

Identity Struggles as Online Activism in China: A Case Study Based on “The Inviting Plan for 985 Fives” Community on Douban

QINYUAN LEI, Southern University of Science & Technology, China

KIT KUKSENOK, Independent, Germany

RAN TANG, University of Washington, USA

JINGYI GUO, The Pennsylvania State University, USA

RAN JI, Phoenix TV, Hong Kong

JIAXUN LI, JD.com, China

Online communities support the well-being of their members by encouraging their social identity formation. In the context of an online community, online activism in the form of identity struggles can be particularly helpful for marginalized individuals or groups. Since May 2020, students from the 985 universities, an elite educational project in China, have been coming to an online community named “The Inviting Plan for 985 Fives” on Douban, an interest-based Social Network Site (SNS), to discuss their failure and dissatisfaction in life. Students who were once recognized for their academic excellence now identify as “fives” (or “garbage”). The present study examines how the Douban group, as a social network and collaborative system, supports the group members in their identity struggles in the context of increasingly fierce peer competition in China. We employ a qualitative approach, combining ethnographic methods such as participant observation and semi-structured interviews, with in-depth analysis of the top discussion threads. We discover that while peer competition and social stratification in contemporary China cause students at the top universities to feel anxious and lost, the online community they build collectively supports them to create a new social identity, the identity of “five,” which is the basis of their online activism. Through this new identity, they seek unofficial democracy, civic participation, and possibilities of social change.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: ACM proceedings, ethnography, online activism, online community, social media

ACM Reference Format:

Qinyuan Lei, Kit Kuksenok, Ran Tang, Jingyi Guo, Ran Ji, and Jiaxun Li. 2023. Identity Struggles as Online Activism in China: A Case Study Based on “The Inviting Plan for 985 Fives” Community on Douban. *Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact.* 7, CSCW2, Article 279 (October 2023), 25 pages. <https://doi.org/1145/3610070>

1 INTRODUCTION

This study uses qualitative research methods to examine an online community called “The Inviting Plan for 985 Fives” (hereafter “985 Fives”) on Douban, one of the largest social media platforms in China. “Five” refers to a Chinese word of a similar pronunciation, “garbage” (*feiwu*). The “985 Fives”

Authors’ addresses: Qinyuan Lei, qinyuan.lei@gmail.com, Southern University of Science & Technology, Shenzhen, China; Kit Kuksenok, Independent, Germany, kit.kuksenok@gmail.com; Ran Tang, University of Washington, USA; Jingyi Guo, The Pennsylvania State University, USA; Ran Ji, Phoenix TV, Hong Kong; Jiaxun Li, JD.com, China.

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. Copyrights for components of this work owned by others than ACM must be honored. Abstracting with credit is permitted. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee. Request permissions from permissions@acm.org.

© 2023 Association for Computing Machinery.

2573-0142/2023/10-ART279 \$15.00

<https://doi.org/1145/3610070>

community was created on May 10, 2020. As a case study, our paper focuses on how this online community supports its group members in their identity struggles in the context of increasingly fierce peer competition in contemporary China. “985” refers to an educational project in China led by the government that contains 39 top Chinese universities comparable to internationally recognized research universities [1, 73, 109, 112, 115]. Being admitted into a 985 university is in and of itself academic achievement for the students. However, since May 2020, a growing number of 985 university students and graduates have joined the “985 Fives” group on Douban to share their real-life failure experiences in studies and work. Within 2 months, nearly 100,000 group members gathered [110].

As a special feature of Douban, users can form discussion groups. Out of these Douban discussion groups, online communities are built based on a system of group rules, moderators, and membership. In the case of the “985 Fives,” Douban users must become a member of the discussion group to start a discussion thread or leave comments. Discussion on topics of shared interests in the format of “discussion threads” is the main form of interaction among group members. It leads to the interesting phenomenon that individuals previously unknown to one another “share common interests before collaboration or discussion and form friendships after,” similar to the collaborative model of Wikipedia [22, 111]. These unique features of Douban as an interest-based Social Network Site (SNS) allow many interest-based communities such as the “985 Fives” to be built and new social identities to be formed, which could lead to broader social activism in China [114]. Characterized by its relatively less restrictive atmosphere in comparison with other Social Network Sites in China, Douban helps users to seek shared social identities and values [54], providing a space for marginal groups to speak for themselves and improve their situation.

Our research aims to answer the following question: how do the participants collaborate and support each other in their identity struggles in the complex social space of an online community? We employ a qualitative approach, combining ethnographic methods such as participant observation and semi-structured interviews, with in-depth analysis of the top 30 threads. This paper focuses on a thematic analysis of the top 30 threads, which is informed by our initial ethnographic work.

Our study contributes to existing CSCW and HCI discussions on online activism, social support, and identity formation online. Firstly, our case study shows that identity struggles is an important form of online activism. Secondly, our analysis confirms that social media can generate and maintain social support, which is consistent with previous CSCW and HCI studies on the same topic [4, 11, 14, 69, 79]. More specifically, in our study we discover that online communities on social media support the psychological well-being of their members through offering emotional support, opportunities of collaboration, and camaraderie in identity struggles. Lastly, the most surprising finding of our empirical work is that the new social identity the members formed collectively in this online community, namely the identity of “five,” lie at the heart of their online activism.

Notably, their online activism has powerful social and political implications in contemporary Chinese society well beyond the scope of their online community. Although the fierce peer competition and social stratification in contemporary China cause students at the top universities to feel anxious and lost about their future, the online community they build collectively supports them to seek unofficial democracy, civic participation, and possibilities of social change. At the end of the paper, we discuss how these findings might have important design implications, particularly in the direction of how design of Social Network Sites should take into account of the inclusion of marginalized voices and less privileged social groups.

2 BACKGROUND

“985” is a Chinese state-led project to promote the development and reputation of the Chinese higher education system by funding the creation of “world-class universities.” Its name originates

from the date of the announcement, May 1998, when then Chinese President Jiang Zemin made the speech “Mobilization of Rejuvenating the Nation through Science and Education” at the Centenary Celebration of Peking University [109]. Education and technology are expected to serve the diverse needs of the Chinese economy after China’s reform and opening-up in the 1980s [73]. The Chinese government regarded it as one of its main development objectives to become a leading educational power [73]. Relevant higher education initiatives include the “Key University Project,” the “211 Project,” and the “985 Project.” Compared to the other two, the “985 Project” is characterized by a smaller number of universities and a larger amount of funding. The generous funding scheme is due to the government’s emphasis on promoting the research capabilities of these universities to world-class levels [112]. Existing studies have quantitatively assessed the outcome of the “985 Project” at the macro level, for instance, by analyzing the growth of publications in international journals [115], or by studying the number of technology innovation platforms built by these universities [109].

In contrast, our study takes a micro perspective by focusing on those who are or have been enrolled at a 985 university. Due to the small number and the high ranking of the 985 universities, students have to work very hard to compete with other Chinese students to be admitted into these universities. Although the state-led college entrance examination has long been regarded as “the primary path to escaping the life of a rural peasant or low-wage factory laborer” in China, factors such as socioeconomic class, urban versus rural upbringing, and parents’ educational levels are becoming potential determinants of student’s success in the exam [65]. In other words, Chinese students’ academic opportunities and achievements are intricately linked to the broader social inequalities in China.

The inequalities in education are often carried over into students’ life after their graduation, as in the case of the “985 Fives” members. There is a group of 985 students who identify as “fives,” or “garbage” in the society. They are those who were once recognized for their academic excellence, but now feel like “garbage”: anxious, stressed, and overwhelmed [67]. Although admission into a 985 university is often perceived by both the students and their parents as a route to upward social mobility, in the case of the “985 Fives,” thwarted personal ambitions after graduation prove to the students that labor market inequalities persist, and chances of social mobility are slim, if not totally absent [16, 71]. That is to say, the 985 project has failed to fulfill its original promise of upward social mobility for these students. This unfulfilled promise has led to a combination of material struggles and nonmaterial struggles among Chinese university students. This is the greater social context of the online activism of the “fives.”

Our investigation of this online community shows that there are not only intricate connections between the members’ material and nonmaterial struggles, but their expression of material concerns often serves as contexts for more intimate communications of identity issues among group members. For instance, some group members refer to themselves as “nerd from the countryside,” a phrase used to describe the younger generation of Chinese who come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and become “lost and confused” after leaving the ‘straightforward environment’ of school” [33]. Another example is the term “involution” (*neijuan*). Originally an anthropological term referring to the social phenomenon that “population growth does not result in productivity or improved innovation,” “involution” is frequently used by the “985 Fives” members and other Chinese youths to describe their feeling of burnout from peer competition across work and study [67, 94].

As a response to the highly competitive job market, many of the group members choose to “lie flat” (*tangping*), meaning to escape from relentless pressures and competitions as “a silent protest to unfairness” [86, 100]. With these diverse and creative discourses, the group members share personal stories and experiences, addressing both a specific immediate audience inside the “985 Fives” community, as well as the broader audience of past or future “985 Fives” who are also confronted by unfulfilled promises of social mobility.

3 RELATED WORK

Our study builds on prior research on online activism, social support, and identity formation online in CSCW and Media Studies. Our contributions to the literature are mainly in these three areas. Firstly, through a case study of the online community of the “985 Fives,” we contribute to research on online activism by illustrating how online identity struggles should be seen as a form of online activism. Secondly, prior literature on social support online has shown that social support online enhances the well-being of the participants. We add particularities onto existing discussions by emphasizing the various forms of social support present in the “985 Fives” community. Thirdly, we confirm existing studies on identity formation on the Internet by shedding light on how moderation practices within the “985 Fives” community play a key role in the identity formation of the group, and more importantly, how the formation of the identity of “five” is at the core of the online activism of these disenchanted Chinese youths.

