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Online scrutiny of people with nice cars: A comparative analysis of Chinese, Russian, and Anglo-American outrage

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Qian Huang^{}, Rashid Gabdulhakov
and Daniel Trottier

Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract

Connected by platforms and equipped with mobile recording devices, social media users are able to conduct near-constant mutual scrutiny. Such mediated scrutiny sometimes escalates to public denunciations online and even mediated or embodied interventions. A recurring theme of such scrutiny can be observed not only on Chinese social media but also on platforms in Russia and elsewhere, in which hostility is openly expressed towards people with nice cars (i.e. late model, luxury, foreign vehicles). In these cases, nice cars are not merely a fact provided by participants in their denunciations; they also serve as an implication of the privileges the owners might possess. By juxtaposing cases in China against other socio-political contexts, the research intends to achieve a better understanding of how and why nice cars are rendered meaningful by participants via mediated scrutiny on social media in China and beyond. The research collects and analyses relevant social media discourses on platforms including Sina Weibo (China), YouTube (Russia), and Facebook (United Kingdom; Australia; United States). Comparing and contrasting cases in different countries, the research demonstrates various forms of critical and populist sentiments that are shaped by unique socio-cultural and political contexts.

Keywords

China, class struggle, digital vigilantism, framing, Russia

Corresponding author:

Qian Huang, Department of Media & Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, P.O. Box 1738, 3000 DR Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

Email: huang@eshcc.eur.nl

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Introduction

Connected by platforms and equipped with mobile recording devices, social media users are able to conduct near-constant scrutiny of peers and strangers alike. Such mediated scrutiny sometimes escalates to public denunciations online and even mediated or embodied interventions, which can be understood through the lens of digital vigilantism (DV) (Trottier, 2017). When witnessing something that is perceived as offensive, citizens often use digital devices to record the actions/speech, expose and try to attract more attention on social media, and then seek retaliation in various forms. This includes seeking to identify the individual caught engaging in offensive activity, but also editorialising about broader social categories to which they belong, as well as related social conditions. Among the actions that are perceived offensive, a recurring theme can be observed not only on Chinese social media but also in Russia and elsewhere, in which hostility is openly expressed towards people with *nice cars* (i.e. late model, luxury, foreign vehicles). However, due to different socio-political contexts, the patterns and media narratives differ in the above-mentioned societies, and as such warrant consideration.

In China, DV incidents are typically disorganised, and the participants are usually temporarily and digitally mobilised due to the exposure of behaviours deemed offensive on the Internet (Heng et al., 2019). Therefore, such offence is often a cogent representation of the current social conflicts or social norms and values due to their capacity to mobilise Chinese netizens in large scale without formal organisation. DV cases about car-related issues take place constantly in China. The narratives in initial denunciatory posts of these DV cases often focus on the brands of cars, which provoke public reactions.

In Russia, a vigilante group StopXam (Stop a Douchebag, n.d.)¹ also shows heightened interest in motorists with nice cars when trying to identify and expose bad driving/parking practices. StopXam participants approach perceived traffic violators and place stickers on their windshields, reading 'I spit on everyone, I drive where I want'; the process of retaliation is filmed, edited, and uploaded on the group's YouTube channels (Gabdulhakov, 2020). While StopXam participants claim to be indiscriminate, they frequently target drivers on expensive cars with VIP licence plates.² YouTube videos featuring this form of peoples' justice are viewed by millions and some of the more spectacular cases reach traditional media.

In the West, a general state of class awareness has recently been manifest through critical discourses about billionaires (Roberts, 2019) and divisions between the so-called '99%' and '1%' in the context of the Occupy movement (McCleave Maharawal, 2013). Yet while roadside offences like bad parking are captured and discussed in local Facebook groups, there is a curious absence of concern for the owners and drivers of 'nice' cars, notably the social categories to which they belong, and the broader state of affairs that these categories and related privileges may come to symbolise.

