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# **The Influence of Weibo Political Participations on the Political Efficacies of Weibo Users**

**Wenxu Wang,**  
MSc in Global Media and Communication

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# The influence of Weibo Political Participations on the Political Efficacies of Weibo Users

Wenxu Wang

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## ABSTRACT

By examining the relationship between microblog political participation and microbloggers' political efficacies, this article investigated the political significance of microblog in China. All together, 129 *sina.weibo* users have participated in the survey conducted in 2012. The results showed that political participations on microblog generally exerted no influence on participants' political efficacies. Only minor association was found between the frequency of microblog political discussion and collective external political efficacy. Compared with microblog political participation, gender and political interests played more important role in determining the political efficacies of Chinese microblog users. The finding indicates that microblog as a technology is not able to promote political advancement alone. Rather there is a need to change the political system from the first place in order to make the political passion on microblog meaningful. It also suggests that further research needs to re-examine the concept of political efficacy to make it more suitable under the authoritarian context. A new approach that goes beyond measuring the frequency of political participation on microblog is also needed in future convergence media studies.

## INTRODUCTION

There is a prevalent concern within the academia that publics are disengaged in politics. The same is also true within China, a country where the majority of the Chinese people do not concern politics at all (Zhou, 2006). With the introduction of microblog in China, dramatic changes have happened within the society. According to the Annual Report generated by China Internet Network Information Centre (2011), *weibo* (Chinese microblog) has attracted 195 million Chinese users by the end of June 2011, which was three times the number of users at the end of 2010. The prominence of microblog not only transforms lifestyles of Chinese people but also brings new possibilities for citizens to participate in politics. This is evidenced by increased interaction between citizens and the government on microblog and by shifted power relations between the two. The trend is that the society is driven to be more open. However openness of the society is not necessarily followed by opening of the political process in which the citizens are allowed and are willing to engage in politics. Thus questions should be asked regarding the capacity of this new media to increase citizen involvement in China and its further implication for the political change within the country.

Coleman, Morrison and Svennvig (2008) in their study of the political influence of new media proposed to examine the concept of political efficacy as the indicator for political engagement. Researchers in political science generally consider political efficacy as a useful predictor for political participation (Abramson & Aldrich, 1982). In media study, we can also examine the political efficacies of users in understanding the political significance of microblog. By doing so, we take an audience-oriented (citizen-oriented) perspective in answering the question of whether microblog can promote a civic culture in which citizens are confident to participate in politics.

To study how microblogging influences political efficacies of microbloggers, integrate the field of media study and participatory democracy would be fruitful. In reviewing past media's researches in political efficacy, it is found that most of studies only emphasized on the symbolic power of media in framing political perceptions but neglected the possibilities of political participation on media. Under the current convergence culture, media are more than content providers but also platforms characterised by intensive interactions between users and users generating contents themselves (Jenkins, 2004). This means that media influence individuals' political selves not only through *shaping perceptions* but also through *providing the experience of political participations*. As suggested by scholars in political communication, the value of active and widespread

popular participations serves as a vital impulse for political communication research (McLeod, Kosicki & McLeod, 2002). This study of active and widespread popular participation is exactly what political science focuses. Therefore to investigate the role of new media in influencing political efficacy, there is a need to combine findings both from media study and political science.

In political science, theories of participatory democracy posit that political participations could result in the variation of political efficacy (Ginsberg & Weissberg, 1978; Finkel, 1987; Kenski & Stroud, 2006). Interestingly, corresponding political participations can also be found on Chinese microblog. This is found in the interactions between citizens and government officials via governmental microblogs and in the intensive discussing of political issues among microbloggers. Studying these political participations is particularly significant for undemocratic countries, like China, where formal participations like voting are inaccessible and the mainstream media are heavily censored. Just as Dahlgren (2005) described, the online domain was a pre-political field where political participation was not explicit but always remained significant and potential.

To be specific, the objective of this research is to study the extent to which these mediated political participations on microblog can influence participants' political efficacy. The research provides an alternative way to conceptualise media's effects on political efficacy. While previous studies often considered media as symbolic resources from which audiences gained political information and formed perceptions of governments, this study conceptualises microblog as a platform that enable direct political participations which may further influence participants' political efficacy. Given current participatory culture, this research fills in the gap in lacking of media study in examining political participations on microblog. Beyond that, it also provides an academic evidence for the debate over microblog's contribution to political changes in China.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Political efficacy

In the book *The Voter Decides*, Campbell, Gurin and Miller (1954) defined political efficacy as “the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process” (p. 187). Although researchers often refer to political efficacy as an overall concept, empirically the notion is further distinguished based on whether the feeling is toward personal competence or toward government system. This distinction constitutes the two types of the individual dimension of political efficacy. One is internal political efficacy which describes the perceptions one has over one’s competence to understand and participate in political worlds. The other one is external political efficacy which measures a person’s belief about governments’ responsiveness on his or her political action (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991). Factor analysis conducted by Acock, Clarke and Stewart (1985) had also confirmed that internal and external political efficacy were two separate concepts and interact with other variables differently.

Recent studies of political efficacy also propose a new dimension of the concept, collective political efficacy. This is generally defined as citizens’ beliefs in the capability of publics as a collective group to enact political changes (Yeich & Levine, 1994; Lee, 2006). In parallel to the individual dimension, collective political efficacy is also divided into two parts, collective internal and collective external political efficacy. The former reflects individuals’ perceptions of the capacity of a group to make political change. While the later one measures individuals’ beliefs over the government responsiveness to collective actions (Manning, Beierlein, Preiser & Wermuth, 2008).

The difference between the collective and the individual dimension relies in which subject is treated as the participant to make political change. Collective dimension focuses on individual’s faith in groups whereas individual dimension emphasises independent personal participation. In the empirical study conducted by Lee (2006), she pointed out that collective political efficacy was a distinct dimension different from individual political efficacy. As she demonstrated, Hong Kong citizens had low feeling of internal and/ or external political efficacy; however their collective political efficacy were relatively high.

Although important, the collective dimension of political efficacy has not yet received sufficient attention (Manning, Beierlein, Preiser & Wermuth, 2008). This disposition of research agenda may be due to the fact that the concept of political efficacy was originated in democratic countries, where citizens usually engaged in politics via voting

independently. Compared to that, in authoritarian countries, well-established democratic system in which citizens can make differences in individual unit is nowhere to be found. Lee (2006) pointed out that citizens in collectivist culture and transitional societies are particularly more aware of their collective fates. The same is also true within China, as individuals can hardly influence the political process in single units. Instead the public opinions can serve as a powerful surveillant pressing the government.

As the landscape of political environment changed by new media, both of the two dimensions of political efficacy could be influenced by microblog. As we mentioned in the introduction section, to study the mechanism of influence, literatures in both media study and political science are worth revisiting first. Then we will integrate the two schools of political efficacy study, and discuss how the emerging ways of political participations on microblog could impact microbloggers' political efficacy.

### **Media study of political efficacy**

The existing research agenda of media's study of political efficacy is rooted in the tradition of Media Effects study, which mainly considers that media influencing audiences through the framing power of media contents. In parallel to the Media Effect study, most of early media researchers who studied the relationship between media and political efficacy considered that it was the exposure of media contents that increased political knowledge and shaped ones' political minds, thereby changing audiences' political efficacies.

For them, the primary effect of contents exposure was being informed. As reviewed by Moy (2008), early studies believed that news provided political information for citizens to understand their political worlds. Thus news reading increased knowledge of individuals which further enhanced believed personal competence to understand and participate in political activities, i.e. internal efficacy. Later studies moved one step further to distinguish the different types of news pieces and how they could shape individual perceptions toward political worlds. For instance, both uncivil political discussions shown on television and general negative reporting of political systems could undermine citizens' trusts towards governments (Robinson, 1975; Miller, Goldenberg & Erbring, 1979; Mutz & Reeves, 2005), which consequentially reduced their feelings of government responsiveness, i.e. external political efficacy.

In addition to news, there were also sizable studies regarding political entertainment programmes. Viewing satires and parodies about political figures or government were found to increase internal political efficacy at the same time decrease external political

efficacy (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). It is because these shows usually require audiences to combine various political knowledge to understand contents. Besides, the negative portraying of the government diminishes audiences' trust simultaneously. Therefore internal and external political efficacy were found to react in opposite direction.

This content exposure approach indeed provides insightful implications for later research. For instance, the negative portraying of governments also exists on microblog, which may decrease microbloggers' external political efficacy. Nevertheless, studying the influence of content exposure on political efficacy is not without problem. First of all, these researches overlooked the active and critical reading of audiences. Cognitive approach to mass communication effects assumes that texts construct our perception of the political world via framing (Harris, 2009), as such influencing our political efficacy. However audiences are active in responding to messages. Some may hold skeptical views toward satire political entertainment shows, thus their political efficacy are not necessarily altered after perceiving contents. This means that other factors may overweight media contents in influencing audience political efficacy. This constitutes the second shortcoming of these studies. In fact, demographic variables and political interests could contribute to essential variations in political efficacy of audiences regardless of message exposure (Stenner-Day & Fischle, 1992). However early studies only concentrated on media contents while failing to control for these variables. Last but not least, these studies only focused on one-dimension flow of contents between producers and audiences, yet talked little about the convergence culture, in which contents are generated by audiences themselves and where interactions among audiences happen along personal networks instead of mass media.