3.1 Online Activism versus Political Activism

There is a body of research in both CSCW and Media Studies examining the connections between online activism and political activism [32, 44, 45, 50, 52, 66, 77, 116]. While the term “online activism” refers to “political activism on the internet or (offline) political movements relying on it” [116, p.61] in broad terms, it remains an ambiguous concept, because “it crosses between the legitimate and the illegitimate” [105, p. 3] and is context-specific [116]. Notably, there was a recent special issue in CSCW titled “Materializing Activism” edited by Hansson, Pargman, and Bardzell, featuring both studies on political activism on the internet and those on political activism relying on digital tools. The editors noted that all the featured studies shared the common ground of contributing to the understanding of “how activism is enabled and constrained by human-computer interfaces” [45], but a clear distinction between online activism and political activism relying on digital tools remained difficult to draw. A similar consensus is shared among Media Studies scholars [13, 52, 106].

There is a general trend in HCI and CSCW in which studies in the 2010s focused more on how digital tools played a supportive role in offline political activism [3, 21, 28, 55, 56, 70, 84, 99], whereas more recent studies emphasized online activism in the forms of hashtag activism [9, 46, 47, 72, 76, 82, 85], image-based activism [19, 47, 64], and online identity struggles as online activism [15, 31, 48, 61, 85]. There is also a series of work by Ghoshal and her colleagues on grassroots activism exploring the role of communication technologies in grassroots movements [39–41]. Their focus on design for social justice, “enabling all individuals to speak for themselves” [39, p. 34], echoes Media Studies scholars’ recent attention to the notions of personalization and visibility in social media activism [8, 62]. This paper extends the literature on identity struggles as a form of online activism by using this new dataset which accounts for young Chinese netizens who are rarely represented in previous CSCW studies of online activism. Another advantage of this dataset is that it demonstrates online activism in a Chinese context where the Internet is highly sanctioned, so are offline collective actions.

The studied form of online activism is one of the very few forms, if not the only form, of activism and political participation that are currently possible in China. Among Media Studies scholars who focus on the Chinese Internet, Yang has done foundational work on online activism [103–105, 107, 108]. He emphasized that “activism can take cultural and social forms without being any less contentious” [105, p. 3], and thereby mapping online activism in China onto the bigger landscape of “everyday resistance” [78]. Yang distinguishes two broad categories of online activism in China: material struggles and identity struggles [105, p. 4]. Identity struggles are “struggles for recognition and against discrimination” [105, p. 4] which focus on nonmaterial concerns. Material struggles are “struggles against oppression and exploitation rooted in grave material grievances”

[105, p. 4]. Although we agree with Yang’s framing and use it as an analytic lens in our study, we add more precision in our usage by emphasizing how the “985 Fives” group members’ material struggles are intricately linked to their identity struggles, instead of treating them as two separate categories. Moreover, between the two broad categories of online activism in China, we purposefully emphasize identity struggles in this paper, because we discovered in this dataset that material struggles are used as contexts for more intimate exchanges about members’ identity struggles.

3.2 Social Support and Identity Formation Online

Although studies of online activism are relatively recent, there is a sizable literature on social support online in HCI and CSCW, addressing social support online in mental and physical health [5, 21, 25, 60, 69, 96, 97, 102, 113], eSports [38], among racial and ethnic minorities [27, 29, 87], and among sexual and gender minorities [31, 48], etc. Most studies have focused on how social support online have served to enhance the well-being of the participants [27, 69]. Various forms of online communities have proven to support marginalized groups by empowering them to exercise free speech [31, 64], form strong interpersonal connections [83, 102], and providing them help in coordination of resources and information sharing [37, 69, 102]. Similarly, Media Studies scholars observe, “community building is at the heart of the [online] activism” [52, p. 2104]. This paper contributes to both confirming and advancing existing literature on social support through a case study of the “985 Fives” online community in China. Through our analysis of the members’ frequent exchanges of emotional support and social support, practical information and resources, and camaraderie in identity struggles, we add important particularities to the understanding of social support online in the context of the Chinese Internet, which is an underexplored topic in CSCW and HCI.

Identity formation and performance of identity online have been long-standing discussions in CSCW [7, 26, 31, 34, 47, 55, 63, 68] and Media Studies [8, 91, 93]. Similar to many of these studies on online identity, we also draw on Goffman’s theory of performance [43] in discussing how members of the “985 Fives” community perform their digital identities in the online community in a way that is disconnected from their offline identities. Our contributions to the discussions on identity formation are two-fold. Firstly, there has a body of research showing that moderation practices as emotional labor plays a key role in identity formation of online communities [30, 79–81, 98]. By illustrating how moderation practices are not only done by moderators but also by community members (see Vignette 4 and “Timeline of Group Rules”), we confirm findings of existing literature on moderation practices by showing how moderation practices play a key role in identity formation. Secondly, the contribution of this study lies in linking identity formation online to online activism. Our study shows that the fluid and contested identity of “five” lies at the heart of the young Chinese netizens’ online activism.

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Data Collection

We conducted a qualitative study of the “985 Fives” online community over the course of one year, from January 2021 until January 2022. The goal of our qualitative study is to answer the research question: how do the participants collaborate and support each other in their identity struggles in the complex social space of an online community? Our approach was informed by our ethnographic work. Specifically, our data collection included participant observation in the digital community, initial semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis of the top 30 threads collected on October 30, 2021. These “threads” are discussion threads where members post on a specific topic. The data collected from these different methods are supportive and complementary of each

other. The threads provide an overview of a large community, both in the number of participants and their communications, whereas the interviews provide more in-depth stories and experiences which are difficult to come across in short-form content such as comments. In this way, we use the results from the semi-structured interviews to provide basic understanding and fill in the blanks for our analysis of the top 30 threads. Important artifacts within and about the group were also included in the analysis, such as the group rules, and a timeline of their updates, to give a more comprehensive overview of the group. The duration of the study also allowed us to observe various important events in the lifespan of the community.

Table 1. The focus of data collection in different periods

Time Period	Data Collection Method
March, 2021 - May, 2021	Semi-structured interviews
June, 2021 - October, 2021	Participant observation
November, 2021 - January, 2022	Analyzing discussion threads

This study has received the school’s IRB approval in March 2021. As Table 1 shows, following initial study preparation and IRB review from January to March 2021, we began with semi-structured interviews (March until May 2021) with 22 interviewees. The extensive amount of posts and the anonymous nature of Douban make it difficult to conduct probability-sampling in the “985 Fives” community. Therefore, for a more varied perspective, we tried to recruit a balanced ratio of male versus female interviewees. Detailed interviewee selection criteria can be found in Appendix A.1. Members of the “985 Fives” communities were contacted through the private message function on their Douban user profiles. 15 female and 7 male members eventually agreed to be interviewed. Interviewees ranged from second or third-year university students to university graduates in their late twenties. A total of 20.9 hours of interview was conducted. All researchers composed memos to enable discussion in the group as a whole.

Between June and October 2021, the focus shifted to ongoing participant observation, which included memos on notable events and documentation of the top 10 threads on a regular basis. Three researchers conducted participant observation each for 3 to 3.5 hours per week during this period. Based on the results of our participant observation, we decided that expanding from the top 10 to top 30 would more adequately cover the important topics that recurred in this community. At the end of the participant observation period, on October 30, 2021, we collected the top 30 threads for analysis.

It is important to note that the discussion threads are the main form of interaction among group members. The top 30 threads are the most salient topics ranked according to the total number of interactions. The top 30 threads consist of a total of 21,301 comments, involving 10,418 unique users.

4.2 Data Analysis

From November 2021 to January 2022, we conducted an in-depth analysis of the top 30 threads in this online community. We relied on memo-writing and extensive group discussion to ensure consistency and validity of our reading. When analyzing the top 30 threads, we also built in overlap between the researchers, such that differences in interpretation could be apparent. Each of the six researchers analyzed 5-6 threads, with formal memo sharing and discussion following each analysis. Through an open coding process, each of the researcher identified several common themes in the

analyzed threads. Table 2 shows the common themes each researcher found in his or her initial analysis.

During all stages, memos were the key vehicle of collaborative analysis, following an iterative and grounded qualitative methodology [17]. A total of 14 memos were composed, shared, and discussed among the researchers during the stage of data collection. Additional six memos were written during the stage of data analysis focusing on the top 30 threads.

In the memos researchers included both the common themes identified in their initial analysis, as well as important quotes and analysis thereof, to be used later in crosschecking and group discussions. We then relied on several rounds of extensive group discussions to verify, refine, and finalize the major themes. Based on these iterative processes, we identified three major themes:

- (1) Identity struggles and identity formation
- (2) Alternatives to “involution” (or peer competition)
- (3) Practical information sharing in job hunting

In the “Overview of the Results” section, we report vignettes following these three major themes, informed by Yang’s categorization of online activism into material grievances and identity struggles [105, p.4], which is the analytic frame that arose as most salient from our initial interview and observation-based inquiry. Each of the three themes specifies the ways and the areas in which the “985 Fives” members collaborate and support each other in the online community, which answers our research question. The fourth vignette focuses on a significant incident that took place in the community, giving insights into the “gray zone” of identity struggles and identity formation in relation to disinformation.

Table 2. Common themes found in the initial analysis

	Common themes
Researcher 1	1. escaping from the pressure in life 2. identity struggles and mutual support thereof 3. practical information sharing
Researcher 2	1. gender discrimination in Chinese society 2. identity and peer support
Researcher 3	1. tension between ideals and reality
Researcher 4	1. socially unacceptable ideals 2. gender issues 3. income and social status 4. the identity of “five”
Researcher 5	1. how online communities address pressure 2. redefining success in society 3. the identity of “five”
Researcher 6	1. struggles for recognition 2. struggles against discrimination

5 OVERVIEW OF THE RESULTS

5.1 Site Description

Similar to other Douban groups, the “985 Fives” site has group rules listed on the top of its landing page. Along with the group rules, the founding date of the group, the category of the group (which

is “school life”), and the newest members are also listed (see Figure 1). While members outside of the “985 Fives” community can view the profiles of the group members, the Douban interface only allows registered Douban users to view the profiles of other Douban users, which ensures a sense of privacy within the community. The Douban interface shows a user profile on a separate page. On a user profile, Douban users can display and rate the music, films, or books they are interested in. Notably, while this information of personal interests is viewable to all other registered Douban users, comments made by Douban users in discussion groups are not viewable on their user profiles. This feature offers protection of privacy to the discussion group members but can also lead to issues of disinformation. Such an instance will be discussed in detail in Vignette 4.



