reports.

After the interview, I would like to keep in touch with you. I will conduct an online observation based on social media sites and invite you to be involved in the process. Some of you daily expressions and actions online may be recorded as research data. But I will not record them without your agreement.

If there is any further information or suggestions that you would like to provide after the interview, welcome to contact me at any times. Thank you for your cooperation!

LIN Ke
Institute of Education
20 Bedford Way
London, WC1H 0DP
UK

1. If you have understood the introduction about my research and agree to join the interview, please tick "Yes".

If you do not want to join it, please tick "No".

Yes

No

2. If you would like to be contacted and involved in my online observation after our interview, please tick "Yes" and leave your contact details on Renren and Weibo. I will send you a friend request via these two sites.

If you do not want to be contacted in the future, please tick "No".

Yes. My account name on *Renren* is:

Yes. My account name on *Weibo* is:

Yes. My account name on other social network sites is:

No.

Appendix 5. Semi-structured Interview Schedule (Students)

学生访谈提纲

一、引导语:

- 青少年（大学生）公民的网络参与研究
- 探讨如何参与公共事务讨论和网上公民活动。
- 比如：校园事件、韩寒事件、动车事件、郭美美事件、叙利亚事件等
- 政治、选举、民意投票、爱国、公共知识分子、志愿者、社区服务、音乐艺术等形式的公共参与

二、自我介绍:

- 姓名、年级、专业、社团任职
- 网龄、上网喜好（时间、地点、网站），为什么？
- 使用哪种社交网络，为什么？

三、问题:

1. 你平时上网喜欢关注公共事务（政治、社会）吗？为什么？如何关注？
2. 哪些公共话题最能吸引你的注意力？
3. 你曾经参加过哪些网上公民活动？或通过网络组织宣传哪些线下活动？
4. 你如何评价自己的参与？（效果、影响力）
5. 你的线上参与和线下参与有联系吗？
6. 哪些因素影响你参与？
7. 你认为今天大学生的网上的公共讨论存在哪些问题？（举例子说明）
8. 你认为怎样才能提升大学生网民的（公民）素养？教育能做什么？

Interview Questions

1. Do you like surfing online to discuss political and social issues? And Why?
2. What kind of social problems and political issues concern you most? And Why?
3. What kind of civic activities do you engage in via the internet? (contents and approaches)
4. How do you evaluate your online civic participation? Could you provide some examples?
5. How do you connect your online experience and offline civic participation?
6. What factors influence your participation or non-participation?
7. What do you think are the problems of Chinese young people's cyber civic participation today?
8. What kind of supports can help nurture democratic citizens? What education can do?

Appendix 6. Semi-structured Interview Schedule (Tutors)

教师访谈提纲

一、引导语:

我的博士研究课题：“中国青年公民的网络参与现状及其教育路径研究”。该研究旨在了解青年学生如何利用互联网参与社会公共事务讨论，参加学校、地区及国家层面的政治、文化、公益活动等；剖析互联网对于提升公民民主素养的积极与消极作用；评估在网络参与的过程中青年学生所表现出的公民素养（知识、技能、价值观）以及遇到的问题；探讨如何将新媒体与教育相结合，培养“具有社会主义民主法治、自由平等、公平正义理念的合格公民”，以期能为网络时代的高等教育、高校学生工作提供相应建议。

网络公民参与：校园事件、韩寒事件、动车事件、郭美美事件、叙利亚事件等；涉及：政治、选举、民意投票、爱国、公共知识分子、志愿者、社区服务、音乐艺术、科技等形式的公共参与

二、自我介绍:

- 姓名、职务、主管工作、专业背景
- 网龄、您的上网喜好（时间、地点、网站），为什么？
- 您使用哪种社交网络，为什么？

三、问题:

1. 根据您的观察，您的学生喜欢上哪些网站？出于什么目的，为什么喜欢？
2. 根据您的观察，学生平时喜欢上网关注公共事务（政治、社会）吗？为什么？如何关注？（男、女、不同年级、专业的学生有区别吗）？
3. 哪些公共话题最能吸引学生的注意力？
4. 您的学生曾经组织或参加过哪些网上公民活动？
5. 您怎样评价他们的参与？（效果、影响力）
6. 您觉得学生的线上参与和线下参与有怎样的联系？
7. 哪些因素影响了学生的参与/不参与？
8. 您认为今天大学生的网上的公共讨论、公民参与存在哪些问题？（举例子说明）
9. 您认为怎样才能提升大学生网民的（公民）素养？学校教育能做什么？

Interview Questions

1. Do students at your university like surf online? What kinds of website do they usually visit and why?
2. From your daily observation, do students like discuss political and social issues? And Why?
3. What kind of social problems and political issues concern your students most? And Why?