Even though the patterns and narratives vary between societies, the commonality is that cars are not only a prominent means of transportation in public spaces but are also rendered meaningful by DV participants in online denunciation, which may reveal the morality concerns, social norms and social conflicts in different societies (Trottier, 2017). Therefore, by analysing the framing of original online denunciations related to 'nice cars' in China, Russia and major Anglophone countries, this research intends to understand *how and why nice cars are (not) rendered meaningful by vigilant digital media users across socio-political contexts*. It is not the intention of the article to exhaustively account for how social class is discursively manifest in the above-mentioned societies. Rather, the article explores the influence of different socio-political contexts on how luxury vehicles become sources of online denunciation in these societies.

From scrutiny to denunciation: the importance of framing in DV

The scrutiny and discovery of a perceived offence are typically understood as events that set off DV campaigns. Such offences include problematic behaviour in public spaces such as roadways and parking lots, but also statements that may have been uttered online. In most cases, such behaviour may already take place in conditions that are recognised as being ‘in public’, yet subsequent responses serve to augment the visibility of the target to a wider audience, as well as reframe their behaviour in a denunciatory light. When presenting the visual evidence, DV participants also provide a description of the events leading up to their footage. In these original posts, DV participants editorialise and frame the offence with information they provide, including the identity of the perpetrator, the sequence of events, and any dialogue exchanged in the process. Consequently, the audience will perceive and evaluate the incident and involved actors under the influence of framing (Goffman, 1974; Reese, 2001), which is crucial in the later DV stages of taking offence and denouncing targets and their behaviour. In addition to the initial discovery of offence, offence-taking also happens when a broader audience is exposed to the original denunciatory posts, which can lead to a larger scale and further rounds of mediated denunciation.

Such offence-taking and denunciation can be conditioned by participants’ moral concerns, social identity, and their confidence in the institutions on relevant issues (Trottier, 2019). Establishing moral grounds to frame an offence are typically based on pre-existing concerns already in public discourse. For instance, anti-paedophile vigilante groups operating in the United Kingdom might frame their campaigns in reference to high-profile incidents of child sexual abuse (Warrington, 2018). Yet such claims and grievances may equally be (re-)articulated in response to an offence, especially those which may be rather exceptional in frequency or severity (cf. Schneider & Trottier, 2013). While concerned with commonly held and even hegemonic values, denunciations themselves can be scrutinised in public discourse, and become subject to counter-denunciations.

Participants also frame DV incidents in ways that reflect or appeal to social groups they identify with. They may associate a place, a tradition, or an abstract value with the community which they believe they belong to and need to be defend (Trottier, 2019). By framing the offence as a threat to these elements, DV participants are able to mobilise citizens who share the same social identity to denounce the target. Participants may also be judged based on widely held perceptions of whoever is making a denunciation, for example, if they belong to a marginalised community. Thus, while disparity between extreme wealth and precarity among citizens may fuel denunciations of offences symbolised by and revolving around ‘nice cars’, this disparity may potentially also serve to dampen or dismiss such criticisms.

How participants view the state’s role in relation to offences also shapes their framing of incidents. DV activities can be framed or implied to be caused by the unwillingness, ineffectiveness, or ineligibility of the police to deal with the offence (Trottier, 2019). In cases targeting nice cars, the framing of the police’s role in incidents is especially important since such cases usually involve traffic laws and regulations, which differs from cases focusing more on morality where the police may have no function, such as marital affairs or vitriolic speech.

Denunciation is thus a means to (re-)frame an event in the above-mentioned perspectives, as well as a call to mobilise some kind of retaliation against the target. A common mobilisation by digital media users is seeking job loss of targets, notably when their employer is known and drawn into the denunciation through platforms like Twitter (Milbrandt, 2020). In some instances, harassment and harm (bethey digital or physical) are also sought. Studying the framing in denunciations

made against targets with nice cars can therefore help to understand the moral concerns, social identities, and citizens' relationship with police in different socio-political contexts.