Fig. 1. The “985 Fives” group interface.

Below group rules is the discussion section. While members can write private messages to each other, the main form of interaction among members is discussion. There are two main ways to take part in the discussions. One is to initiate a discussion thread on a topic of common interests among group members; the other is to contribute to a certain topic by leaving comments in the thread. Discussions are grouped into three separate categories – “latest discussions,” “hottest discussions,” and “selected discussions,” with only the “latest discussions” viewable on the landing page (see Figure 1). A total of 61 threads under the “latest discussions” category are shown on the landing page, listed according to the posting time with the newest thread on top. The top 8 threads are “selected” threads pinned by the group moderators from the “selected discussions” category, with a glaring red tag “selected threads” attached at the beginning of the pinned threads.

We have collected the top 30 threads under the category of “hottest discussions” in October 2021 for detailed content analysis. Each thread consists of a topic related to the “985 Fives” community posted by a member, followed by a longer text that offers context to the topic. The most popular threads are often in the form of a question, incentivizing other members of the community to offer advice, suggestions, or share similar experiences. Comments are listed below the initial topic in order of popularity. The most liked comment is shown first, followed by the second, and so forth. The quotation function of the platform allows members of the community to quote sections of others’ comments to address a particular part of the discussion.

Among the shared content, we identified two key types of content. One key category of content is practical information sharing and expertise sharing, comparable to content produced in open content production and sharing websites, such as Wikipedia, GitHub, or Reddit [2, 6, 12, 23, 36, 51, 53, 59, 88]. In the case of the “985 Fives” community, we noticed that the well-being of the members is both a condition of community health that ensures well-coordinated collaboration in content production [36] and the content being produced. There are numerous threads that help the members develop skills for self-improvement and spread useful information in job hunting. A more in-depth analysis of practical information sharing within the community is offered in Vignette 2.

The other key category of content is related to the group members’ collective efforts to break away from the “five” identity. Many popular threads emphasize either the sharing of the “five” identity, or the renunciation of the “five” identity, or paradoxically, both at the same time. The paradoxical nature of this online community determines that while the members joined the community because of their shared identity of being a loser in an “world-class university” in China, one of the main goals of the community is to support their members in renouncing that exact identity.

Moreover, it is a common practice among the “985 Fives” posters to remind their viewers to forward their threads to others “so that more ‘fives’ can see it.” Many of the most shared threads are highlighted by the group moderators with the “selected thread” tag, to make sure they will be seen by most people. The way in which content is displayed on Douban clearly prioritizes popular content. The upside of this type of interface is that it allows popular content to be seen by many community members, creating a strong sense of community by giving visibility to the most resonating, and hence by definition, the most mainstream ideas within the community. The downside is that it makes it difficult for less popular, marginalized ideas to be seen and recognized.

5.2 Timeline of Group Rules

Setting clear rules is vital to bring some structure to the group. Ever since it was created in May 2020, the group has been updating its formal rules regarding who and what content are acceptable in the community, especially during its initial stages. To join, namely to acquire membership to the group, potential members are required to read through a dedicated group rules section and also detail the reasons why they identify as a “five.” Then their application will be reviewed by the moderators.

Soon after it was created, the group started to attract a lot of attention from a wide audience. As the community unofficially admitted both 985 and 211 students, sometimes even students from less selective schools, group discussions arose respecting whether those who fall into the latter category should be allowed to join. On May 15th, 2020, the moderators laid down an official rule, stressing the need for members of different opinions to “seek common ground while reserving differences.”

On May 28th, 2020, the group specified 4 sub-forums for the relevant discussions, namely “sharing personal problems,” “sharing useful experience and practical information,” “soliciting advice,” and “chatting for fun.” All thread authors are required to put their threads under one of the 4 categories. In this way, the category name will be automatically added before the thread title.

In July 2020, an official thread for group members to report violations of the group rules was created. This shows that not only the official moderators, but also the group members actively took part in the daily moderation practices in this community.

In mid-November 2020, in response to rising feminist sentiment and ongoing discussions centered around gender discrimination, the group set up a formal rule stipulating that feminist content will be removed, unless it is related to the 985 experience or identity. Upon setting up this rule, the moderators deleted a lot of the feminist content that was deemed inappropriate or irrelevant.

Table 3. Information of the interviewees mentioned in the vignettes

No.	Age	Gender	Duration	Mentioned in
Interviewee1	22	Male	60 mins	Vignette1
Interviewee2	24	Female	80 mins	Vignette2
Interviewee3	27	Male	20 mins	Vignette2
Interviewee4	21	Male	30 mins	Vignette2
Interviewee5	22	Female	30 mins	Vignette2
Interviewee6	26	Female	60 mins	Vignette3
Interviewee7	24	Female	60 mins	Vignette3

However, these formal rules do not go unchallenged. Members are actively engaged in redefining the boundaries of the community. There are constant debates on whether the group should be more inclusive or exclusive. For example, in March 2021, numerous threads and comments questioned the legitimacy of the membership of non-985/211 students, sometimes even of 211 students. The banning of feminist content in November 2020 also triggered a backlash. Irritated by the way the moderators handled this issue, a number of members, mostly female members, immediately rallied together and formed another smaller Douban group which openly embraces a feminist agenda. These power struggles over group rules are not uncommon in this group and other Douban groups.

5.3 Introduction to the Results

Through thematic analysis of the top 30 threads, we identified three major themes: “identity struggles and identity formation,” “alternatives to peer competition,” and “practical information sharing in job hunting.” Each of the first three vignettes focuses on one of these themes. Vignette 4 focuses on a significant incident took place in the online community related to “identity struggles and identity formation” in the context of disinformation. We also drew upon our interviews as supporting data. Interviews mentioned in the vignettes are listed in Table 3.

Of the top 30 threads we analyzed, six of them have the word “everyone” in the title of the thread, which signals the intention of the original poster to solicit opinions on a certain topic from all members of the community. The word “everyone” (*dajia*) in Chinese literally means “a big family,” showing a sense of camaraderie among the “fives.” Six of the top 30 threads include the personal pronoun “you” in either its plural or singular form in the title, which in a similar way indicates an intention to solicit collective opinions, as well as to address other members of the community in a personal manner. Four of the top 30 threads include the word “oneself” in the title, which is another common wording among the members to invite the other members to share their own personal opinions or experiences on a certain topic. Additionally, four of the top 30 threads has the English word “five” in the title, three of which deal directly with the identity of “five,” one of which is a general question asking why other “fives” are “having insomnia tonight.” These common features of the popular titles suggest a strong sense of shared identity among the members, as well as an equally strong sense of community and camaraderie among the self-identified “fives.” Following are four vignettes presenting a reading of the top 30 threads, supplemented by the data from the interviews.

5.4 Vignette 1: Alternatives to “Involution” (or Peer Competition)

In this vignette, we focus on analysis of the threads that fall under the theme of “alternatives to ‘involution’ (*neijuan*, peer competition)” We have the following observations:

- (1) Many “fives” believe that “involution” is a social norm and a social reality in China.
- (2) They are challenging this social norm by imagining an alternative ideal life.
- (3) Collective imagination is playing an important role in sustaining this online community.

One of the top 30 threads is titled “Some criticism of ‘involution’” (thread 30, see Appendix A.3) In this thread the original poster offers a long list of examples of “involution” (peer pressure) he or she has encountered in his or her daily life or on the Internet, as well as his or her criticism of them. The original poster invites all “985 Fives” member to share their own criticism of “involution.” Below is an example of “involution” the original poster gives:

Thread Excerpt 1. There are a variety of professions, but the right professions are few. The exemplary life is when one gets admitted into a prestigious university at 18, and graduates with a “correct major” at 22. If one is asked to declare a major, it must be Computer Science.

These “involution” examples such as the one in Thread Excerpt 1 receive a total number of 4,236 likes (on the day of data collection), which is significantly more than the other top threads, demonstrating the importance of the topic of “involution” within the “985 Fives” community. One of the most liked comments in this thread reads:

Thread Excerpt 2. I think “lying flat” is the best mental state for people in this group. I am just a company slave, what do I care if my peers have high salaries? If I don’t die from starvation today, I earn another day. Seriously, with this kind of “don’t give a damn” attitude, life can’t do anything to you.

Responding to the reality of highly competitive university environment and job market, the “985 Fives” choose to “lie flat,” which means to escape from peer pressure and competitions, as their way of silent protest (Thread Excerpt 2). Importantly, “lying flat” doesn’t mean to give up completely, but rather, for many “fives” it means to imagine alternatives to “involution,” creating ideals outside of the social norms.

Within the top 30 threads analyzed, there are 3 threads referring to “job seeking.” These threads and their comments reflect what the “fives” truly long for in a dream job, when they can put social, familial, and peer pressure aside. Most of the answers appearing in the comment sections do not adhere to the expectations of Chinese society. In the thread titled “What is your ideal job which may seem strange to others?” (thread 2, see Appendix A.3) the group members discuss their ideal jobs which do not fit the expectations of mainstream society for “985 graduates.” The most liked comment reads: “Open a hot pot restaurant or barbecue restaurant that has good business.” Another much liked comment reads: “I want to be a food blogger or a travel blogger, one with no financial burden at all, or I will die of anxiety.” Interestingly, most of their ideal jobs do not require higher education, which they as 985 university graduates have already acquired.