Consequently with the emergence of internet, new mechanisms of which media could influence political efficacy were added into literature (Cornfield, 2003; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Coleman, Morrison & Svennevig, 2008). Among them, studies about the interactions between citizens and governments and among citizens themselves could provide useful guidance for this research. According to Kenski and Stroud (2006), internet offered new ways for citizens to interact with government officials, such as the e-government portals. The interaction itself could promote perceived government responsiveness, hence improving external political efficacy. However, some also pointed to the downside of e-government portals. As Johnson and Kaye (2003) suggested, the government officials' ignoring of citizens' requests could harm external political efficacy instead.



Beyond the interactions between citizens and governments, media scholars have also realized the consequence of online political discussions among citizens themselves. As reviewed in previous section, when discussing with others, individuals learnt about different views and shared similar ideas. Discussing political issues with different others can broad one's factual knowledge about politics (Scheufele, 2000), thus increasing internal political efficacy. On the other hand, realization of sharing similar ideas with others may increase feeling of social support (Moy, 2008).

This feeling of social support is not yet studied extensively by media scholars. As past media researches all examined the individual dimension of political efficacy while neglecting the collective side. Nevertheless, the relationship between political discussion and increased community solidarity is well substantiated in political science (Verba, Scholzman, Brady & Nie, 1995; Stamm, Emig & Hesse, 1997). They posited that discussing with others who hold similar ideas could nurture a feeling of social support, which was expected to have some relations with collective political efficacy. Once people start to be aware that they are not alone, they are more likely to perceive that a government will respond to the community as a whole. This will be discussed in detail later.

As a conclusion for this section, media's studyings of political efficacy treat the concept as a consequence of media effects. Early literature focused on the informing and perception shaping functions of media, yet neglecting other diversified factors that could influence political efficacy: audience agency in perceiving media contents, precedent political interests and more importantly the interactive feature on participatory media. While recent internet studies have taken into account the interactive political participation and peer discussions online, nevertheless they lacked theoretical framework in studying the modes of online political participations and their influences on political efficacy. Thus, under the participatory culture, there is a need to learn from theories in political science, from which we could construct a theoretical framework to analyze political participations on Chinese microblog.

### **Political science's study of political efficacy**

Political science's study of the causal factors of political efficacy is the experience of political participation. This research agenda is grounded on theories of participatory democracy which postulate that citizens' participation in political activities will influence their inner political efficacy (Finkel, 1987). For participatory democracy tradition, both conventional and unconventional political activities are considered as political

participation as long as they are intended to influence the process of government decision making (Stenner-Day & Fischle, 1992).

Scholars focusing on conventional political participations considered that participations in institutional political activities benefited both individuals and political systems (Thompson, 1970). Therefore formal participations, such as voting and campaigning, were expected to bring positive changes in one's perceptions of personal-competence and government responsiveness. To be specific, democratic theorists such as Pranger (1975) indicated that participation resulted individual development since it was a process of improving knowledge, skills and even traits that are necessary to participate in democratic system, hence increasing internal political efficacy. In terms of external political efficacy, theory of Mobilization of Support contended that participation reinforced individuals' acknowledgement of political system as they believed that they were controlling decision making processes thus acquiesced in current political systems (Ginsberg, 1982).

On the other hand, some researchers also recognized the influence of engaging in unconventional political activities. Most of these activities, such as protesting, community activism and internet discussion are not system-supportive hence may bring negative influence on external political efficacy in contrast to conventional participation. For instance community activism is defined as activities that intended to solve community problems that governments had failed to resolve (Almond & Verba, 1963). Participating in this kind of activism means that one has to organize meetings, call for petitions and contact government officials, which may increase internal political efficacy at the same time decrease external political efficacy. For it on the one hand develops participants' skills but on the other hand reinforces the lack of confidence in government institutions (Stenner-Day & Fischle, 1992).

Participatory democracy theories thus provide insightful implication for studying microblog. As microblog is a platform on which both conventional and unconventional political participation can be found. More importantly, these political participations substitute formal voting and campaigning that are unobtainable in China. On microblog, citizens take political actions in less explicit ways. This is exemplified in interaction with government weibo and in the high level of political discussions between microbloggers. The interactions and dialogues form a microblog culture which further stimulates civic responsibilities and encourage political activism.

While previous studies have shown that internet civic culture can bring positive changes to Chinese politics (Yang, 2003; Zhou, 2006; Yang, 2009). The current study examines

how political participations on microblog can influence civic culture in China. To explore the microblog landscape, it will integrate ideas discussed in both media and political science as the theoretical framework for this research. The next section thus discusses Chinese microblog political participations and employs the integrated framework to investigate the influence of them on political efficacy.

### **Microblog political participation and its influence on political efficacy**

Both conventional and unconventional political participations can be found on weibo. As for conventional political participation, there is a recent trend for governmental institutions to open up official microblog accounts. By the end of March 2011, there were all together 1708 government institutional accounts and 720 governmental officers' accounts being created (Zhang & Jia, 2011). As reviewed, in the past years, e-government websites utilize the interactive feature of internet to interact with citizens. Yet what distinguishes microblog from e-government websites is that microblog in China has increasingly become a new medium for public opinions to emerge (Hunter, 1998 May), whereas e-government websites is only an online service platform.

In light of that, Chinese governmental institutions decided to use microblog as a new way to monitor, guide and respond to public opinions of the citizens. The functions of government weibo include: disseminating information; providing governmental services; soliciting public opinions and interacting with publics (Gao, 2012). These governmental microblogs play important roles in promoting the openness of government information and encouraging public opinion expression. Some regional government officers even utilized their microblog to discuss legislation proposals with microblogger during National People's Congress and the Chinese Political Consultative Conference (Du, 2012, March 8).

In spite of the heat of governmental microblog and its claimed benefits, problems have also come out. Firstly there is an uneven distribution of governmental microblogs within the country. Government institutions in Southern China are more active and open in creating and updating contents and in interacting with publics, such as government microblogs in the provinces of Jiang Su, Fu Jian, Guang Dong and Zhe Jiang. By contrast, other government microblogs do poorly in maintaining contents (Zhang & Jia, 2011). Second, government microblogs are generally rated low among Chinese *weibo* users. As an online research conducted by The People's Government of Zhejiang Province (2011) suggested, governmental microblogs were thought to contain less information wanted by publics and lacked enough interaction and immediate responses to microbloggers' comments.

These problems could cause different effects on individuals' political efficacy. As reviewed, conventional political participating increases both internal and external political efficacy. Interacting with government official microblogs belongs to this type of political participation. Thus intense interaction with government official microblog is supposed to increase internal and external political efficacy, for it enhances personal capacities to understand political world, at the same time increasing endorsement of the government system. However, untimely response to microbloggers' requests could just reduce perceived government responsiveness. It thus lowers external political efficacy. As a result, as ones' frequency of interacting with government weibo increase, their internal political efficacy is supposed to increase. At the same time, the direction of change in external political efficacy varies according to whether government weibo respond to their comments timely.

In terms of unconventional political participation, both community activism and political extremism proposed by Stenner-Day and Fischle (1992) can rarely been seen on weibo. In fact, under the authoritarian regime, contents related to petitions and protestation are often self-censored and/or deleted by microblog service provider. However this does not mean that there is no meaningful unconventional political participation. As Yang (2009) contents, internet activism in China is less apparent but more tactful and covert. This is mainly manifested in online public discussion which is exactly a form of direct political participation (Kwei, 1999).

As reviewed, political discussion on Internet increases awareness of sameness with others and further improves collective political efficacy, this mechanism is also manifested on microblog. To be specific, microbloggers will comment and forward political contents that they agree with. The contents are then forwarded further along with other comments. Thus it creates a stream of awareness of political opinions. What is more important than the actual contents communicated is the psychological byproducts of the process of transmitting. As Postman (1995, July 25) pointed out, the influence of information transformation on new media should not only be discussed in terms of contents but more importantly the symbolic meaning of the way information was transmitted. The symbolic meaning created by microblog in China is that Chinese users first realize that their voices can be heard widely and there are many users who share same values with themselves. As a result, values are transmitted rapidly and aggregated voices can even change social agenda.

What facilitates the above process of voice making, identity sharing and agenda setting is exactly the new communication pattern of microblog technology. Firstly the design of

microblog enables individuals to connect with strangers that would not otherwise be possible (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Microblog is found to contain fewer reciprocal relationships compared with other social networks (Kwak, Lee, Park & Moon, 2010). This means that networks on microblog are not the replication of real worlds, but are formed based on interests. Thus individuals can experience a sense of identification with anyone who shared similar opinions, making the perceived social supports more extensive than other social network sites.