4. What kind of civic activities do your students organise or take part in via the internet?
5. How do you evaluate students' online civic participation? Could you provide some examples?
6. What do you think students' online experience connect with their offline civic participation?
7. What factors influence students' participation or non-participation?
8. What do you think are the problems of Chinese young people's cyber civic participation today?
9. What kind of supports can help nurture democratic citizens? What education can do?

Appendix 7. List of Interviewees and Information

SI = Student Interviewee TI = Teacher Interviewee

P = Postgraduate Student U = Undergraduate Student

F = Female

M = Male

No.	University	Gender	Year of Study	Field of Study	Interview Date	Interview duration
SI 1	B	F	P2	Regional Economics	2012/4/11	33'04"
SI 2	B	F	P1	Resources & Environment	2012/4/11	35'00"
SI 3	B	M	U3	Human Resource Management	2012/4/11	38'00"
SI 4	B	F	P1	Comparative Education	2012/4/11	73'33"
SI 5	B	F	P1	Comparative Education	2012/4/11	37'00"
SI 6	B	M	U4	Information Engineering	2012/4/11	36'25"
SI 7	B	M	P1	Chinese	2012/4/16	38'20"
SI 8	A	F	P1	Veterinarian	2012/4/12	34'52"
SI 9	A	F	P1	Veterinarian	2012/4/12	
SI 10	A	M	P1	Veterinarian	2012/4/12	
SI 11	A	M	P1	Veterinarian	2012/4/12	
SI 12	A	M	P2	Vehicle engineering	2012/4/12	30'20"
SI 13	C	M	U3	Economics	2012/4/13	47'17"
SI 14	C	M	U3	Economics	2012/4/13	
SI 15	C	F	U3	Accounting	2012/4/13	42'23"
SI 16	C	F	U3	Accounting	2012/4/13	
SI 17	C	F	U3	Financial Management	2012/4/13	20'06"
SI 18	C	F	U3	Financial Management	2012/4/13	22'25"
SI 19	C	F	U3	Financial Management	2012/4/13	34'09"

SI 20	C	F	U2	Social Work	2012/4/13	49'14"
SI 21	D	M	U4	Politics	2012/4/17	37'04"
SI 22	D	M	U4	Politics	2012/4/17	46'12"
SI 23	D	F	U3	Youth Work	2012/4/17	59'02"
SI 24	D	F	U3	Social Work	2012/4/17	
SI 25	E	M	U2	Agriculture	2012/4/23	48'22"
SI 26	E	M	U2	Agriculture	2012/4/23	
SI 27	E	M	U2	Agriculture	2012/4/23	
SI 28	E	F	P2	Soil Science	2012/4/23	47'16"
SI 29	E	F	P2	Soil Science	2012/4/23	
SI 30	E	F	P2	Soil Science	2012/4/23	
SI 31	N	F	U1	Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL)	2012/4/26	59'55"
SI 32	N	F	U1	TCFL	2012/4/26	
SI 33	N	F	U1	TCFL	2012/4/26	
SI 34	N	F	U2	TCFL	2012/4/26	48'25"
SI 35	N	F	U2	TCFL	2012/4/26	
SI 36	N	F	U2	TCFL	2012/4/26	
SI 37	N	F	U1	Chinese	2012/4/26	58'14"
SI 38	N	F	U1	Chinese	2012/4/26	
SI 39	N	F	U1	Chinese	2012/4/26	
SI 40	N	F	U2	English	2012/4/26	38'03"
SI 41	N	F	U2	English	2012/4/26	
SI 42	N	F	U2	English	2012/4/26	
SI 43	N	M	U3	Business Administration	2012/4/27	55'47"
SI 44	N	M	U3	Business Administration	2012/4/27	
SI 45	N	M	U3	Business Administration	2012/4/27	
SI 46	N	M	U3	Sport Management	2012/4/27	47'23"