Similarly, thread 14 (see Appendix A.3) puts forward a question “If you ‘fives’ don’t need to consider income, social status, etc., what jobs do you want to have?” The most liked comment reads: “I want to have a house abroad and put it on Airbnb. I will make so much money in the first half of the year that I can travel around the world for the rest of the year.” One of the commenters says that “I want to be a farmer in Texas, one who drives a tractor.” One comment reads: “I want to open a coffee shop, [and drink] a cup of coffee every day and sell coffee. Then I go home to play with my cat.” One says, “A librarian, because it feels free.” Another says, “To become a Taoist priest.” All these threads demonstrate that most “fives” try to escape from society and peer pressure in their daily life. Most comments shared the desire to escape from peer competition, or “involution.” By defying social norms, the commenters are imagining alternatives that may or may not lead to actual changes in their daily lives, but collective imagining in itself is no less of a radical act of activism.

Overall, these threads show that collective imagination is playing an important role in sustaining this online community by providing a safe environment for members to speak freely about socially

unacceptable or unrealizable ideals. In the “ideal job” thread (thread 2, see Appendix A.3) one commenter says: “This post warms my heart. I hope everyone can live the way they want to.” Through collective imagination, the “fives” are also exerting their own individual imagination that originates in their dissatisfaction with the realities in their life. Their collective goal is to reject “involution.” One interviewee (interviewee 1, see Table 3) said, “Obviously I’m against ‘involution.’ I think the effect of the ‘985 Fives’ community is that it encourages everyone to find their own way out.”

Examples in this vignette show that the identity of “five” is in fact founded on the negotiation with social norms, as members reclaim the derogatory Chinese word “garbage” (“five”) and use it to mean an alternative ideal. Arguably, the effect of this negotiation could also reach beyond the boundaries of this community, making their collective imagination a form of online activism.

5.5 Vignette 2: Practical Information Sharing in Job Hunting

In this vignette, we discuss the threads that touch upon “practical information sharing in job hunting.” Our key observations are as follows:

- (1) Douban discussion threads allow community members to coordinate the production and sharing of practical information.
- (2) The members desire more effective information sharing.
- (3) Practical information in this community takes place both online and offline.
- (4) Apart from practical information, the members also exchange emotional support with one another.

A key function of the Douban threads is that it allows community members to coordinate the production and sharing of practical information. This vignette analyzes one of the most popular threads of the “985 Fives” community titled “Sharing my ten-year working experience as a civil servant in a capital city in Northeast China” (thread 3, see Appendix A.3). The thread was created by the original poster on October 5th, 2020. Comments were posted in this thread almost without interruption from October 2020 to November 2021. The original poster was actively answering posted questions throughout the entire period, offering practical information particularly related to becoming or working as a civil servant, as well as emotional support.

The original poster is a self-proclaimed former “five” who has been working as a civil servant for 10 years in a capital city in Northeast China. At the beginning of the thread, the original poster briefly described his or her university education and work experience, followed by an open solicitation for questions regarding working “inside the system.” Here, the term “inside the system” refers to the system of governmental institutions in the Chinese context. A civil servant who is essentially an employee “inside the system” is deemed by many Chinese graduates as a highly desirable, but competitive career option for its security and stability. The open solicitation for questions is followed by clear rules set out by the original poster for more effective information sharing, including posting longer texts to allow better readability, avoiding private messaging, and reposting the thread before asking a question to allow broader reach. This points to the desire for more effective information sharing and wider reach of the shared information.

The majority of the commenters ask practical questions related to becoming or working as a civil servant. Some of these questions include the salary of a public servant, frequency of overtime, the process of civil servant examination, suitable university majors for a public servant, etc. The note “if inappropriate please delete” is added to the end of the comment asking about the annual salary of a civil servant in Northeast China, showing the awareness of the commenter towards the sensitivity of the demanded information. The decision of how to balance between the protection of privacy and practical information sharing has been left to the original poster and the commenters.

The original poster responds to the question by giving full details of his annual salary, including his after-tax income, provident fund, bonus, and actual income with subsidies added.

One comment by a female commenter starts with a brief introduction of her general information, including her gender, university major, and current work condition, and ends with an explicit call for help from the original poster, “Brother Biao, please help me take a look at my situation, thank you!!!” In these cases, the special anonymous features of the Douban platform make Douban groups a more effective space of practical information sharing. More discussion of the anonymous features of Douban can be found in Vignette 4 (focusing on the problematic aspects) and in the Discussion section.

Practical information is not limited to the online space. Online exchanges sometimes lead to practical information sharing between the members offline. An interviewee (interviewee 2, see Table 3) told a story about how she found her job. She once created a thread in which she mentioned some of her personal background. After attending a group interview for a job, she was approached by another interviewee who recognized her as the poster, because her self-introduction at the interview coincided with the information in the thread. They exchanged contacts and started to exchange information on job vacancies. It was from this person that she learnt that her current organization was hiring.

Apart from practical information, emotional support is also offered by the original poster, as well as by participants in the thread. Many comments convey the general emotion of collectively fighting against material grievances. One of the much liked comments in the thread reads: “That’s why we must find a neat and warm place that cannot be blown away by the wind, nor rained on, to ‘lie flat’ together.” Many comments thank the original poster “Thank you, Brother Biao. Brother Biao is a powerful person!” The abundance of supportive comments and comments conveying gratitude shows that the commenters feel cared for by the original poster and other commenters, hinting at an environment of social support.

The original poster adopts the role of a former “five” and mentor, but one who has escaped his disadvantages in material conditions and achieved a new lifestyle of material security. In one of the semi-structured interviews, a former “five” (interviewee 3, see Table 3) shared similar motives for continue posting in the “985 Fives” group after he stopped identifying as a “five.” He said: “I wanted to share my experiences as a person who has been there. They need guidance.” By allowing its members to effectively share practical information that helps resolve material grievances in their lives, the “985 Fives” community offers a space of online activism founded on practical information sharing, social support, and emotional support, helping the members to find new lifestyles and identities.

One interviewee (interviewee 4, see Table 3) shared her experience of actively seeking emotional support in the community:

Interview Excerpt 1. Sometimes I feel lonely in the school, because I like staying in the library all the time, but my classmates prefer to stay in the dormitory. So I wrote a post in the group to ask people if they also felt lonely when they had little company studying at university. I was genuinely surprised by the number of replies I got. I realized that I was not the only one who felt that way.

Unlike the discussed thread of “Sharing my ten-year working experience as a civil servant in a capital city in Northeast China,” the main goal of the interviewee in posting in the community is to seek emotional support, which she successfully received. This is confirmed by another interviewee (interviewee 5, see Table 3) who commented on the discussions of “involution” in the community: “In the discussion threads, people will share their experiences in a serious manner. Usually there will be a lot of suggestions from the other ‘fives.’ This kind of comments resonate with me and help

me with peer pressure in life.” In the “985 Fives” community, the well-being of commenters is both the foundation of content production and the key content being produced.

5.6 Vignette 3: Identity Struggles and Identity Formation

In Vignette 3, we examine threads that deal with “identity struggles and identity formation.” We have discovered that:

- (1) The group rules provide a clear definition for the identity of “five,” which defines the boundary of this community.
- (2) The identity of “five” is also repeatedly consolidated in group members’ everyday discussions.
- (3) The identity of “five” is fluid and not permanent.
- (4) The rejection of “involution” (peer competition) is central to the identity struggles and identity formation of the “fives.”

Defining what is “five” and not “five” is a starting point of identity construction for the group members. On the one hand, the group rules provide a clear definition for “five”: “students or graduates of the 985 project universities who are currently experiencing temporary difficulties in studies or job hunting.” The young individuals who joined the “985 Fives” community all identify as “fives.” On the other hand, the group rules also clarify what is considered as “not five”: “students or graduates from other universities, or anyone who shows off, merely laments personal worries, or engages in cyberattacks in the group.” Overall, the “985 Fives” group sets a clear boundary for the identity of “five.”

At the same time, the identity of “five” is repeatedly consolidated in group members’ everyday discussions and posting activities. For example, in thread 23 (see Appendix A.3), the group members took a personality test. The result of almost 70% of the participants in a poll being INTP/INFP in terms of the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator demonstrates that most members share the personality traits of introverts (“I”), intuitives (“N”), thinkers (“T”)/feelers (“F”), and perceivers (“P”). Many group members responded to the result by affirming their shared “introverted and impractical” personality traits. This indicates the participating members’ strong sense of belonging to the identity of “five” beyond the superficiality of failure in exams or job hunting. This sense of belonging rooted in shared personality traits provides a solid community base for online activism.

The identity of “five” is also fluid and negotiable, rather than permanent. Expressions such as “You are not a ‘five’ from now on! Good for you!” assert the fluidity of the identity of “five.” Another example is in thread 19 (Appendix A.3) titled “It’s a ‘five’ group, but few people would really feel like (they are) pure ‘five,’ right? Please come to show and say something about yourself that is not so ‘five!’” The answers in the thread include “getting a high mark in college entrance examinations,” “being optimistic in uneasy situations,” and “having lots of supportive friends,” etc. One of the interviewees (interviewee 6, see Table 3) commented that the discussions surrounding “not so five” show the friendly and supportive atmosphere in the group, allowing group members to temporarily escape from social pressure and frustration. More importantly, through these discussions, the group members consistently redefine success set by the society.

As a case of identity struggles through subverting the societal definition of success, in the thread titled “Some criticism of ‘involution’” (thread 30, see Appendix A.3, also discussed in Vignette 1) group members complain about fewer chances and resources, but significantly more competition in education or job hunting. Many compare themselves to “numbing machines” on “an assembly line.” Some others advocate for “lying flat” completely, rejecting competition altogether. For example, an interviewee (interviewee 7, see Table 3) stated that:

Interview Excerpt 2. I’m just temporarily being a five. In fact, I don’t think anyone in this group will be a five for the rest of their life. It’s just a temporary condition during a certain period of our life where we are

filled with self-loathing. We will all find a way out eventually, either by getting back on our feet or ‘lying flat’ and accepting our life as it is.