Secondly, not only does microblog enable expansion of social bounding. The emotional feelings on microblog are also contagious thus easily influencing political attitudes of microbloggers. Named as social awareness streams, contents displayed on user's microblog page nurture an always-on feeling (Naaman, Boase & Lai, 2010). The quick information disseminating feature often stimulates heated discussion of large-scale public events, resulting in a stream of political discussion on individual's page. Barnhurst (2011) pointed out that this *affect* characteristic of new media was able to promote political involvement among normal citizens.

A study conducted by Papacharissi and Oliveira (2011) demonstrated the huge influence of Twitter in nurturing a sense of solidarity online and promoting a can-do feeling during the Arab Spring uprising. Such examples also exist in China, for instance, during *the Scandal of Guo Meimei* microbloggers' public opinions forced the Chinese Red Cross to change relevant policies and make the donation process more open (Hong & FlorCruz, 2011, July 6).

As a consequence, unconventional political discussion on microblog could influence both the individual and the collective dimensions of political efficacy. Following on the study of internet discussion, we can postulate that the more one discusses on microblog, the more one will obtain factual knowledge about politics, which is followed by increased internal political efficacy (Scheufele, 2000). Besides, in China public discussions online are often full of satires and implicit criticism or guarded explicit criticism of the Party (Esarey & Qiang, 2008). In microblog communities the same type of dissatisfaction with the Party and higher social classes is also prevalent. As mentioned in previous section, negative portraying of governments will diminish external political efficacy. Thus we expect that high frequency of political discussion on microblog is related to low external political efficacy.

On the other hand, high frequency of microblog political discussion could also results in high collective internal and collective external political efficacy. Enlarged social bound may increase ones' confidence in the capacity of weibo users as a whole to understand

and participate in politics. At the same time, high frequency of discussing political issues may also associate with high collective external political efficacy. The more one has discussed, the more one would experience large-scale events microblog made in exerting surveillance on the government and in changing social agenda. As Lee (2006) has discussed, collective political efficacy is easily influenced by large-scale events during societal transition. By the same token, the large-scale events on microblog may increase collective external political efficacy.

To summarize this section, the general research question asks whether there is association between political participation on microblog and political efficacy of microbloggers in China. Both conventional and unconventional political participations can be found in Chinese. microblog. While interaction with governmental microblog belongs to conventional political participation, political discussion with other microbloggers constitutes unconventional political participation. Integrating both participatory democracy theory and media effect study, we postulate that political attitudinal changes are expected to happen within those who have participated in political activities. Specific research hypotheses and sub-question are synthesized as followed:

*Conventional political participation:*

Hypothesis 1. microbloggers who interact with governmental microblogs more have higher level of internal political efficacy.

Sub-question 1: how does the degree of interaction with governmental microblogs associate with external political efficacy?

*Unconventional political participation:*

Hypothesis 2: the more one discusses about political issues on microblog, the higher one's internal political efficacy will be.

Hypothesis 3: the more one discusses about political issues on microblog, the lower one's external political efficacy will be.

Hypothesis 4: the more one discusses about political issues on microblog, the higher one's collective internal political efficacy will be.

Hypothesis 5: the more one discusses about political issues on microblog, the higher one's collective external political efficacy will be.

## METHODOLOGY

### Implementation

#### *Data*

Since no quantitative research has been done in studying the political attitude of microblog users, thus primary data was collected from a cross-sectional survey. *sina.weibo* was chosen for the study as it currently occupied 87% of the Chinese microblog market (Wen & Sun, 2011). The mode of data collection was self-administered questionnaire conducted on *surveymonkey.com*. Overall, 144 *sina.weibo* users participated in the survey during July 10 to July 15, 2012. Among them 129 valid questionnaires were obtained.

#### *Sampling and recruitment*

Snowball sampling was employed in the current research. The lack of sampling frame is a common sampling problem for online social network studies (Gjoka, Butts, Kurrant & Markopoulon, 2011). This makes traditional random sampling impossible to achieve. Alternatively, crawling the social graph (i.e. the networks in which users are connected with one another) of target social network sites is used more often by researchers in the field (Gjoka et al., 2011). Crawling can take many forms, from the most sophisticated crawling techniques such as systematic random walking (Rasti, Torkjazi, Rejaie & Stutzbach, 2008 September) and multigraph sampling (Gjoka et al., 2011), to the simplest form of snowballing. Given the high cost of sophisticated crawling techniques, snowball sampling was chosen in this study.

Obviously, research using the simple form of crawling technique like snowballing will suffer from having low external validity when some nodes on the social networks are omitted. Omitting of important nodes is partly due to the selection bias of the initial nodes and partly due to the non-response from invited respondents. To mitigate such problems, following sampling steps were taken.

Firstly, research invitation (see Appendix 1) was sent out by the researcher on *sina.weibo* in the form of a piece of *weibo* (similar to a *tweet*). At the same time, in the original research invitation, the researcher mentioned (act of using the “@” sign followed by a username) ten of her followers and asked each of them to forward the invitation *weibo* to other five people. Thus respondents who had completed the questionnaires would forward the invitation letters and mentioned five of his or her followers. The rest of the

sample was drawn with the same process. This recruitment process was designed to mitigate the above problem in two ways. On the one hand, the researcher only mentioned ten people from the list of her own followers on *sina.weibo*, thus leaving the rest of the sample to be driven by respondents themselves. Besides, the composition of the initial ten nodes contained people with diverse sociodemographic background as much as possible. On the other hand, the research design also tried to solve the problem of low response rate. According to the pilot test, the response rate of questionnaires sent to strangers (instead of one's followers) was lower than ten percents. In the current study, the close relationship with mentioned followers increased the likelihood of responding.

## **Measurement**

### *Control variables*

To redress the insufficiency of neglecting confounding factors in early media studies, five demographic variables, including gender, age, education, income and party affiliation were controlled in this research: gender (male coded as 1, female coded as 2; male: 46.5%, female: 53.5%); age ( $M = 24.47$ ,  $SD = 4.498$ ); education had four categories, (high school or below coded as 1, bachelor degree coded as 2, master degree coded as 3, doctor degree or higher coded as 4, Median = 2.00,  $SD = .557$ ); income contained six categories ranging from "less than 1,000 RMB" to "more than 30,000RMB" (Median=2,  $SD = 1.528$ ); party affiliation was composed of three categories (CCP Member coded as 1 : 23.3%, Members of the Communist Youth League coded as 2 : 39.5%, Publics and nonparty member coded as 3 : 37.2%).

In addition to that, political interest was also controlled. In fact, political interest could play important roles in determining participatory behaviors and political efficacies of individuals (Stenner-Day & Fischle, 1992). Higher political interest is correlated with more political participation and higher political efficacy. Ignoring this confounding variable would inflate the correlation between political participation and political efficacy. To measure it, three items developed by Chen and Zhong (1999), were used: 1) interest in politics in general; 2) care for national affairs and 3) care for major local issues. According to Chen and Zhong (1999), this measurement was more suitable to measure the political interest of Chinese citizens. Because it emphasized psychological involvement instead of behavioral involvement, which the later was inaccessible under Chinese authoritarian regime. Each item was measured on a five-point scale, where "1" indicated low interest and "5" indicated high interest (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .815$ ). Political interest index was the average score of the three items, ranging from lowest 1 to higher 5 ( $M = 3.84$ ,  $SD = .819$ ).



*Microblog political participation*

Conventional political participation was measured in terms of the frequency of interaction with governmental microblogs. Two questions were asked to measure the level of conventional political participation, 1) the frequency of following the contents of government weibo, and 2) the last time commenting or forwarding contents of government microblog. These two questions come up with an overall degree of involvement with government weibo which was an ordinal variable consisting of three categories (not participated in conventional political participation was coded as 1, middle level of involvement in conventional political participation was coded as 2, high level of involvement in conventional political participation was coded as 3, Median = 2.00, SD = .875).

Unconventional political participation focused on the level of involvement in discussing political issues. Since communication on microblog is composed of peak issues and persistence issues (Shamma, Kennedy & Churchill, 2011). Peak issues are those popular topics generating heated discussions within short time period, for example *the High Speed Train Crash*. Persistence issues by contrast, are less heated topics sustaining for longer duration of time, such as the issue of democracy. Since the research was a cross-sectional study conducted during a time when no salient peak issues were discussed in large scale, thus asking respondents to simply recall the frequency of discussing of political issues would underestimate actual level of participation. As a result, the degree of involvement in unconventional political discussion was measured at two dimensions: 1) the frequency of discussing political issues in daily life, and 2) the number of heated political topics discussed in the last eighteen months. These heated political topics were chosen from the *semi-annual heat political topics rank* on *sina.weibo*. Combining these two questions resulted in an overall score for involvement in discussing politics (low level of unconventional political participation was coded as 1, middle level was coded as 2, high level was coded as 3, Median = 2.00, SD = .828).