Methods

Given the importance of the meaning-making process in denunciations, we analysed how DV participants frame actors, interactions and the development in their original denunciatory posts in selected DV incidents involving nice cars in China, Russia, and Anglophone countries, including the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States. It is important to note that the chosen cases merely serve as a snapshot of some common practices and narratives in DV cases that involve cars and car owners, rather than an exhaustive summary of such practices and narratives. Due to the heterogeneous social media landscapes in the countries we research, our data collection followed common guidelines while accounting for variance in platforms and media formats. We collected the original denunciatory digital contents of nice-car-related DV incidents on the main social media platform(s) participants use. For Chinese cases, original denunciatory posts with photos and videos on Sina Weibo were collected; videos posted by DV organisation StopXam on YouTube were collected for Russian cases; posts and interactions in Facebook DV groups were collected for analysis in Anglophone countries.

Chinese DV cases are typically unorganised and participants are temporarily mobilised; meanwhile, the high-profile cases usually attract media attention. Therefore, relevant Chinese cases were first identified through theory and topic-driven keyword searches in the WiseNews database. After identifying key cases, the original denunciatory Sina Weibo posts were collected. In China, Sina Weibo currently holds a monopoly position and enjoys unmatched connectivity among Chinese social media platforms with active verified government-related accounts, mainstream media and individual users including civilians, celebrities and public opinion leaders (China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC], 2017). Because of such connectivity, Sina Weibo has been the major platform for participants to conduct DV.

With branches across Russia and in other post-Soviet republics, StopXam (Moscow) runs two YouTube channels, one for Russian-speaking audiences and the other one (English version) for international audiences (Gabdulhakov, 2018). We present a brief overview of observations made in regard to the video products shared by StopXam participants in their Russophone YouTube channel. As public channels on YouTube allow for sorting videos by date and popularity, we selected and analysed the ten most popular videos on the Russophone StopXam channel.

In the Anglophone context, we considered discourses and repertoires where luxury vehicles (among others) may be openly and publicly scrutinised. This includes Facebook pages and groups that are meant to denounce bad roadside behaviour. These groups routinely post pictures of vehicles, often with denunciatory commentary, and in turn allow other users to provide additional comments. By searching for 'crap parking' pages and groups on Facebook, we selected twenty groups and pages, eighteen of which are focused on the United Kingdom and two on Australia. The fact that no such group was identified as originating in the United States is considered in our discussion below. For Facebook groups, we examined posts, comments to posts, as well as comments in response to comments. In the case of Facebook pages, we applied the same protocol, but examined both *messages* and *community*, in order to interpret admin and member-submitted content.

After the data collection, in-depth qualitative analysis of the framing provided by DV participants on selected cases was conducted. Specifically, we analysed framing devices listed in Table 1,

Table 1. Framing devices.

Category	Examples
Rhetorical and other written/grammatical devices	Word choice; metaphors; exemplars Key words (presence and/or absence) Sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgement Concluding statements and paragraphs
Technical devices	Headlines; subheadings; photo/video captions and subtitles; leads Photographs and videos How is the development of incident described How are the actors described How are the actors labeled What elements are present or absent All sources of information in articles Who are quoted How are they identified Where is the quote placed in the story

which is adapted from Linström & Marais's checklist (2012, p. 33), adopted by participants in selected cases. In the process of analysis, a key step we took was to determine whether patterns and characteristics that we identified in one country appear in cases from other countries.

'The rich versus the vulnerable' framing in China

DV activities targeting people with nice cars can be regarded as a demonstration of struggles between different social strata in China. 'Social strata' is a better concept compared to 'social classes' to describe the distinct social groups in current Chinese society because it focuses more on material and economic inequality without the strong political connotation the latter has in relation to the political struggle in the early years of the Communist Party of China (CPC)'s rule (Zhang, 2017). In the past decade, the income disparity in China has increased rapidly and China has become one of the most economically-unequal countries in the world, with an estimated Gini coefficient of 47.3 points (Jain-Chandra et al., 2018). Such increasing wealth inequality can lead to a greater interpersonal hostility among social groups due to perceived disadvantage and relative deprivation (Greitemeyer & Sagioglou, 2017). In Chinese society, such perceived disadvantage is consolidated by product brands that signify different power to consume. In this case, car brands mobilise social groups that perceive relative deprivation to target seemingly advantageous social groups. However, it is important to point out that focusing on overt hostility between social groups often overshadows the long overdue discussion on structural issues that result in such increasing disparity, including unequal access to education (Anagnost, 2008).