Many commenters in the thread about “involution” (thread 30, see Appendix A.3) share similar mentality of “lying flat.” For example, one commenter says: “I am lying flat and doing absolutely nothing. The more ‘five’ I am, the happier.” Here “five” is being used as an adjective describing an relaxed attitude towards life, in opposition to an “involved” attitude. Another commenter says, “I have now reached the stage where I can throw off my shackles to ‘lie flat’ and do absolutely nothing.” All of these examples show that “lying flat” has become a new found attitude towards life shared by many “fives” and, for many, the core of the “five” identity.

To sum up, the identity of “five” in the “985 Fives” group has a boundary defined by the group rules, but this boundary can also be negotiated through consistent interactions and struggles. Through their identity struggles, the “fives” redefine success set by the society, which in itself is a form of activism. A deeper discussion of the identity of “five” will be in the discussion section.

5.7 Vignette 4: Identity Formation and Disinformation

Our last vignette discusses a significant incident inside the “985 Fives” community related to identity formation and disinformation. Our most important observations are:

- (1) Material gain and the gaining of recognition have driven members in the community to deliberately share false information about themselves.
- (2) Because the “985 Fives” community is built upon a shared identity, the members are actively engaged in defending the community boundary by rejecting those who are fake “fives.”
- (3) While the anonymous interactions features on Douban support more intimate discussions, they can also potentially facilitate the creation and spread of disinformation.

Although the group seems to be a virtual wonderland where members share personal experiences and useful information, it cannot be assumed that all posted information here is authentic and real. The pursuit of material well-being coupled with the urge to gain recognition may drive members to “perform” their digital selves in ways that do not correspond to their real identities [43]. This vignette focuses on the incident of a female member who fabricated a phony persona.

The girl created two threads in the group, on May 21st and July 06th, 2020 respectively. She claimed that although she had the luxury of studying at a prestigious university, her lack of interest in her college major had resulted in her failure in many courses and even mental disorders. Eventually, she dropped out and retook the college entrance examinations so that she could choose her college major again, one where her passion truly lay. The rise from a “five” to a soon-to-be freshman chasing her passion attracted a great deal of attention and impressed many group members who left a long list of admiring replies below.

However, the inspiring story quickly turned out to be a fake one. On July 24th, 2020, the girl created a thread in another smaller Douban group that had only a few thousands members and revealed her real-life conditions in the mistaken belief that she would not be discovered by other “fives.” Soon on the same day, a member of the “985 Fives” community commented under both of her threads that her experience is a complete fabrication and left the link to her new thread in which she gave herself away. The commenter even created a thread in the “985 Fives” Douban group, as well as on Weibo (another popular social media platform in China), where compelling and sufficient evidence was presented in an organized way that the original poster was telling lies. The poster immediately deleted all content about her real situation, but according to this commenter, she confessed that she retook the exam not out of the need for a second chance to choose her major, but simply because her poor exam results couldn’t get her into even an average university, let alone a 985 or 211 one. She even had to take the exam for 4 consecutive years, but all these years of toil

in high school has witnessed virtually no improvement in her grades. Since her grades failed to meet the entry requirement for any bachelor programs, now she had to choose between studying for a technical diploma or skipping higher education to find a job.

The virtual online world, however, gave her the opportunity to create another image of herself online, one that was not founded on who she truly was in real life, but completely relied on her rich imagination and the new possibilities brought by communication technologies. By constantly making up fake life stories, she successfully constructed an Internet self who was born into an affluent family, and brave enough to drop out of college to pursue her dreams unabashedly. She also managed to trick people into giving her money and gifts by befriending some peers who admired her after reading her threads.

The “985 Fives” group members were furious at having been deceived by a fake “five.” Since the group is built upon a shared identity of “fives,” the members are actively engaged in defending the community boundary by rejecting those who are not “fives,” so that they can create a place where they feel safe to share their most traumatic experiences. Many members thus see identity faking as the most serious offense, because it raises questions regarding the authenticity of information shared in the community and disrupts its supportive atmosphere. This act of rejection performed by the community members shows that not only the moderators but also the members take up the responsibility of moderation practices in this group.

Besides expressions of outrage and shock, there were also comments such as “I guess there are many liars like her in our group.” A close inspection of these features of anonymous interactions on Douban reveals that the platform design can potentially facilitate the creation and spread of disinformation. The fact that a user’s threads and comments in Douban groups will not be displayed on their user profiles makes it difficult for anyone to track each other’s digital footprints in a sea of information on the platform. This protection of privacy encourages the users to share information without the worry of being hunted down, as discussed previously in Vignette 2. However, it may give rise to unauthenticated information and fabricated personal experiences. Motivated by both material goals and psychological needs to obtain social approval and recognition, users may find it tempting to pretend to be someone they wish they were in their fantasies, when they can easily get away with telling fake and inconsistent stories about themselves. The group members are thus required to evaluate the information shared in these groups for authenticity and form their own judgement.

6 DISCUSSION

Our research answered the question of how the members of the “985 Fives” online community collaborate and support each other in their identity struggles and engage in online activism. This study both confirms and extends existing work on social support, online activism, and identity formation.

6.1 Sustained social support

This study contributes to CSCW and HCI literature on the topic of how social media generates and maintains social support. Previous literature suggests that presenting a positive image is favored on social media [74, 75, 92], since disclosure of emotional vulnerability in social interactions runs the risk of losing “face” [43]. In recent years, however, there is a growing body of literature that examines the use of social media to improve emotional well-being through self-disclosure of negative and traumatized experiences [4, 5, 60, 113]. Our study adds to this line of literature by providing empirical evidence of the “985 Fives” members appropriating Douban as a space to express their negative feelings.

The group is representative of disenchanted Chinese youngsters on the cusp of a historic transition. Having grown up in a prosperous economy, and yet facing a precarious one when thrown into an ultra-competitive job market after graduation, they find themselves in a dire state in which the promise of joining the middle class is becoming increasingly unattainable. The terms emerging in Chinese youths’ lexicon such as “five,” “involution,” and “lying flat,” capture their sense of gloom and hopelessness. Frustrated by fierce competition and limited social mobility, 985 university students and graduates gather in this Douban group to share their failure experiences. Interacting with other “fives” who have experienced similar hardships and disenchantment creates a sense of belonging, and allows them to seek social support, achieve collaboration, and improve psychological well-being.

Furthermore, while prior work shows that social media is efficient at providing informational support but unsuitable for emotional support [89], our study found that emotional support is as important as informational support to the group members. Both offering and seeking reassurance from their peers is a major incentive for the group members in this community. Vignette 2 provides a detailed analysis of how advice and guidance giving is often accompanied by exchange of compassion and encouragement. Several interviewees reported that interacting with other members helped them combat distress and rediscover inner contentment. Such connections play a vital role in the construction of the shared “five” identity.

Finally, our research found that the “five” identity allows the members to forge long-term camaraderie and encourages them to consistently provide emotional and informational support to each other. This strong bond inside the community transcends the “five” identity, for the bond persists even when a member no longer identifies as a “five.” For instance, in Vignette 2, a former “five” offered advice on how to become a civil servant. This former “five” and other current “fives” were all actively engaged in providing support and information for each other. Moreover, the bond sometimes also extends beyond the online context. The story about job hunting (interviewee 2, see Table 3) mentioned in Vignette 2 illustrates the possibility of online encounters turning into offline friendships. This finding is consistent with previous studies that found connections between online mediated communication and in-person social support [18, 38, 90].

6.2 Identity struggles as online activism: two approaches to identity struggles

While a plethora of literature has explored how social media can serve as an important tool for social protest and online activism [3, 19, 45, 84], our study enriches CSCW literature on the topic by providing a case study in the Chinese context where online activism is unlikely to produce offline political movements, for offline movements are often quickly suppressed in China. Our finding shows that activism can take an online and a cultural form. The members’ newly formed social identity, the “five” identity, lies at the heart of their online activism. Because of the importance of this identity, the members are very protective of it. They are actively fighting against situations where members are fabricating their personal stories and identities, as discussed in Vignette 4. In doing so, they are collectively readopting the original design of the platform to fit their own needs. How the anonymous features of social media platforms potentially facilitate the creation and spread of disinformation has been dealt with by previous literature [57, 58].

Previous studies on identity formation tend to stress solidarity based on a relatively stable identity and explore how an identity can be reaffirmed and defended in a mediated environment, such as LGBTQ+ identity [31, 35, 48], racial-ethnic identity [24, 30], and more. Our study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the temporality and fluidity of the “five” identity. We discover that solidarity can be achieved within the community despite the fluid nature of the shared identity and the different ways the members engage in identity struggles.

There are two main approaches in which the group members engage in their identity struggles. Some members call to embrace and “reclaim” the “five” identity [10, 42], while some others aim to break away from it. The former group adopts a more radical approach in their identity struggles. For them, being a “five” means to “completely lie flat.” By openly embracing the identity of “five,” a homophone for “garbage,” they strive to reclaim this derogatory label. The realization that a good education coupled with hard work will no longer beget success motivates them to protest by advocating the alternative, which is to retreat from the pursuit of socio-economic opportunities and resort to the “lying flat” lifestyle. They only give the bare minimum to get by, while ignoring the fact that they are being deemed a threat to the state’s economic ambition by the Chinese authorities [49, 95, 101]. This mentality of “protest by lying flat” is explained in Vignette 3. The heated discussion mentioned in Vignette 1 about unconventional jobs the members hope to undertake also shows their desire to defy normative social standards. The identity of “five,” which is at the heart of their online activism, stands for more than self-deprecation, but a call for noncooperation and a radical way of rejecting the fierce peer competition in Chinese society today.