*Political efficacies*

Internal political efficacy was measured on a four-item scale which was proved to be reliable compared with other measurements (Niemi, Craig & Mattei, 1991). The four statements were: 1) I consider myself to be well qualified to participate in politics in China (SELFQUAL); 2) I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing China (UNDERSTAND); 3) I feel that I could do as good a job in public offices in China as most others (PUBOFF); 4) I feel better informed about politics than most people in China (INFORMED). (Cronbach's alpha = .729)

External political efficacy was measured on a two-item scale (Craig, Niemi & Silver, 1990). The two statements were: 1) In China, government officers do not care people like me (NOCARE); 2) In China, people like me have no say over government affairs (NOSAY). The Cronbach's alpha was .684 which is lower than the ideal .7, however as Pallant (2010) suggested, Cronbach alpha value was sensitive to the number of items in scales. As the variable was measured only on a two-item scale, such .684 figure was treated as acceptable in this research.

Collective political efficacy is a relatively new dimension of political efficacy as a result we do not have handful literature regarding the measurement of it. Manning, Beierlein, Preiser and Wermuth (2008) in their reviews of past literatures about collective political efficacy, suggested a measurement scale for each type of collective political efficacy. In this study, we adjust their (Manning, et al., 2008) measurement scales to the Chinese context. Collective internal political efficacy was measured on a two-item scale, the two statements were: 1) During political change, Chinese microbloggers can bound together (ABILITYBOUND); 2) Chinese microbloggers are group of people who can make positive change in politics (COMPETENCE). (Cronbach's alpha = .744)

Collective external political efficacy was measured based on a five-item scale, the five statements were: 1) Change will happen within China if enough people bound together and call for change on weibo (ENOUGHCHANGECHN); 2) Compared with independent individuals organized group of microbloggers have more influence on politics in China (ORGANIZEDINFLUENCE); 3) If enough people call for change on weibo, government will respond (ENOUGHRESPONSE); 4) Chinese government will listen to people if we pressure them on weibo (PRESSURELISTEN); 5) If enough people call for change on weibo, government officers will really take steps to make change (ENOUGHTAKECHANGE); (Cronbach's alpha = .852)

For all of the four political efficacies, respondents evaluated the statements on a 6-point Likert scale. The Likert scale ranges from 1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree, except for external political efficacy which negative questions were asked in questionnaires and thus were reversely calculated. 6-point Likert scale was used since Chinese respondents were found to be inclined to choose midpoint answers in Likert scale questions than people in other culture (Lee, Jones, Mineyama & Zhang, 2002). Eliminating of the neutral choice forced respondents to take a position on their political attitudes. Index for each political efficacy was the average score of their respective scale of items, ranging from lowest 1 to highest 6. The current questionnaire improved some questions in the summative essay (Wang, 2012), for the full version of the questionnaire see appendix 6.

**Data analysis**

Data analysis had three steps. Descriptive analyses were performed first to have an overview of the respondents' demographic features, microblog political participation patterns and political efficacy. Since there was no existing research using identical set of items to measure the political efficacy of Chinese citizens, thus meaningful comparison of the results with other studies was impossible. Thereby one-sample T-tests were used to compare the mean scores of political efficacies and each of their own mid-points. In the second step, One-way ANOVA, independent t-test and bivariate correlation were used to scrutinize potential correlations between different types of control variables and political efficacy. It also tested the correlations between political participations and political efficacies. Finally, Hierarchical multiple regressions and two-way between-groups ANOVA were conducted for political participations and political efficacies while controlling for correlated control variables discovered in the second step (summary of tests in each step, see Appendix 2.). Hierarchical multiple regressions enabled us to tell how much political participation can still predict a significant amount of the variance (if any) in political efficacy if we control for corresponding control variables (Pallant, 2010). Two-way between-group ANOVA, allowed us to examine individual effects of political participations and control variables on respective political efficacies. It also examined joint effects (if any) of political participation and related control variables on political efficacies (Pallant, 2010). Categorical variables were transformed into dummy variables for the purpose of conducting Hierarchical multiple regressions (see Appendix 2.).

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

### General descriptive

An overall description of the sample composition is given in Table 1. In general the sample corresponded well with the actual population of sina.weibo user after comparing with the known demographic background (Yu , 2011), except that the elderly users were slightly underrepresented. The sample correctly reflected the characteristics of sina.weibo users, that is there were more female users than male users; at the same time the education level of majority of users was either bachelor degree or master degree. Besides users whose monthly income was lower than 1,000RMB and between 1,000RMB and 3,999RMB occupied the first two proportions in total. This was due to the fact that most of users were students and then employed workers (Yu, 2011). The political interest of respondents was really high (mean = 3.84, which was significantly higher than the mid-point of the scale after conducting a one-sample t-test,  $t = 11.287$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

As for conventional political participation, there were in total 45% of respondents who had not interacted with government weibo at all. Among those who had followed government weibo, 60% of them had relatively high level of interaction with government weibo, which occupied 33% of the total sample. In terms of unconventional political participation, 39.5% respondents only had a low level of involvement in discussing political issues on weibo, respondents with middle and high involvements in political discussion occupied 31% and 29.5% of the total respectively.

In terms of dependent variables: political efficacy, all of the mean scores of the four types of political efficacy were lower than the mid-point of the Likert scale. Among them, the differences between the mean score and the mid-point of external political efficacy and of collective external political efficacy were statistically significant. (External Political Efficacy  $M = 2.62$ ,  $t = -7.498$ ,  $\text{sig} < .001$ ; Collective External Political Efficacy  $M = 3.25$ ,  $t = -2.867$ ,  $\text{sig} = .005$ ). These meant that both perceived government responsiveness to citizens and perceived government responsiveness to microbloggers as a whole were significant low among users in the sample. Apart from that, internal political efficacy and collective internal political efficacy were also lower than their mid-point, although they were not statistically significant (Internal Political Efficacy  $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = .978$ ; Collective Internal Political Efficacy  $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 1.086$ ).

**Table 1.**  
Descriptive of Sample

		N	%	M	SD	Mdn
Gender	Male	60	46.5			
	Female	99	53.5			
	Total	129	100.0			
Education	High school or below	2	1.6			
	Bachelor degree	71	55.0			
	Master degree	53	41.1			
	Doctor degree or higher	2	1.6			
	Total	128	99.2	2.43	.557	2.00
Income	Less than 1,000 RMB	59	45.7			
	1,000-3,999 RMB	22	17.1			
	4,000-6,999 RMB	15	11.6			
	7,000-9,999 RMB	13	10.1			
	10,000-30,000 RMB	19	14.7			
	More than 30,000 RMB	1	.8			
Party affiliation	CCP Member	30	23.3			
	Communist Youth League	51	39.5			
	Publics or nonparty	48	37.2			
	Total	129	100.0			
Average political interest	Total	121	93.8	3.84	.819	4.00
Conventional political participation	None	58	45.0			
	Middle	29	22.5			
	High	42	32.6			
Unconventional political participation	Low	51	39.5			
	Middle	40	31.0			
	High	38	29.5			
Internal political efficacy	Total	129	100.0	3.45	.978	3.50
External political efficacy	Total	128	99.2	2.62	1.326	2.50
Collective internal political efficacy	Total	123	95.3	3.39	1.086	3.50
Collective external political efficacy	Total	122	94.6	3.25	.973	3.40

**Correlation checking**

Table 2 listed the variables that were correlated with dependent variables at the significant level of .05. As the table suggests, age, education and party affiliation were not correlated with political efficacy as expected from literature (Finkel, 1987). Nevertheless, gender was indeed associated with most types of political efficacy except for external political efficacy. Besides, political interest and income were correlated with internal and collective internal political efficacy respectively. In addition to control variables, two types of political participations were not found to have any correlation with the four political efficacies in general. (Detailed statistical output see Appendix 3 )

**Table 2.** Summary of correlation checking

<b>Internal political efficacy</b>	<b>External political efficacy</b>	<b>Collective internal political efficacy</b>	<b>Collective external political efficacy</b>
Gender	/	Gender	Gender
Political interest		Income	Unconventional
Conventional		Unconventional	
Unconventional			

**Note:** this is only correlation checking for the third step, thus statistical figures are not reported.

After the second step, unrelated control variables were dropped. Informed from table 2, further analyses need to be conducted to test the correlation between political participation and political efficacy while controlling for related control variables. Different tests were used depending on the number and nature of explanatory variables. Thus internal political efficacy, collective internal political efficacy were tested by conducting hierarchical multiple linear regressions. Collective external political efficacy was tested using two-way ANOVA. Since External political efficacy did not correlate with any of the variables, thus no further analysis was conducted about it.

## Correlation summary

### *Internal political efficacy and conventional political participation*

As shown in Table 3, the block of control variables explained 26.0% of the variance in internal political efficacy in the sample. After entering of conventional political participation scale, the total variance explained by the model as a whole was 26.4%. Conventional political participation only explained an additional 0.4% of the variance in internal political efficacy (R Square Change = 0.004), after controlling for gender and political interest. Two dummy variables of conventional political participation were statistically insignificant in the second model ( $p_{\text{dummy for none}} = .436$ ,  $p_{\text{dummy for middle}} = .823$ ), which means that controlling for gender and political interest, conventional political participation was still not correlated with internal political efficacy. Gender ( $B = .385$ ,  $p = .016$ ) and political interest ( $B = .543$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) still played the major roles in determining internal political efficacy. That is, the score of internal efficacy of male was higher than the score for female. Besides, political interest was positively correlated with internal political efficacy as expected. Since respondents with higher political interest tend to pay more attention on political knowledge in normal time, consequently they were more likely to perceive higher personal capacities in understanding the political world. Overall, H1 was rejected.