There are three types of DV cases involving nice cars in China, including traffic conflicts (from minor to severe), demonstration of wealth, and corruption or government-related privileges. The most common type of car-related DV case is traffic conflicts. The severity can vary: a scratch, violating traffic regulations, physical violence, or injury and death caused by the driver. It is expected that citizens pay more attention to and try to find a law-breaker or individuals who harm people, but the cases that draw most of the attention are those involving nice cars. A typical framing of such incidents follows this pattern: a lady/guy who drives a nice car brand harm a socially

disadvantaged individual. High-profile cases of this type include *Maserati driver beat up food delivery guy* in 2017, *Lady driving luxurious car ganged up on security guard after a dispute* in 2016 and *Volvo driver insulted a taxi driver as 'inferior'* in 2015.

Another prominent type of case is caused by the owners of luxurious cars showing off their wealth. In this type of case, the target does not have to overtly break any law. Rather, their vehicle serves as a form of conspicuous consumption that offends netizens and potentially raises questions about the legality of the acquired wealth. The 'Guo Meimei' case is the most representative instance of this type and it even became a commonly agreed term to use when referring to people engaging in similar conduct (Link & Qiang, 2013).

Nice cars that demonstrate corruption or government-related privilege are also a common subject in DV cases in China. The *gongche* (public service car) has a connotation of government officials' privileges that lingered from a previous era, when such privileges were commonly accepted. However, Chinese citizens started to realise how problematic it is to use public service vehicles for private affairs, and the Internet enabled them to voice such grievances. The access to so-called public service cars had been criticised as a symptom of corruption (Notar, 2014) because they are often used by officials for personal affairs, such as picking up children and travelling. This type of case gradually disappeared after Xi Jinping took power in 2013. The central government reformed the public service car system in 2014, cancelling the cars for officials who had a rank lower than sub-provincial (ministerial) level (Xinhua News Agency, 2014). Together with the public service car system reformation, the intense anti-corruption movement started by the central government may have contributed to the decrease of such cases (Ke, Liu, & Tang, 2018).

Several characteristics can be identified in DV participants' framing. When a conflict is involved, as in most instances of the first type, people with nice cars are juxtaposed with disadvantaged people. The former are typically presented as blameworthy, while the latter are meant to elicit sympathy. Participants achieve such framing first by naming the car brand or simply using *haoche* (nice car) to represent the target. The brands mentioned include Audi, BMW, Buick, Mercedes-Benz, Porsche, Land Rover, Maserati, Bentley, and Volvo. What makes the contrast more drastic is the emphasis participants place on the vulnerable identities of the other party, for example, age (elder, child) or job (parking lot attendant, security guard, delivery man, taxi driver). These labels often emphasise physical vulnerabilities associated with age, and also vulnerable social status brought by jobs that are temporary, badly paid, and physically demanding. In addition, DV participants mobilise Chinese netizens by highlighting aggressive actions the target engages in and/or the rude speech the target utters. For instance, words like 'insult', 'slap', 'beat up', 'break' (a body part), and 'gang up' are often used to describe what the target did to the other party, and the targets often utter curse words or insults such as 'you are inferior' and 'you worthless security guard'. Pictures and videos are also presented as evidence of the transgressions. With these rhetorical and technical devices, DV participants frame traffic conflicts as the rich bullying the weak, which moralises incidents and both parties involved, and mobilises more Chinese netizens to become DV participants.