There are also members who refuse to “completely lie flat” and hope to eventually “get rid” of the “five” identity through being a member of the “985 Fives” community. As with those who choose to “completely lie flat,” they are fully aware of the mounting uncertainties and overwhelming obstacles to upward social mobility in China. Yet amid the despondency, they are also wary of the low socioeconomic status that comes with “a lying flat” lifestyle, especially for those who were born into a rural or small-town family and do not have abundant material resources. Therefore, they choose to keep making painful efforts to improve their social status before the door to the higher-middle class completely closes. To them it is important to break away from the “five” identity. The temporality of the identity is key to their approach to identity struggles. For example, as Vignette 2 shows, the members actively seek for useful information and advice to land a secure job as a civil servant. Vignette 3 and 4 also show that the members actively encourage each other to bounce back and escape from the “five” dilemma. This sentiment is pervasive in this group. In almost every thread where the poster claims he or she has achieved some form of success, expressions of warm congratulation flood the comment section. Expressions such as “You are not a ‘five’ from now on!” (as discussed in Vignette 3) showcase the fluidity of the identity of “five.” In successfully shedding the “five” identity, the group members embrace the joyfulness of finding their ground again, despite having experienced debilitating failure in the past. This approach, compared to embracing the label of “five” and “lying flat,” provides a more practical way to negotiate with the harsh social realities in China.

6.3 Design implications

Our findings on the diverse ways in which the “985 Fives” members interact with and support each other in their identity struggles point to important design implications.

Firstly, as the matrix of domination can be easily reproduced by social computing technologies platform [20], we point to the need of more inclusive design solutions that facilitate the expression of marginalized voices and allow less privileged social groups to obtain social support. Our case study shows how technologies support the identity struggles of a marginalized social group. The Douban group provides a safe space for the members of the “985 Fives” community to make their voices heard. It is through technology-enabled interactions with others that the group members create a supportive environment and a sense of camaraderie within the group.

Secondly, designers should pay attention to mutual construction between new computing systems and their users, thereby achieving design that respects the users’ agency and creativity. Our study suggests that users actively leverage platform affordances to achieve their socio-political goals. For example, in the “985 Fives” community members constantly call for reposting and ask other

members to avoid private messages in order to ensure that useful information can reach a wider audience. This is a creative and proactive way of leveraging technical affordances of the platform. Therefore, designers need to be aware of users’ creative construction of meanings and strategies when using new technologies and be prompt to respond to their varied needs.

Last but not least, social media platform designers should consider the implications of their design on collective actions, both online and offline. Prior research has found that as an “interest-oriented SNS,” Douban, compared with SNSs based on offline pre-existing relationships, is better at enabling strangers to form new ties with others through shared interests, and therefore has greater potential to mobilize collective actions [114]. Our research confirms the potential of online communities on Douban to provide a space for online activism. In this salient protest, the “fives” collectively defy social norms and call for alternative lifestyles. We suggest that examining the use of digital technologies in activism could help designers form a better understanding of the potential as well as the constraints of their design in the contexts of promoting collective actions.

7 CONCLUSION

To summarize, this research offers insights into how the “985 Fives” online community on Douban supports its group members in their identity struggles in a radically changing socio-political landscape in China. Frustrated by limited economic and social opportunities, these disillusioned young people construct a shared identity of “five” in an attempt to resist the social and peer pressure brought by the economic downturn and a lack of upward social mobility in China. We make important contributions to CSCW and HCI literature. First, we showcase that the online identity struggles of the disenchanted Chinese youths is an important form of online activism with powerful social and political implications in contemporary Chinese society. Second, we highlight how social media can support young Chinese people to generate long-term social support in an online community. Third, we find that their identity struggles on social media is the very foundation of their online activism, which is intricately associated with their material and nonmaterial struggles in offline realities. We also call to mind that system designers should consider how they can better support the expression of marginalized voices and collective actions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you reviewer!

REFERENCES

- [1] 985 Project. 2022. 985 Project — Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Project_985&oldid=1093030630 [Online; accessed 13-July-2012].
- [2] Mark Ackerman and Christine Halverson. 2004. Sharing expertise: The next step for knowledge management. In *Social Capital and Information Technology*. MIT Press.
- [3] Ban Al-Ani, Gloria Mark, Justin Chung, and Jennifer Jones. 2012. The Egyptian blogosphere: A counter-narrative of the revolution. In *Proceedings of the ACM 2012 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*. 17–26.
- [4] Nazanin Andalibi, Oliver L Haimson, Munmun De Choudhury, and Andrea Forte. 2018. Social support, reciprocity, and anonymity in responses to sexual abuse disclosures on social media. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI)* 25, 5 (2018), 1–35.
- [5] Nazanin Andalibi, Pinar Ozturk, and Andrea Forte. 2017. Sensitive self-disclosures, responses, and social support on Instagram: the case of # depression. In *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing*. 1485–1500.
- [6] Liam Bannon and Susanne Bødker. 1997. Constructing common information spaces. In *Proceedings of the Fifth European Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*. Springer, 81–96.
- [7] Jeremy Birnholtz, Colin Fitzpatrick, Mark Handel, and Jed R Brubaker. 2014. Identity, identification and identifiability: The language of self-presentation on a location-based mobile dating app. In *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction with Mobile Devices & Services*. 3–12.

- [8] Nomy Bitman. 2021. ‘Which part of my group do I represent?’: Disability activism and social media users with concealable communicative disabilities. *Information, Communication & Society* (2021), 1–18.
- [9] Kyle Booten. 2016. Hashtag drift: Tracing the evolving uses of political hashtags over time. In *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 2401–2405.
- [10] Robin Brontsema. 2004. A queer revolution: Reconceptualizing the debate over linguistic reclamation. *Colorado Research in Linguistics* (2004).
- [11] Moira Burke, Cameron Marlow, and Thomas Lento. 2010. Social network activity and social well-being. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 1909–1912.
- [12] Federico Cabitza and Carla Simone. 2012. Affording mechanisms: An integrated view of coordination and knowledge management. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)* 21, 2 (2012), 227–260.
- [13] Bart Cammaerts. 2015. Social media and activism. In *The International Encyclopedia of Digital Communication and Society*. Wiley-Blackwell, 1027–1034.
- [14] Caleb T Carr, D Yvette Wohn, and Rebecca A Hayes. 2016. [Thumbs up emoji] as social support: Relational closeness, automaticity, and interpreting social support from paralinguistic digital affordances in social media. *Computers in Human Behavior* 62 (2016), 385–393.
- [15] Matthew Carrasco and Andruid Kerne. 2018. Queer visibility: Supporting LGBT+ selective visibility on social media. In *Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 1–12.
- [16] Wing Kit Chan and Jiayu Zhang. 2021. Can university qualification promote social mobility? A review of higher education expansion and graduate employment in China. *International Journal of Educational Development* 84 (2021), 102423.
- [17] Kathy Charmaz. 2006. *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. sage.
- [18] David A Cole, Elizabeth A Nick, Rachel L Zerkowicz, Kathryn M Roeder, and Tawny Spinelli. 2017. Online social support for young people: Does it recapitulate in-person social support; can it help? *Computers in Human Behavior* 68 (2017), 456–464.
- [19] Victor P Cornet, Natalie K Hall, Francesco Cafaro, and Erin L Brady. 2017. How image-based social media websites support social movements. In *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 2473–2479.
- [20] Sasha Costanza-Chock. 2020. *Design justice: Community-led practices to build the worlds we need*. The MIT Press.
- [21] Constantinos K Coursaris and Ming Liu. 2009. An analysis of social support exchanges in online HIV/AIDS self-help groups. *Computers in Human Behavior* 25, 4 (2009), 911–918.
- [22] David Crandall, Dan Cosley, Daniel Huttenlocher, Jon Kleinberg, and Siddharth Suri. 2008. Feedback effects between similarity and social influence in online communities. In *Proceedings of the 14th ACM SIGKDD International Conference on Knowledge Discovery and Data Mining*. 160–168.
- [23] Laura Dabbish, Colleen Stuart, Jason Tsay, and Jim Herbsleb. 2012. Social coding in GitHub: Transparency and collaboration in an open software repository. In *Proceedings of the ACM 2012 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*. 1277–1286.
- [24] Dipto Das, Carsten Østerlund, and Bryan Semaan. 2021. “Jol” or “Pani”? : How does governance shape a platform’s identity? *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 5, CSCW2 (2021), 1–25.
- [25] Munmun De Choudhury and Sushovan De. 2014. Mental health discourse on reddit: Self-disclosure, social support, and anonymity. In *Eighth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media*.
- [26] Michael A DeVito, Ashley Marie Walker, and Jeremy Birnholtz. 2018. ‘Too gay for Facebook’: Presenting LGBTQ+ identity throughout the personal social media ecosystem. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 2, CSCW (2018), 1–23.
- [27] Michael A Devito, Ashley Marie Walker, Jeremy Birnholtz, Kathryn Ringland, Kathryn Macapagal, Ashley Kraus, Sean Munson, Calvin Liang, and Herman Saksono. 2019. Social technologies for digital wellbeing among marginalized communities. In *Conference Companion Publication of the 2019 on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing*. 449–454.
- [28] Jill P Dimond, Michaelanne Dye, Daphne LaRose, and Amy S Bruckman. 2013. Hollaback! The role of storytelling online in a social movement organization. In *Proceedings of the 2013 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*. 477–490.
- [29] Bryan Dosono. 2018. AAPI identity work on Reddit: Toward social support and collective action. In *Proceedings of the 2018 ACM Conference on Supporting Groupwork*. 373–378.
- [30] Bryan Dosono and Bryan Semaan. 2019. Moderation practices as emotional labor in sustaining online communities: The case of AAPI identity work on Reddit. In *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 1–13.
- [31] Brianna Dym, Jed R Brubaker, Casey Fiesler, and Bryan Semaan. 2019. “Coming out okay”: Community narratives for LGBTQ identity recovery work. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 3, CSCW (2019), 1–28.