### *Internal political efficacy and unconventional political participation*

The relationship between unconventional political participation and internal political efficacy resembled a lot to the relationship between conventional political participation and internal political efficacy. As shown on Table 3, adding the scale of unconventional political participation only accounted for an additional 0.3% of the variance in internal political efficacy (R Square Change = 0.003) after controlling for gender and political interest. Two dummy variables of unconventional political participation were not significantly related with internal political efficacy as shown in the second model ( $p_{\text{dummy for low}} = .486$ ,  $p_{\text{dummy for middle}} = .570$ ). Again, gender ( $B = .400$ ,  $p = .012$ ) and political interest ( $B = .578$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) played the major roles in determining internal political efficacy. Therefore H2 was rejected.

### *External political efficacy and conventional and unconventional political participation*

As mentioned before, external political efficacy was not associated with any of the variables studied in this research. H3 were therefore rejected and answer for sub-

question 1 is that there is no association between interaction with government weibo and external political efficacy. Detail statistical outputs see Appendix 4.

*Collective internal political efficacy and unconventional political participation*

Unconventional political participation was not correlated with collective internal political efficacy ( $p_{\text{dummy for low unconventional}} = .248$ ,  $p_{\text{dummy for middle unconventional}} = .822$ ). In fact, the correlation between income and collective internal political efficacy discovered in the second step disappeared as well after controlling for sex and unconventional political participation in the second model ( $p_{\text{dummy for low income}} = .134$ ,  $p_{\text{dummy for middle income}} = .127$ ). Only gender was correlated with collective internal political efficacy but at minor degree, with female achieved higher score this time than men in the sample ( $B = -.430$ ,  $p = .036$ ), (test summary see Table 3). Thus H4 was rejected.

*Collective external political efficacy and unconventional political participation*

Results of the Two-way ANOVA was summarized in Table 4, it showed that the interaction effect between gender and unconventional political participation was not statistically significant ( $F = 1.194$ ,  $p = .307$ ). There was a statistically significant main effect for gender as expected ( $F = 6.219$ ,  $p = .014$ ). Overall female achieved higher score for the variable than male across all three levels of unconventional political participation. While unconventional political participation became insignificant at .05 level when controlling for gender, however it was significant at 0.1 level ( $F = 2.359$ ,  $p = 0.099$ ). As demonstrated on Figure 1, respondents' believed government responsiveness to collective political efforts indeed increased when the level of microblog political discussion rose from low to middle levels. However, when the degree of political discussion went beyond middle level, gender played a more noteworthy role. To be specific, the more female discussed political issues on weibo, the higher their collective external political efficacy would be, whereas extensive microblog political discussion of male could just lower their collective external political efficacy. Thus H5 was only half supported.



**Table 3.** multiple linear regression analysis for political participation and political efficacy

Conventional political participation	Internal political efficacy	Internal political efficacy	Internal political efficacy	Collective internal political efficacy	Internal political efficacy	Collective internal political efficacy
Dummy for none conventional participation		-0.142(.181)				
Dummy for middle level conventional participation		-0.049(.217)				
			Unconventional political participation			
			Dummy for low level unconventional participation		.140(.200)	-.273(.235)
			Dummy for middle level unconventional participation		.118(.208)	-.057(.251)
Control variables			Control variables			
Dummy for male (gender)	.385*(.155)	.385*(.157)	Dummy for male (gender)	.385*(.155)	-.409* (.201)	.400* (.158)
			Dummy for low income		.350(.239)	-.430*(.203)
			Dummy for middle income		.471(.272)	.364(.241)
Political interest	.555***(.095)	.543***(.097)	Political interest	.555*** (.095)		.578*** (.101)
Model statistics			Model statistics			
R Square	.260	.264	R Square	.260	.083	.095
R Square change		.004	R Square change		.003	.012

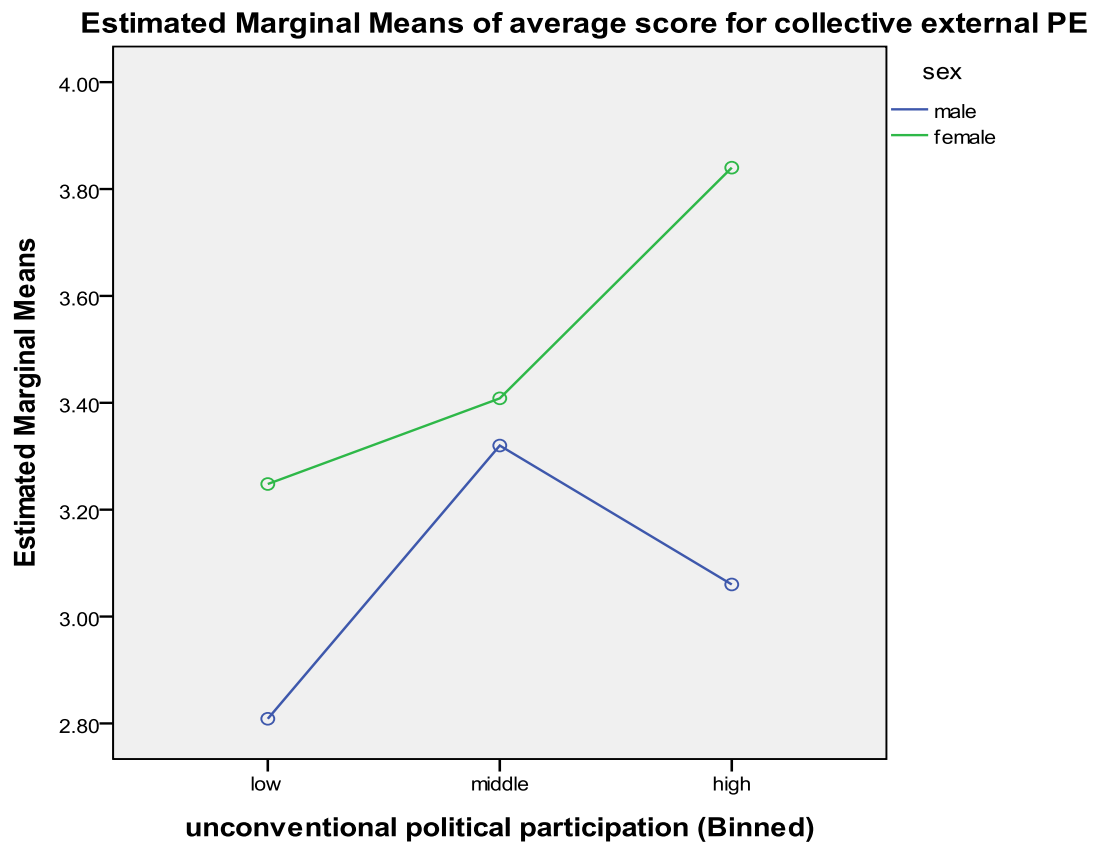
Note: The table summarizes three multiple linear regressions: Conventional political participation and internal political efficacy, unconventional political participation and internal political efficacy, unconventional political participation and collective internal political efficacy. Entries are non-standardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parenthesis. Detailed statistical output see appendix 5. \*p < 0.05. \*\*\*p < 0.001.

**Table 4.** Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: average score for collective external PE

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Squared	Eta
Corrected Model	11.097 <sup>a</sup>	5	2.219	2.490	.035	.097	
Intercept	1256.168	1	1256.168	1409.417	.000	.924	
SEX	5.543	1	5.543	6.219	.014	.051	
UNCONVGP3	4.205	2	2.103	2.359	.099	.039	
SEX * UNCONVGP3	2.129	2	1.064	1.194	.307	.020	
Error	103.387	116	.891				
Total	1401.160	122					
Corrected Total	114.484	121					

a. R Squared = .097 (Adjusted R Squared = .058). Note: SEX stands for gender, UNCONVGP3 stands for unconventional political participation. Levene's test of equality of error variances suggests that error variance of the dependent variables is equal across group. Detailed statistical output see appendix 4

**Figure 1.** Two-way ANOVA

## **DISCUSSION**

This research took a quantitative, user-oriented perspective to scrutinize the capacity of microblog in nurturing a civic culture in China. Although the sampling technique limited the generalizability of the result, still the current research provides some evidence for the debate over the capacity of microblog to promote democratic changes in China. Although some were optimistic towards internet in bringing democratic change to China, the research findings of the current study lent more supports for the opposite side. Generally speaking, the low scores of political efficacies across the sample suggest that respondents do not attach much faith in the current government nor do they believe that their actions could make impact on the political process in China. Albeit microblog provides a platform that contains new democratic possibilities, microblog respondents do not show strong confidence in their actions, be it individually or collectively, to make political differences.