SI 47	N	M	U3	Sport Management	2012/4/27	
T1	A	F	N/A	N/A	2012/4/12	33'23"
T2	A	M	N/A	N/A	2012/4/12	34'40"
T3	C	M	N/A	N/A	2012/4/13	78'26"
T4	B	M	N/A	N/A	2012/4/11	70'26"
T5	B	M	N/A	N/A	2012/4/12	35'24"
T6	C	F	N/A	N/A	2012/4/13	40'02"
T7	E	M	N/A	N/A	2012/4/26	45'36"
T8	N	F	N/A	N/A	2012/4/27	52'56"

Appendix 8. Coding Frame

Categories	Coding Themes and Labels	
Set 1. Coding based on Current Research Question		
Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Vote/Election · Volunteering · Job hunting · Finance · Education · Health/medical system · Environment · Public service · Government · Political parties · NGOs · Local communities · Student societies · National issues (Patriotism) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Global issues · Military affairs · History · Cross-cultural understanding · Social equalities · Class gaps · Gender issues · Religion · Ethnic minorities · Human Rights · Disadvantage groups · Everyday life issues (sports, arts, fashions, photography, travel, shopping...)
Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Layout of websites · Content of websites · Reputation of websites · User-Friendly websites · Personal interest · Study/profession needs · (to expand knowledge and skills) · Friendship networking · Mutual-supports · Self-satisfaction · Community engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Publicity for individuals · Publicity for organizations · Publicity for activities · Participation experience · Political efficiency · Censorship · Sense of responsibilities · (e.g. to become public intellectuals)
Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Lurking · Like · Sharing · Simply replying · Discussing · Debating · Activity/campaign launch · Canvass 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Contact the authority · Quarrelling · Abusing · Oral violence · 'Human Flesh Search' · Offline interaction: · Positive: offline charity activities;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Voting · Online-donation · Online-shopping · Online-petition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Negative: privacy exposure; personal attacking; · Flaming
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Online impact · Offline impact · Online & Offline · Local influence · National influence · Global influence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Influence to personal networks · Influence to a website · Influence to a university · Influence to an organisation (student society, government, NGOs)
Educational supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Encouraging more CCP · Setting and learning netiquettes · Improving university's online forum · Peer-support · Teacher/tutor- consultancy · Policy-support · Necessary skill training (e.g. rational and rational thinking, evidence-based debating, reflective-practice) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Community of practice (e.g. discussion/activities in interest groups, student societies and other organisation) · Service learning (e.g. volunteering work) · Issues of CCP to be discussed in formal political education in the university

Set 2: Coding based on Theoretical Framework (multi-discipline)

Rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Freedom of thought · Freedom of conscience and religion · Freedom of opinion and expression · Freedom of online/offline peaceful assembly and association · Take part in the different levels of governing, directly or through representatives · Election · Free choice of employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · protection against unemployment · Form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests · Freely participate in the cultural life of the community (e.g. student societies)
Responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Take part in voting · Take part in public discussions and debates · Negotiate for important public affairs · Help community improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Promote virtues and civic spirits · Abide by the laws and regulations · Struggle for inequality and injustice

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Influence policy (different levels) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Respect others rights
Capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Information acquiring · Information screening and analysing · Reflective and critical thinking · Listening to others · Mutual respect · Interest-promoting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Judgment-making · Communication skills: debate, negotiation, persuasion · Governing · Problem-solving · Decision-making · Cooperation

Set 3: Coding based on Theoretical Framework (educational perspective)

Knowledge of Cybercivic Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Internet & information · Online communities (forum & SNSs) · Politics · Society · Community · Organizations (e.g. student society, NGO, government, civil society organization) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Law · regulations · Human Rights · National affairs · International affairs
Values of Cybercivic Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Sharing · Mutual-support · Respect · Freedom · Democracy · Tolerance · Dignity (personal, organisational, national) · Social justice · Social inclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Diversity · Patriotism · Solidarity · Sense of Responsibility · Anti-discrimination · Anti-violence · Individualism v.s. Collectivism · Traditional values v.s. Modern values
Skills of Cybercivic Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Similar to Capabilities in Set 2. · Information acquiring · Information screening and analysing · Reflective and critical thinking · Listening to others · Mutual respect · Interest-promoting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Judgment-making · Communication skills: debate, negotiation, persuasion · Governing · Problem-solving · Decision-making · Cooperation