- [32] Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport. 2011. *Digitally enabled social change: Activism in the internet age*. Mit Press.
- [33] The Economist. 2021. Education in China is becoming increasingly unfair to the poor. <https://www.economist.com/china/2021/05/27/education-in-china-is-becoming-increasingly-unfair-to-the-poor>
- [34] Shelly D Farnham and Elizabeth F Churchill. 2011. Faceted identity, faceted lives: Social and technical issues with being yourself online. In *Proceedings of the ACM 2011 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*. 359–368.
- [35] Julia R Fernandez and Jeremy Birnholtz. 2019. “I don’t want them to not know”: Investigating decisions to disclose transgender identity on dating platforms. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 3, CSCW (2019), 1–21.
- [36] Andrea Forte, Niki Kittur, Vanessa Larco, Haiyi Zhu, Amy Bruckman, and Robert E Kraut. 2012. Coordination and beyond: Social functions of groups in open content production. In *Proceedings of the ACM 2012 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*. 417–426.
- [37] Jesse Fox and Rachel Ralston. 2016. Queer identity online: Informal learning and teaching experiences of LGBTQ individuals on social media. *Computers in Human Behavior* 65 (2016), 635–642.
- [38] Guo Freeman and Donghee Yvette Wohn. 2017. Social support in eSports: Building emotional and esteem support from instrumental support interactions in a highly competitive environment. In *Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play*. 435–447.
- [39] Sucheta Ghoshal and Amy Bruckman. 2019. The role of social computing technologies in grassroots movement building. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI)* 26, 3 (2019), 1–36.
- [40] Sucheta Ghoshal, Rishma Mendhekar, and Amy Bruckman. 2020. Toward a grassroots culture of technology practice. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 4, CSCW1 (2020), 1–28.
- [41] Sucheta Ghoshal, Andrea Grimes Parker, Christopher A Le Dantec, Carl Disalvo, Lilly Irani, and Amy Bruckman. 2019. Design and the politics of collaboration: A grassroots perspective. In *Conference Companion Publication of the 2019 on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing*. 468–473.
- [42] Farah Godrej. 2011. Spaces for counter-narratives: The phenomenology of reclamation. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 32, 3 (2011), 111–133.
- [43] Erving Goffman. 1959. *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Doubleday.
- [44] Joss Hands. 2010. *@’s for activism: Dissent, resistance and rebellion in a digital culture*. Pluto Press.
- [45] Karin Hansson, Teresa Cerratto Pargman, and Shaowen Bardzell. 2021. Materializing activism. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)* 30 (2021), 617–626.
- [46] Karin Hansson, Malin Sveningsson, and Hillevi Ganetz. 2021. Organizing Safe Spaces: # MeToo Activism in Sweden. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)* 30, 5 (2021), 651–682.
- [47] Farnaz Irannejad Bisafar, Brooke Foucault Welles, Catherine D’Ignazio, and Andrea G Parker. 2020. Supporting youth activists? Strategic use of social media: A qualitative investigation of design opportunities. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 4, CSCW2 (2020), 1–25.
- [48] Elizabeth M Jenkins, Zulfia Zaher, Stephanie A Tikkanen, and Jessica L Ford. 2019. Creative identity (re) Construction, creative community building, and creative resistance: A qualitative analysis of queer ingroup members’ tweets after the Orlando Shooting. *Computers in Human Behavior* 101 (2019), 14–21.
- [49] Xi Jinping. 2021. Zhashi tuidong gongtong fuyu [Promoting common prosperity]. http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2021-10/15/c_1127959365.htm
- [50] Mary C Joyce. 2010. *Digital activism decoded: The new mechanics of change*. IDEA.
- [51] Kenichi Kamiya, Martin Röscheisen, and Terry Winograd. 1996. Grassroots: Providing a uniform framework for communicating, sharing information, and organizing people. In *Conference Companion on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 239–240.
- [52] Anne Kaun and Julie Uldam. 2018. Digital activism: After the hype. *New Media & Society* 20, 6 (2018), 2099–2106.
- [53] Aniket Kittur and Robert E Kraut. 2010. Beyond Wikipedia: Coordination and conflict in online production groups. In *Proceedings of the 2010 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*. 215–224.
- [54] Ho Kiu-Chor et al. 2007. A case study of Douban: Social network communities. *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology* 1, 2 (2007), 43–56.
- [55] Yubo Kou and Colin M Gray. 2018. “What do you recommend a complete beginner like me to practice?”: Professional self-disclosure in an online community. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 2, CSCW (2018), 1–24.
- [56] Yong Ming Kow, Yubo Kou, Bryan Semaan, and Waikuen Cheng. 2016. Mediating the undercurrents: Using social media to sustain a social movement. In *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 3883–3894.
- [57] PM Krafft and Joan Donovan. 2020. Disinformation by design: The use of evidence collages and platform filtering in a media manipulation campaign. *Political Communication* 37, 2 (2020), 194–214.

- [58] David Lazer, Matthew Baum, Nir Grinberg, Lisa Friedland, Kenneth Joseph, Will Hobbs, and Carolina Mattsson. 2017. Combating fake news: An agenda for research and action. (2017).
- [59] Alex Leavitt and John J Robinson. 2017. Upvote my news: The practices of peer information aggregation for breaking news on reddit. com. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 1, CSCW (2017), 1–18.
- [60] Guo Li, Xiaomu Zhou, Tun Lu, Jiang Yang, and Ning Gu. 2016. SunForum: Understanding depression in a Chinese online community. In *Proceedings of the 19th ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*. 515–526.
- [61] Calvin Liang, Emily Tseng, Sachin Pendse, Crystal Lee, Kimberley Allison, Neilly H. Tan, Ruotong Wang, Alexandra To, and Amy Zhang. 2021. Subtle CSCW traits: Tensions around identity formation and online activism in the Asian diaspora. In *Companion Publication of the 2021 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing*. 347–351.
- [62] Sara Liao. 2019. “# IAmGay# What about you?”: Storytelling, discursive politics, and the affective dimension of social media activism against censorship in China. *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019), 21.
- [63] Jessica Lingel, Mor Naaman, and Danah M Boyd. 2014. City, self, network: Transnational migrants and online identity work. In *Proceedings of the 17th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*. 1502–1510.
- [64] Fannie Liu, Denae Ford, Chris Parnin, and Laura Dabbish. 2017. Selfies as social movements: Influences on participation and perceived impact on stereotypes. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 1, CSCW (2017), 1–21.
- [65] Gloria Xiao Yu Liu and Charles C Helwig. 2020. Autonomy, social inequality, and support in Chinese urban and rural adolescents’ reasoning about the Chinese college entrance examination (Gaokao). *Journal of Adolescent Research* (2020), 0743558420914082.
- [66] Jun Liu. 2021. Technology for activism: Toward a relational framework. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)* 30, 5 (2021), 627–650.
- [67] Yi-Ling Liu. 2021. China’s ‘involved’ generation. *The New Yorker* 14 (2021).
- [68] Danielle Lottridge, Nazanin Andalibi, Joy Kim, and Jofish Kaye. 2019. “Giving a little’ayyy, I feel ya’to someone’s personal post”: Performing support on social media. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 3, CSCW (2019), 1–22.
- [69] Haiwei Ma, C Estelle Smith, Lu He, Saumik Narayanan, Robert A Giaquinto, Roni Evans, Linda Hanson, and Svetlana Yarosh. 2017. Write for life: Persisting in online health communities through expressive writing and social support. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 1, CSCW (2017), 1–24.
- [70] Gloria Mark, Mossaab Bagdouri, Leysia Palen, James Martin, Ban Al-Ani, and Kenneth Anderson. 2012. Blogs as a collective war diary. In *Proceedings of the ACM 2012 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*. 37–46.
- [71] Ka Ho Mok and Alfred M Wu. 2016. Higher education, changing labour nanzanet and social mobility in the era of massification in China. *Journal of Education and Work* 29, 1 (2016), 77–97.
- [72] Aaron Mueller, Zach Wood-Doughty, Silvio Amir, Mark Dredze, and Alicia Lynn Nobles. 2021. Demographic representation and collective storytelling in the me too twitter hashtag activism movement. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 5, CSCW1 (2021), 1–28.
- [73] Xiong Qingnian, Zhang Duanhong, and Liu Hong. 2011. Governance reform at China’s “985 Project” universities. *Chinese Education & Society* 44, 5 (2011), 31–40.
- [74] Lin Qiu, Han Lin, Angela K Leung, and William Tov. 2012. Putting their best foot forward: Emotional disclosure on Facebook. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 15, 10 (2012), 569–572.
- [75] Leonard Reinecke and Sabine Trepte. 2014. Authenticity and well-being on social network sites: A two-wave longitudinal study on the effects of online authenticity and the positivity bias in SNS communication. *Computers in Human Behavior* 30 (2014), 95–102.
- [76] Eugenia Ha Rim Rho and Melissa Mazmanian. 2020. Political hashtags & the lost art of democratic discourse. In *Proceedings of the 2020 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 1–13.
- [77] Dana Rotman, Sarah Vieweg, Sarita Yardi, Ed Chi, Jenny Preece, Ben Shneiderman, Peter Pirolli, and Tom Glaisyer. 2011. From slacktivism to activism: Participatory culture in the age of social media. In *CHI’11 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 819–822.
- [78] James C Scott. 1985. *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. yale university Press.
- [79] Joseph Seering. 2019. Building more positive online communities through improving moderation and strengthening social identity. In *Conference Companion Publication of the 2019 on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing*. 89–93.
- [80] Joseph Seering, Felicia Ng, Zheng Yao, and Geoff Kaufman. 2018. Applications of social identity theory to research and design in computer-supported cooperative work. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 2, CSCW (2018), 1–34.