### **Interaction with Government microblog**

In principle, the mechanism of conventional political participations to enhance internal political efficacy is through personal education and development of skills (Pranger, 1975). This is what Pranger (1975) called the self-realisation of citizenship. However the interactions with government weibo failed to provide the kinds of opportunities that allowed personal developments. This is due to the fact that the nature of conventional political participation via government weibo in China is different from the nature of conventional political participation normally measured by researchers in democratic countries. What they considered as conventional political participation were usually voting and attending candidates campaigning or even helping politicians in campaigns (Ginsberg & Weissberg, 1978; Stenner-Day & Fischle, 1992; Shi, 2000). These differ a lot from the way our respondents interacted with government weibo. From our survey, the purposes for our respondents to interact with government weibo were to give public suggestions, to gain public informations and to consult laws. These kinds of interactions could not improve the skills required to participate in the political world in China. Instead, micrologger interacted with government weibo only to solve daily problems.

In terms of external political efficacy, previous researches posited that involvement in conventional political process could strengthen ones' psychological endorsement of government systems thus making participants to perceive more system responsiveness (Ginsberg & Weissberg, 1978). However, there existing huge amount of government microblogs that were inactive and seldom response to citizens' requests (Gao, 2012).

Another problem of government microblog is that most of them use improper ways of communication to talk with microbloggers (Gao, 2012). For large amount of government officers, they opened microblog just for the sake of open or were forced to open because it was required by their leader. Unquestionably seldom can these government microblogs produce real dialogues with citizens.

From another point of view, government weibo is only one of the forms of interaction between citizens and government. Even if some government microblogs respond to comments timely and are popular among users, the authoritarian regime has already resulted in a deeply rooted perception that the government does not respond to citizens' needs (Shi, 2000), which is difficult to be changed in short time. This reason explains why the external political efficacy was low across all respondents no matter they had interacted with government weibo or not.

### **Microblogs political discussion in China**

In terms of political discussion on microblog, i.e. the unconventional political participation, it did not broaden the political knowledge of microbloggers (internal political efficacy) as expected, nor it was associated with microbloggers' perceived government responsiveness (external political efficacy). To some extent, the survey design limited the result findings. As quantifying the frequency of political discussion cannot reflect the purpose and quality of discussing political issues. It is likely that discussing of political issues did not necessarily involve criticizing the government, thus external political efficacy would not necessarily decrease.

It is also likely that, as mentioned before, perceived low government responsiveness was so deeply rooted in the minds of microbloggers, that political discussion itself could explain little of the variance. Participatory democratic theorists such as Muller (1979) and Finkel (1987) provided insightful explanation for this kind of situation. According to them, the external political efficacy of activists citizens is already low before participating in political extreme actions. In this case, it was the high political interest and dissatisfaction with the government that drove microbloggers to participate in activism action (discuss political issues) from the first place. As a result even if respondents differ in their levels of political discussion, their scores of external political efficacy were similarly low.

On the other hand, forwarding and commenting do not necessarily increase political competence of microbloggers (internal political efficacy). Firstly the 140 word-limits could restrict the depth of issue analysis thus it is not an ideal place to gain in-depth

knowledge of political worlds. Second, microblog is in essence a social network that provides instant information through sharing via numerous nodes (Yu, 2011). Contrary to what we previously presumed, this kind of social network turned out to attract more like-minded people rather than dissenters who can bring different perspectives. This is one of the reasons why the social network sites were often criticized by scholars who doubt the capacity of them in bringing democracy, as people's knowledge is reinforced rather than being broaden (Boyd, 2008).

From the above analyses, we can see that the two types of microblog political participations could not improve personal competence nor they were able to modify individual perceptions toward the government responsiveness. The study of political participation and individual level of political efficacy is however not enough to draw conclusion over the influence of microblog on nurturing a civic culture. Since microblog is a social network, there is a need to analyze the collective dimension of political efficacy as well. This new dimension is in parallel to what Loader and Mercea (2011) advocated. For them, a new perspective in examining the democratic prospective of social networks, is to look at the collaborative capacity of social media and how it can empower participants. This empowerment focuses more on the affective side of participating experience than on the side of knowledge acquisition. What we found from this research was that microblog political discussion did not make participants feel capable as a group to make political change. However, it did make them believe at a minor degree that the government was more responsive to the public opinions of microbloggers as a whole than to individual voices.

In principle, the process of discussing political issues helps individual microbloggers identify with others who share similar values. However shared identity does not necessarily lead to perceived high competence of the group as a whole to make political change (collective internal political efficacy). In fact, it is likely that the quality of experience counts more in determining individuals' confidence on the group's capacity. Some individuals may have experienced incidences in which microbloggers bounded together, however others might have witnessed more factions and disputes within microbloggers. Since microbloggers are fragmented nodes, their experience and their evaluations of their own past experience also varies. Thus frequency of discussion was less important compared to personal experience. Positive experience even in small amount (equal to low level of political discussion) can result in having increased confidence on microbloggers' capacity, and vice versa.

In addition to personal experience, gender difference also played important role in shaping one's perception. When asked to evaluate the capacity of microbloggers as a collective group in achieving political influences, female respondents were more optimistic than their male counterpart, as the overall score of collective internal political efficacy of women was significantly higher than men. It is likely that female microbloggers tend to be more optimistic than male in believing that microbloggers as a group is competent to make political change; and are more inclined to recall positive experience of how discussing political issues on microblog were able to influence the Chinese society. On the other hand, male could be more skeptical in the competence of microbloggers as a whole to bound together and to make political change.

By the same token, the problem of individual experience and demographic factor also influenced collective external political efficacy. From the result, we found that frequency of political discussion indeed increased collective external political efficacy. However this influence was only effective among female participant and among male participants who engaged in lower degree of political discussion. From one side, it confirms Christensen and Bengtsson's (2011) research finding that previous marginalized women considered digital media as a new way to be active in politics and that they were more vigorously embracing the empowerment brought by digital participation than their male counterpart. From another side, active male participants seemed to be more pessimistic than less active male participants in believing that government was more responsive to microblog. This might be caused by trait difference or preceding negative perceptions toward the government but it could also due to personal experience. That is active males could run into more times of the government's ignorance towards microblog than others, thus were more pessimistic to believe the government will not respond to microbloggers as a whole.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Limitation and further implication

After explaining the disassociation between political participations and political efficacies, there is a need to point out the limitations of the research and some further implications. Firstly, the questionnaire was self-administered by respondents themselves. Self-administration of the questionnaire led to 15 respondents' dropping out from the survey. In addition to that, the form of self-report reduced the internal validity of the survey (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 1999). As the frequency of political participation was measured based on respondents past memory. There is a possibility that some answers misrepresented their actual participation behaviours. Moreover, the sampling strategy restricted the external validity. On one side, the small sample size of 129 means that an effect needs to be large to be significant if we use the .05 significant level. Accordingly we may overlook subtle but important effects. On the other side, the snowballing technique attracted respondents with similar backgrounds, which lowered the representativeness of the sample. Thus replication of the survey that employs more sophisticated sampling techniques for social network sites should be used before accepting the result of the research.

Despite these limitations, some further implications should be discussed in reviewing the irrelevance between microblog political participation and political efficacy. In fact, microblog political participation in China is different in many ways from the political participation studied in democratic countries. The following paragraphs will summarize the disparity and provide further research implication in four perspectives, including the communication pattern of microblog, the Chinese authoritarian regime, the unique feature of Chinese microbloggers and the applicability of the concept political efficacy.

Firstly, the communication characteristic of microblog makes microblog political participation unique. As Hogan and Quan-Hasse (2010) pointed out, social media is a new form of political participation where collective actions are taken at individual level. Such form of individualized communication means that collective political participations are not actualized through collective presences in same physical places. Instead individuals participate in political activities in different time, at different venues and have different experience. Such personalized political participation indeed poses challenges for us to measure the impact of microblog on the political self of participants. This is because, depending on *who* they followed on microblog and *how* they

participated in political activities, different people would have different feelings toward same political issues.

To make it more clear, the contents shown on each person's microblog are different for each user. Even during the same time period, individuals' experience of collective political actions diverges from one another depending on the set of accounts they have followed. Besides, the way of political participation is also different on microblog. As individual users are fragmented distributed behind the screen, thus one can discuss political issues but simultaneously distracted by other entertainments on his or her screens (Chouliaraki, 2010). The strong emotional feelings instigated by collective actions can easily fade away. All in all compared with traditional collective political actions, collective discussions on microblog do not guarantee a sense of collective identity building nor do they guarantee a can-do feeling. Further study regarding demographic difference, perception difference and experience difference should be conducted before claiming that microblog political discussion can psychologically empower participants.

