

Insulting China in Indiscrimination? A Conceptual Review and Mechanistic Explanation Based on Agent Based Modeling

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Abstract

Insulting China is a term that is becoming increasingly popular on Chinese social media and has caused widespread controversy. One of the points of contention is the generalization of the term Chinese insult, which is manifested in the expansion of the use of the concept and the indiscriminate targeting of the attack. This study attempts to address this controversy by reviewing the concept and providing a mechanistic explanation of it. First, we draw on rational choice models in the context of game theory to identify the types of actions individuals take, while digital vigilantism provides their motivations and organizational goals. Second, drawing on Schelling’s micro-motivation-macro-behavior model, we set conditions for equilibrium states. By modifying the parameters as well as transforming the conditions, the ABM can provide a mechanistic explanation of the phenomenon and further illustrate the premises under which this controversial viewpoint can be sustained. This study first combines digital vigilantism and nationalism studies to provide more detailed mechanisms of subjects under the influence of media technology, while advancing understanding about ABM as a social science explanatory methodology

1 Introduction

On December 30, 2021, the New York Times featured an article discussing a viral term *insulting China*(*ruhua*) on Chinese social media platforms[Xiaoqing, 2021]. Within this term aimed at defending national dignity, the precise characteristics of such incidents and the definition of what constitutes *Insulting China* remain unclear. Concurrently, the expanding application of the term has garnered attention with some analysts suggesting its increasingly indiscriminate usage. Specifically, the targets seems becoming broader (including multinational corporations, local companies, cultural commodities, consumer goods, foreign governments, local governments, etc.), and the reasons have become more diversified, covering political controversies, culture, and national sentiments[Xiaoqing, 2021].

Is Insulting China really getting more indiscriminate? This study attempts to address this question by returning to the origins of the concept, while at the same time, the authors proposed a mechanistic explanation of the phenomenon which allow us to have a deeper insight into the intersection of digital nationalism and activism in the specific context of China.

2 Mobilization of Chinese Digital Nationalism

This study refers to *Insulting China* as a social media hashtag playing a role in social behavior and mobilization within public sphere [He, 2023, Huang, 2023]. The nationalist mobilization on social platforms is triggered by various incidents like international conflicts, where Chinese netizens usually direct their anger to *enemy* - either a government, as abstract concept, or certain products. Existing research on this phenomenon has focused on middle range theoretical explanations[Wang et al., 2016]. In the nationalist mobilization cases (e.g. D8 expedition) discussion, scholars reviewed the disintegrative impact of emerging media technologies on the behavioral contexts of new-gen-nationalists in China and describe complex mechanisms of cultural production and collective identity

formation in everyday contexts. Wang et al. [2016] recognizes through *fandom patriotic activism* that the national and various group boundaries which are constantly encountered in transnational consumption compel post-moderns to reverse their communal identities. Changes in symbolic resources and cultural signifiers in the context of technology have transformed imagined ways of communication game[Liu, 2017, Wang et al., 2016]. Also, Lu and Ju [2021] proposes *nationalism in daily performance* to explain the kind of nationalist practice form which lies between grand special events and banal daily representations. More specifically, young people have solidified the *political correctness* censorship as a habit in their daily reading of online texts. Not only are they inspired in certain major events, but any remarks that degrade or harm China will cause habitually alert of the body and may further trigger an *expedition*. They threw themselves into the emotional abreaction in the *flame war* as well as showed sensitiveness and rationality in the choice of strategies. They also underwent continuous negotiations and choices based on different value orientation when facing the conflicts of multiple identities.

3 Link the individual choices and collective action

In the aforementioned cases, the actor(nationalist individual) is conceptual ambiguity. Due to the confusion in the conceptualization of the individual as a universal and the individual in specific decision-making contexts, it is struggling to effectively resolve the logical chain from individual to collective action or to simply attribute it to abstract cultural factors. In this study, our work attempts to effectively correlate individual decision-making and collective action in social mobilization under the hashtag of nationalist mobilization and, more specifically, Insulting China. First, we review James Coleman’s rational choice theory and draw on Thomas Schelling’s game-theoretic analysis to limit insults to specific types of actions and action structures[Coleman, 1986, Schelling, 2006]. This will help us to conduct a collectively conditioned equilibrium state analysis of the contingent behav-

iors. At the same time, we review the theory of digital vigilantism(DV) to specify the motivation for the actions that are carried out in relation to other types of cyber-activism sub-concepts[Favarel-Garrigues et al., 2020]. Under the *call out culture*, users can easily search for, request and disseminate personal information, this information can be used to incite anger for a variety of cultural and political purposes. The practices that scrutinize, condemn, and even exploit the harm of those perceived to be violating legal/moral boundaries, with the goal of achieving some form of justice, also facilitated by media affordances and culture-historical context [Trotter, 2020]. DV contributes to place the empirical phenomenon of vigilantism in a theoretical context for meaningful comparison.

4 Methods

Our research tries to reveal the evolutionary dynamics and emergence phenomenon of netizens’ behaviors based on Agent-Based Modeling (ABM). ABM has been shown to be an effective method for performing social modeling and mechanism interpretation[Sohn, 2022] and permits us to successfully address the problem of the micro-macro connection in social sciences[Linares, 2018].

The model consists of rules proposed from a game theory view and we aim to back-calculate the whole process of the emergence of patterns like digital vigilantism. Furthermore, by tuning the parameters related to basic proposed rules we established the primary micro-level mechanisms vital to observe digital vigilantism. Based on this observation, we find such behaviors can be described as a generalized phenomenon in nonequilibrium statistical physics, called shockwave. The first principle theory of dynamics can offer a hand-waving explanation on shockwavelike results. In addition to this, we collect longitudinal event data within the time frame to observe the efficacy of the mechanisms generated by simulated model.

5 Contribution

First of all, digital vigilantism has been introduced into nationalism studies to account for people’s behavior and mobilization mechanisms on social media. As pointed out by Liu [2017], nationalists have successfully domesticated new media as a medium in constructing national identity during their engagement process, while their behaviors also have been changed by the technology. DV, as a comprehensive theory, successfully links different actors and uses a larger lens to observe this phenomenon of justice self-organization within social media background.

Second, this paper adopts the theoretical framework of Agent-Based Modeling (ABM), which underscores the evolution of micro-level behaviors into macro-level phenomena. It aims to directly investigate the intricate relationship between the state, media platforms, and individuals targeted by digital vigilantism, while also analyzing the conditions that drive the evolution of this phenomenon. Given that digital vigilantism often involves individual political decisions influenced by ideology, our exploration initially adopts a dichotomous perspective of

legalism and irrationality. This involves operationalizing individual ideology-based choices using game-theoretic rational choice models, thereby elucidating their role in shaping the macro-level digital vigilantism phenomenon. By avoiding simplistic characterizations of netizens as irrational mobs in opposition to legal establishments, our analysis frames the phenomenon as a hashtag-based curation, shedding light on its underlying causes and manifestations.

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