- [81] Ellen Simpson and Bryan Semaan. 2021. For you, or for “you”? Everyday LGBTQ+ encounters with TikTok. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 4, CSCW3 (2021), 1–34.
- [82] Karin Skill, Sergio Passero, and Marie Francisco. 2021. Assembling Amazon fires through English hashtags. Materializing environmental activism within Twitter networks. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)* 30, 5 (2021), 715–732.
- [83] C Estelle Smith, Zachary Levonian, Haiwei Ma, Robert Giaquinto, Gemma Lein-Mcdonough, Zixuan Li, Susan O’Conner-Von, and Svetlana Yarosh. 2020. “I cannot do all of this alone”: Exploring instrumental and prayer support in online health communities. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI)* 27, 5 (2020), 1–41.
- [84] Kate Starbird and Leysia Palen. 2012. (How) will the revolution be retweeted? Information diffusion and the 2011 Egyptian uprising. In *Proceedings of the ACM 2012 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*. 7–16.
- [85] Leo Graiden Stewart, Ahmer Arif, A Conrad Nied, Emma S Spiro, and Kate Starbird. 2017. Drawing the lines of contention: Networked frame contests within # BlackLivesMatter discourse. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 1, CSCW (2017), 1–23.
- [86] Tangping. 2022. Tangping — Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Tang_ping&oldid=1096228974 [Online; accessed 13-July-2012].
- [87] Alexandra To, Wenxia Sweeney, Jessica Hammer, and Geoff Kaufman. 2020. “They just don’t get it”: Towards social technologies for coping with interpersonal racism. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 4, CSCW1 (2020), 1–29.
- [88] Cristen Torrey, David W McDonald, Bill N Schilit, and Sara Bly. 2007. How-To pages: Informal systems of expertise sharing. In *ECSCW 2007*. Springer, 391–410.
- [89] Sabine Trepte, Tobias Dienlin, and Leonard Reinecke. 2015. Influence of social support received in online and offline contexts on satisfaction with social support and satisfaction with life: A longitudinal study. *Media Psychology* 18, 1 (2015), 74–105.
- [90] Sabine Trepte, Leonard Reinecke, and Keno Juechems. 2012. The social side of gaming: How playing online computer games creates online and offline social support. *Computers in Human Behavior* 28, 3 (2012), 832–839.
- [91] Emiliano Treré. 2015. Reclaiming, proclaiming, and maintaining collective identity in the # YoSoy132 movement in Mexico: An examination of digital frontstage and backstage activism through social media and instant messaging platforms. *Information, Communication & Society* 18, 8 (2015), 901–915.
- [92] Jessica Vitak and Jinyoung Kim. 2014. “You can’t block people offline”: Examining how facebook’s affordances shape the disclosure process. In *Proceedings of the 17th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*. 461–474.
- [93] Sonja Vivienne. 2016. *Digital identity and everyday activism: Sharing private stories with networked publics*. Springer.
- [94] Fan Wang and Yitsing Wang. 2021. The buzzwords reflecting the frustration of China’s young generation. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-57328508>
- [95] Fan Wang and Yitsing Wang. 2021. Tangping Kechi, Nalai de zhengyigan [Lying flat is shameful. How could it be justified?]. http://epaper.southcn.com/nfdaily/html/2021-05/20/content_7944231.htm
- [96] Liuping Wang, Dakuo Wang, Feng Tian, Zhenhui Peng, Xiangmin Fan, Zhan Zhang, Mo Yu, Xiaojuan Ma, and Hongan Wang. 2021. Cass: Towards building a social-support chatbot for online health community. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 5, CSCW1 (2021), 1–31.
- [97] Yi-Chia Wang, Robert Kraut, and John M Levine. 2012. To stay or leave? The relationship of emotional and informational support to commitment in online health support groups. In *Proceedings of the ACM 2012 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*. 833–842.
- [98] Donghee Yvette Wohn. 2019. Volunteer moderators in twitch micro communities: How they get involved, the roles they play, and the emotional labor they experience. In *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI conference on human factors in computing systems*. 1–13.
- [99] Volker Wulf, Kaoru Misaki, Meryem Atam, David Randall, and Markus Rohde. 2013. ‘On the ground’ in Sidi Bouzid: investigating social media use during the Tunisian revolution. In *Proceedings of the 2013 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*. 1409–1418.
- [100] Zhou Xin. 2021. China’s Gen Z are ‘laying flat’, but does this new work, life attitude pose a social and economic threat? <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3134633/chinas-gen-z-are-laying-flat-does-new-work-life-attitude-pose>
- [101] Wang Xingyu. 2021. Yindao “Tangpingzu” zhenxi shaohua fenfa youwei [Leading the “lying flat” people to cherish their time and forge ahead]. http://www.xinhuanet.com/2021-05/20/c_1127467494.htm
- [102] Diyi Yang, Robert E Kraut, Tenbroeck Smith, Elijah Mayfield, and Dan Jurafsky. 2019. Seekers, providers, welcomers, and storytellers: Modeling social roles in online health communities. In *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 1–14.

- [103] Guobin Yang. 2003. The Internet and the rise of a transnational Chinese cultural sphere. *Media, Culture & Society* 25, 4 (2003), 469–490.
- [104] Guobin Yang. 2009. China since Tiananmen: Online activism. *Journal of Democracy* 20, 3 (2009), 33–36.
- [105] Guobin Yang. 2009. *The power of the Internet in China: Citizen activism online*. Columbia University Press.
- [106] Guobin Yang. 2016. Activism. In *Digital keywords: A vocabulary of information society and culture*. Princeton University Press.
- [107] Guobin Yang and Craig Calhoun. 2007. Media, civil society, and the rise of a green public sphere in China. *China Information* 21, 2 (2007), 211–236.
- [108] Guobin Yang and Min Jiang. 2015. The networked practice of online political satire in China: Between ritual and resistance. *International Communication Gazette* 77, 3 (2015), 215–231.
- [109] Cheng Ying. 2011. A reflection on the effects of the 985 Project. *Chinese Education & Society* 44, 5 (2011), 19–30.
- [110] Cheng Ying. 2021. The collective disillusionment of “985 Fives” and its transcendence: A psychological examination of the “lying Flat-ism” of elite college students in distress under the pandemic crisis [“985 feiwu” de jiti shiyi jiqi chaoyue: yiqing weiji xia kunjing jingying daxuesheng de “fei” xinli shenshi]. *Zhongguo Qingnian Yanjiu [China Youth Study]* 4 (2021), 76–84.
- [111] Louis Yu and Valerie King. 2010. The evolution of friendships in chinese online social networks. In *2010 IEEE Second International Conference on Social Computing*. IEEE, 81–87.
- [112] Han Zhang, Donald Patton, and Martin Kenney. 2013. Building global-class universities: Assessing the impact of the 985 Project. *Research Policy* 42, 3 (2013), 765–775.
- [113] Renwen Zhang, Jordan Eschler, and Madhu Reddy. 2018. Online support groups for depression in China: Culturally shaped interactions and motivations. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)* 27, 3 (2018), 327–354.
- [114] Weiyu Zhang and Rong Wang. 2010. Interest-oriented versus relationship-oriented social network sites in China. *First Monday* (2010).
- [115] Xiaohua Zong and Wei Zhang. 2019. Establishing world-class universities in China: Deploying a quasi-experimental design to evaluate the net effects of Project 985. *Studies in Higher Education* 44, 3 (2019), 417–431.
- [116] Suay Melisa Özkula. 2021. What is digital activism anyway? Social constructions of the “digital” in contemporary activism. *Journal of Digital Social Research* 3, 3 (2021), 60–84.

A RESEARCH METHODS

A.1 Interviewee Selection Criteria

The criteria of selection of interviewees are as follows:

- (1) He or she is currently a member of the “985 Fives” community on Douban.
- (2) He or she has the willingness to be interviewed and the ability to express it clearly
- (3) Preferably, he or she has previously shared their experiences in the community, especially if he or she has told a complete story and received replies.

A.2 Interview Questions

All researchers conducted interviews based on the following outline:

- (1) First, just to get started, I’d like to ask you some questions related to the online community. When was the last time you logged in, and what did you do? When did you decide to join the “The Inviting Plan for 985 Fives” online community, and why?
- (2) Now, I’d like to get a sense for your background. Do you have a job? (If yes, what kind of job do you have?) Where do you live? How would you describe your economic situation? Where were you born and raised? How would you describe the socio-economic standing of your family? What is one personal experience that best describes your current living or working situation?
- (3) Let’s come back to the online community. How often do you interact with other group members? What are the main issues you enjoy discussing with other group members? Is there anything about participating in the community that you have found surprising? Can you share with me one personal experience that best describes your current living or working situation?

A.3 Top 30 Threads

Table 4. Top 30 Threads

No.	Title
1	What is the rate of postgraduate recommendation at your college?
2	What is your ideal job which may seem strange to others?
3	Sharing my ten-year working experience as a civil servant in a capital city in Northeast China.
4	Sharing my college admission results.
5	Everyone comes in with a quote from your parents that made you feel suffocated (teen drama writers are welcome to come and take the material).
6	How can my parents make so many bad choices for me before I became an adult?
7	Is it really easy to get admitted into 985 universities in your high school?
8	Give yourself something to look forward to. Please list here the things that you want to achieve.
9	It is New Year’s Day, everyone. May all your wishes come true.
10	Let’s compare whose majors are less popular.
11	Let’s break the imagination about ideal cities (for both life and work).
12	Come and talk about your real ideals.
13	Do you really choose not to marry and not to have children? Or, is it just bragging?
14	If you “fives” don’t need to consider income, social status, etc., what jobs do you want to do?
15	A person who wasted a postgraduate recommendation slot and was arrogant about it should be scolded.
16	Can first-tier cities really broaden your horizons?
17	When looking for a job, I was angry about sexism (in the process).
18	If your boyfriend is the beneficiary of gender discrimination, will you be angry at him?
19	It’s a “five” group, but few people would really feel like (they are) pure “five,” right? Please come to show and say something about yourself that is not so “five!”
20	After hearing the story of Zhang Guimei (a female educator who pioneered the establishment of schools for girls in rural China), would “fives” choose to be a housewife?
21	I’m the poster from the other group who dropped out of school to retake the college entrance examination! All exams are done!!! Not bad!
22	I am really annoyed by the current trend of everyone studying for the postgraduate exams.
23	The members of our group are not all INTP and INFP, right?
24	Will you have physical symptoms when you are stressed?
25	Let’s discuss why people do not take the civil servant exam.
26	I graduated from a well-known 211 university, and now work as an E-commerce live-streaming host. Is this a waste of my education?
27	Everyone come in and tell us about the schools or majors you regret not choosing.
28	Eventually, I gave up resisting.
29	“Fives,” why are you having insomnia tonight?
30	Some criticism of “involution.”

Received July 2022; revised January 2023; accepted March 2023