Second, under the authoritarian regime, the Chinese government is not willing to share its power of decision making with citizens. Thus they tend to treat microblog as only a new form of public relation that disseminates information, monitors public opinions and maintains relations with citizens. Different from voting and campaigning, the interaction between microbloggers and government weibo is hardly intellectually demanding and competence enriching. Microbloggers do not feel that they are engaging in the kind of political processes that are significant. This makes participatory democracy theories inapplicable under Chinese context. Moreover, even if the government tries to initiate dialogues with citizens through weibo, however questions should be asked regarding how likely these virtual dialogues can migrate to offline real political world. One should not cursively conclude that the government has started to respond to citizens' need if it generates timely response on microblog (not to mention the large amount of inactive government microblog). Actual problem-solving actions should also be taken offline in order to enhance citizens' believed government responsiveness. Thus opening microblog should not be considered as a panacea or the ultimate resort.

Thirdly, under such authoritarian government, Chinese microbloggers generally do not trust on the government. Their disappointments with the government formed a negative precedent perception which severely undermined their political efficacies fundamentally. In contrast to this low political efficacy is their significantly high political interest. Microbloggers are group of young citizens who register lots of interests in politics



compared with the general apolitical publics. However this high level of political interests had not transformed into high political efficacies or booms of political participations on microblog. This disproves Chen and Zhong's (1999) implication that the high political interest of urban Chinese will followed by potentially high level of civic engagement. At least in the sense of microblog, what we see is the disproportionately low level of political participation and political efficacy sharply in contrast to the expressed high political interest.

The underlying reason accounting for this discrepancy is that there is a lacking of democratic system which results in microbloggers' unfamiliarity of how to enact their citizenship online. From the survey, we found that among the respondents who had interacted with government weibo, they admitted that they did not expect the government to respond to their needs on microblog (see appendix 5). In addition, lots of political discussions are abusive denunciations of the government without rational deliberation. Of course, one may oppose such a deliberative form of public sphere advocated by Habermas (1974). For instance, some scholars like Mouffe (1999) and Papacharassi (2010), emphasized the emotional side of political participation on social media. However in the case of China, more specific proposal pertaining to how such emotional empowerment can be transformed into a healthy civic culture that is conducive to democratic improvement is needed. Without the support of a democratic system, passions can only escalate into violence As Loader and Mercea (2012) had put, citizens are holding more power in the second generation of digital democracy. The problem is how to guide microbloggers to utilize the power in advancing political change under the authoritarian regime.

For the past years, qualitative researches regarding the soft resistance of Chinese netizens were handful. Scholars such as Yang (2009) and Esarey and Qiang (2011) examined extensively how internet users used ambiguous and *egao* contents to resist the central government. Perhaps further study of microblog political participation should go beyond measuring the frequency and turning attention to the contents as well, such as text, photos and videos.

In the end, there is a need to revisit the concept of political efficacy. Although higher political efficacy is generally considered as an indicator for higher citizen engagement (Coleman, Morrison & Svennvig, 2008), however we cannot arbitrarily state that the low political efficacy of our microblog respondents means their civic engagement is low. In fact their high political interest and collective engagement in discussing political issues suggest that they do have passion in politics. It is only that their passion cannot be

properly measured by political efficacy which is in original, a concept used to predict future political participation.

For instance, internal political efficacy measures one's believed capacity in understanding political world. Low internal political efficacy suggests that one is not confident in his or her competency to understand politics, thus is less likely to participate in political activities. However in the case of China, such formal political participation does not exist at all. This has not only made measuring internal political efficacy less meaningful, it also neglects the potential political interests one actually possesses. By the same token, low external political efficacy means that individuals may cease to participate in political activities, since they think their actions cannot generate responses from the government. However without a future political activity for one to participate in, answering the questions of external political efficacy can turn into dissatisfaction expression, particularly for citizens who are full of discontentedness toward the government. In light of that, future research should be cautious in using the concept political efficacy, particularly when individual political participations are not accessible.

The current research thus tried to adjust the concept of political efficacy by measuring the collective dimension. It turned out that the collective external political efficacy did have some correlation with microblog political participation. Tentatively, we could expect that in the face of the authoritarian regime, Chinese citizens may put more faith in the microblog in enacting their citizenship, and that the collective dimension of political efficacy may better reflect this distinct type of civic engagement of Chinese microbloggers. To substantiate this idea, further research needs to ameliorate the measurement of political efficacy, and compare the collective dimension with the individual dimensions.

Integrated theories from media study and political science, this study took an audience-oriented perspective in addressing the question of whether microblog can bring any political significance to China. The research results raise our attention that we should not be too optimistic in believing that the *weibo* can bring a civic culture in China, in which citizens are politically efficacious. The disassociation between microblog political participation and political efficacies adds another evidence for dismissing the idea of technological determinism. Even though the microblog has brought new possibilities for Chinese citizens to participate in politics, however without a proper functioning political system, virtual political participation can hardly be transformed into meaningful real world democratic advancement. On the other hand, however, we are not advocating the same kind of democratic system completely resembling those in western democratic

countries. Given the unique political culture in which citizens are highly interested in politics (at least on *weibo*) yet unable to enact their citizenship, hence applying theories such as political efficacy to China is not only improper, but will also lose sight to the potential political significance of microblog. Accordingly, future research needs to find alternative ways to measure the influence of microblog democracy that is more suitable for the Chinese context. Such alternative measurement can either embark from studying the collective dimension of political efficacy which is more suitable for the political culture on *weibo* or embark from examining the actual political contents on *weibo*. Both qualitative and quantitative research will be needed to explore the microblog arena.

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## APPENDIXES

### Appendix 1. Invitation letter: (English)

Don't limit your microblog to watching others and updating status. Let's make change, let's stop watching. Five minutes could make your microblog to be more meaningful. Please complete the questionnaire in the link and @ 5 of your followers. We need you, the society need you. #microblog participation and political efficacy# <http://t.cn/zWVWBjN>

Invitation poster



**Appendix 2**

**Dummy variables**

Original variables	Baseline group	Dummy variables
Control variables		
Gender	Female	Dummy for male
Education	Master degree or higher	Dummy for bachelor degree or lower
Income	High income	Dummy for low income
		Dummy for middle income
Party affiliation	Publics or nonparty	Dummy for CCP member
		Dummy for Youth League
Independent variables		
Conventional political participation	High conventional participation	Dummy for none conventional participation Dummy for middle conventional participation
Unconventional political participation	High unconventional participation	Dummy for low unconventional participation
		Dummy for middle unconventional participation



**Appendix 3. correlation test in the step 2 of the data analysis process**

**Group Statistics**

sex	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
average score for internal male	60	3.6833	1.12452	.14518
PE female	69	3.2717	.78910	.09500

**Independent Samples Test**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
average score for internal PE	Equal variances assumed	9.090	.003	2.430	127	.017	.41159	.16939	.07640	.74679
	Equal variances not assumed			2.372	103.827	.020	.41159	.17349	.06754	.75565

**Group Statistics**

sex	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
average score for collective male	58	3.1121	1.10041	.14449
internal PE female	65	3.6308	1.02040	.12657

**Independent Samples Test**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
average score for collective internal PE	Equal variances assumed	.985	.323	-2.712	121	.008	-.51870	.19126	-.89734	-.14006
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.700	116.790	.008	-.51870	.19208	-.89912	-.13828

**Group Statistics**

sex		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
average score for collective external PE	male	58	3.0276	.97797	.12841
	female	64	3.4469	.93111	.11639

**Independent Samples Test**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
									Lower Upper
average score for collective external PE	Equal variances assumed	.224	.637	-2.425	120	.017	-.41929	.17289	-.76160 -.07698
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.419	117.422	.017	-.41929	.17331	-.76251 -.07607

**Correlations**

		average score for political interest	average score for internal PE
average score for political interest	Pearson Correlation	1	.470**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	121	121
average score for internal PE	Pearson Correlation	.470**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	121	129

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

**Descriptives**

average score for collective internal PE

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum	Between- Component Variance
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound			
Low income	57	3.4455	1.19285	.16084	3.1230	3.7679	1.00	5.50	
Middle income	35	3.6429	.84515	.14286	3.3525	3.9332	2.00	5.50	
High income	33	3.0152	1.05686	.18398	2.6404	3.3899	1.00	5.50	
Total	125	3.3862	1.08608	.09793	3.1923	3.5800	1.00	5.50	
Model									
Fixed Effects			1.06796	.09629	3.1955	3.5768			
Random Effects				.17430	2.6362	4.1361			
									.05982

**Test of Homogeneity of Variances**

average score for collective internal PE

Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
2.739	2	120	.069

**ANOVA**

average score for collective internal PE

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	7.042	2	3.521	3.087	.049
Within Groups	136.865	120	1.141		
Total	143.907	122			

**Appendix 4: Regression test****Regression 1****Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.510 <sup>a</sup>	.260	.247	.848	.260	20.717	2	118	.000
2	.514 <sup>b</sup>	.264	.239	.853	.004	.325	2	116	.723

a. Predictors: (Constant), average score for political interest, dummy for male

b. Predictors: (Constant), average score for political interest, dummy for male, dummy for none conventional participation, dummy for middle conventional participation

**ANOVA<sup>c</sup>**

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	29.818	2	14.909	20.717	.000 <sup>a</sup>
	Residual	84.920	118	.720		
	Total	114.738	120			
2	Regression	30.291	4	7.573	10.402	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	84.447	116	.728		
	Total	114.738	120			

a. Predictors: (Constant), average score for political interest, dummy for male

b. Predictors: (Constant), average score for political interest, dummy for male, dummy for none conventional participation, dummy for middle conventional participation

c. Dependent Variable: average score for internal PE

**Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Correlations			Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Zero-order	Partial	Part	Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)	1.155	.376		3.068	.003	.409	1.900					
dummy for male	.385	.155	.197	2.489	.014	.079	.691	.211	.223	.197	.999	1.001
average score for political interest	.555	.095	.464	5.861	.000	.367	.742	.470	.475	.464	.999	1.001
2 (Constant)	1.274	.424		3.002	.003	.434	2.115					
dummy for male	.385	.157	.197	2.451	.016	.074	.696	.211	.222	.195	.982	1.019
average score for political interest	.543	.097	.455	5.597	.000	.351	.735	.470	.461	.446	.962	1.040
dummy for none conventional participation	-.142	.181	-.073	-.782	.436	-.501	.217	-.106	-.072	-	.739	1.353
dummy for middle conventional participation	-.049	.217	-.021	-.224	.823	-.479	.382	-.051	-.021	-	.731	1.368

a. Dependent Variable: average score for internal PE

**Regression 2**
**Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
dimensiono 1	.510 <sup>a</sup>	.260	.247	.848	.260	20.717	2	118	.000
2	.513 <sup>b</sup>	.263	.238	.854	.003	.264	2	116	.768

a. Predictors: (Constant), average score for political interest, dummy for male

b. Predictors: (Constant), average score for political interest, dummy for male, dummy for middle unconventional participation, dummy for low unconventional participation

**ANOVA<sup>c</sup>**

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	29.818	2	14.909	20.717	.000 <sup>a</sup>
Residual	84.920	118	.720		
Total	114.738	120			
2 Regression	30.203	4	7.551	10.361	.000 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	84.535	116	.729		
Total	114.738	120			

a. Predictors: (Constant), average score for political interest, dummy for male

b. Predictors: (Constant), average score for political interest, dummy for male, dummy for middle unconventional participation, dummy for low unconventional participation

c. Dependent Variable: average score for internal PE

**Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Correlations			Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Zero-order	Partial	Part	Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	1.155	.376		3.068	.003					
	dummy for male	.385	.155	.197	2.489	.014	.211	.223	.197	.999	1.001
	average score for political interest	.555	.095	.464	5.861	.000	.470	.475	.464	.999	1.001
2	(Constant)	.966	.459		2.103	.038					
	dummy for male	.400	.158	.205	2.539	.012	.211	.229	.202	.974	1.027
	average score for political interest	.578	.101	.484	5.749	.000	.470	.471	.458	.896	1.116
	dummy for low unconventional participation	.140	.200	.070	.699	.486	-.075	.065	.056	.629	1.590
	dummy for middle unconventional participation	.118	.208	.056	.570	.570	-.039	.053	.045	.651	1.536

a. Dependent Variable: average score for internal PE

### Regression 3

**Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.287 <sup>a</sup>	.083	.059	1.053	.083	3.568	3	119	.016
2	.308 <sup>b</sup>	.095	.056	1.055	.012	.780	2	117	.461

a. Predictors: (Constant), dummy for middle income, dummy for male, dummy for low income

b. Predictors: (Constant), dummy for middle income, dummy for male, dummy for low income, dummy for low unconventional participation, dummy for middle unconventional participation

ANOVA<sup>c</sup>

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	11.875	3	3.958	3.568	.016 <sup>a</sup>
	Residual	132.032	119	1.110		
	Total	143.907	122			
2	Regression	13.612	5	2.722	2.445	.038 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	130.295	117	1.114		
	Total	143.907	122			

a. Predictors: (Constant), dummy for middle income, dummy for male, dummy for low income

b. Predictors: (Constant), dummy for middle income, dummy for male, dummy for low income, dummy for low unconventional participation, dummy for middle unconventional participation

c. Dependent Variable: average score for collective internal PE

Coefficients<sup>a</sup>

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Correlations			Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Zero-order	Partial	Part	Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	3.281	.234		14.011	.000	2.817	3.745					
	dummy for male	-.409	.201	-.188	-2.036	.044	-.806	-.011	-.239	-.183	-.179	.901	1.110
	dummy for low income	.350	.239	.161	1.464	.146	-.124	.824	.049	.133	.129	.634	1.576
	dummy for middle income	.471	.272	.197	1.731	.086	-.068	1.010	.150	.157	.152	.596	1.679
2	(Constant)	3.422	.277		12.360	.000	2.874	3.970					
	dummy for male	-.430	.203	-.198	-2.124	.036	-.831	-.029	-.239	-.193	-.187	.887	1.127
	dummy for low income	.364	.241	.168	1.510	.134	-.114	.842	.049	.138	.133	.628	1.593
	dummy for middle income	.430	.280	.180	1.537	.127	-.124	.983	.150	.141	.135	.567	1.765
	dummy for low unconventional participation	-.273	.235	-.123	-1.161	.248	-.738	.193	-.116	-.107	-.102	.686	1.458
	dummy for middle unconv participation	-.057	.251	-.024	-.226	.822	-.555	.441	.097	-.021	-.020	.670	1.492



a. Dependent Variable: average score for collective internal PE

## Two-way ANOVA

Dependent Variable: average score for collective external PE

unconventional political participation (Binned)			Mean	Std. Deviation	N
male	dimension2	low	2.8087	1.01887	23
		middle	3.3200	1.05234	15
		high	3.0600	.85125	20
		Total	3.0276	.97797	58
female	dimension2	low	3.2480	1.00047	25
		middle	3.4083	.92592	24
		high	3.8400	.73368	15
		Total	3.4469	.93111	64
Total	dimension2	low	3.0375	1.02285	48
		middle	3.3744	.96374	39
		high	3.3943	.88316	35
		Total	3.2475	.97270	122

## Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances<sup>a</sup>

Dependent Variable: average score for collective external PE

F	df1	df2	Sig.
.691	5	116	.631

Tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups.

a. Design: Intercept + SEX + UNCONVGP3 + SEX \* UNCONVGP3

## Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: average score for collective external PE

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	11.097 <sup>a</sup>	5	2.219	2.490	.035	.097
Intercept	1256.168	1	1256.168	1409.417	.000	.924
SEX	5.543	1	5.543	6.219	.014	.051
UNCONVGP3	4.205	2	2.103	2.359	.099	.039
SEX * UNCONVGP3	2.129	2	1.064	1.194	.307	.020
Error	103.387	116	.891			
Total	1401.160	122				
Corrected Total	114.484	121				

a. R Squared = .097 (Adjusted R Squared = .058)

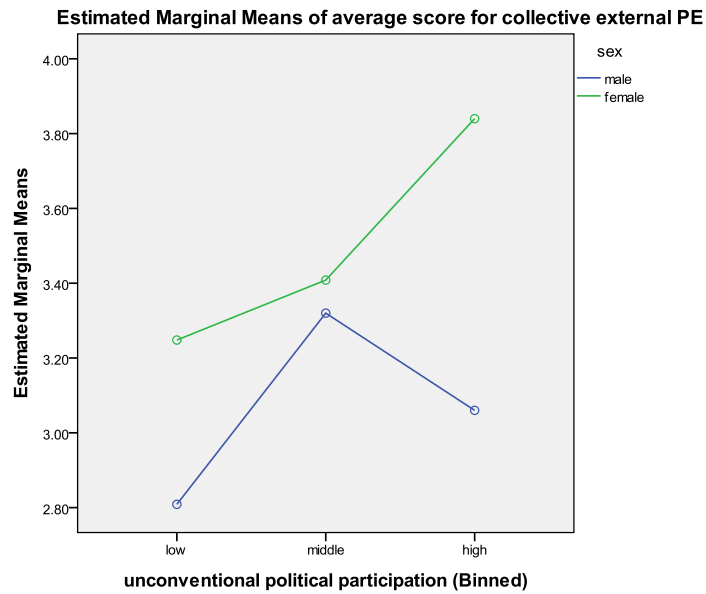


Figure 1.

**One-way ANOVA: external political efficacy**

**ANOVA**

average score for external PE

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.605	2	.803	.452	.637
Within Groups	221.768	125	1.774		
Total	223.373	127			

Note: test for correlation between conventional political participation and external political efficacy

**ANOVA**

average score for external PE

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2.211	2	1.105	.625	.537
Within Groups	221.162	125	1.769		
Total	223.373	127			

Note: test for correlation between unconventional political participation and external political efficacy

**Appendix 5. frequency table for whether government weibo respond timely**

**whether government weibo respond timely**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid never respond to my	21	16.3	30.0	30.0
not timely	8	6.2	11.4	41.4
timely	3	2.3	4.3	45.7
my interaction way does not need its response	38	29.5	54.3	100.0
Total	70	54.3	100.0	
Missing System	59	45.7		
Total	129	100.0		

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