DV participants also generalise the target as a questionable social group and the incident as a problematic social trend in their framing. Even though the initial DV participants sometimes refrain from directly associating the target with a social group in the original post, their binary framing tends to provoke such links to be drawn by other participants when they comment on and/or repost the original Weibo post. The fact that the targets are driving nice cars is often interpreted as an indication of the social group the targets belong to, such as government officials, rich people, *heishahui* (mafia), *baofahu* (nouveau riche), and *chaiqianhu* (the relocated)³. The participants then adopt such generalisations to make comments about certain problematic social trends. For

instance, shaming from DV participants commonly include statements like ‘in this society, if you have the money, you will rule’, ‘It seems he’s connected to the mafia. Otherwise how can he be so aggressive and audacious?’, and ‘They are definitely the relocated. So rude and vulgar! You are rich, so what?’. By associating the car brands to certain social groups, the Chinese DV participants voice their concerns, dissatisfaction, and anger about social problems, especially about the increasing gap between rich and poor (Jain-Chandra et al., 2018) and the consequences of such an increasing gap.

The absence of criticism against the police in participants’ framing is intriguing. As mentioned before, DV participants often frame their activities as a result of the unwillingness, ineffectiveness, and ineligibility of the police to deal with the offence (Trottier, 2019). However, in Chinese nice car DV cases, most participants tag the official Weibo accounts of local police or relevant institutions, informing them of the offence and demanding reactions, without criticising or implying that the police is incompetent. Official local police accounts usually respond promptly, promising that they are looking into the case, soliciting more information, or announcing the outcome of cases. The lack of negative framing of police is broadly indicative of the positive attitude Chinese citizens have towards the law enforcement (Wu et al., 2012).

Through the framing in their posts and comments, Chinese DV participants render nice cars meaningful when moralising the offence and shaming the target. Nice cars, sometimes even common vehicles, have been symbolic in Chinese society. Before the opening and reform, private cars were associated with ‘a bourgeois lifestyle’ (Zhang, 2017, p. 42) and passenger cars were only enjoyed by high government officials (Barme, 2002). Therefore, the word *gongche* has a connotation of privilege and political power originating from and lingering after that period. With the development of the car industry due to Deng’s policy, the private car ownership rose dramatically in the early 2000s, and the connotation of cars also changed to some degree (Barme, 2002). To own a car means to be able to live a modern, comfortable, and mobile life, which comes from and in turn indicates superior economic power. An imported and foreign car is the most visible symbol of modern and social status of its owner (Hooper, 2007), because in China, to own such a car requires resources beyond the means of an average salaried professional (Zhang, 2017). Therefore, nice cars have always been associated with social status and power in Chinese society. When people with different economic and social power interact and negotiate in streets, highways, and other traffic-related public spaces (Urry, 2000), this symbolic meaning is consolidated and amplified, which leads to the above-mentioned binary framing of the rich versus the vulnerable in Chinese netizens’ DV activities against people with nice cars.

‘Road boor busters’ in Russia

Individuals and groups across Russia have been engaging in social justice with the focus on a diverse set of issues, ranging from capturing migrants to exposing alleged paedophiles, and regulating road-traffic violations. Some of such vigilantes act as “entrepreneurs”, monetising acts of retaliation over perceived breaching of legal and moral norms by the targets (Favarel-Garrigues, 2019). Amid tightening control over citizens’ self-expression online, some forms of digitally mediated activism are encouraged and supported by the state in Russia (Gabdulhakov, 2018; Daucé et al., 2020). Since its creation in 2010, StopXam enjoyed both formal and informal endorsement by Russia’s political elite. Group members have personally met with state leadership and received presidential grants in support of their activities (Gabdulhakov, 2018). StopXam has been extensively covered in Russia’s traditional media, while respective framing of participants

has been inconsistent over time, ranging from full endorsement to intense scrutiny of the motives for participation (Gabdulhakov, 2020).

StopXam positions itself as a force that unlike the police is not afraid of approaching people in fancy cars with VIP licence plates and tinted windows. Moscow's StopXam is operating in a context where drivers with money and power seek ways to defy traffic laws by putting a *migalka* (ambulance/police siren) on top of their vehicles (Ioffe, 2011), sparking rampant irritation from fellow drivers already coping with some of the world's worst traffic (The Moscow Times, 2018). Thus, when participants retaliate against the owners of luxury vehicles, they are performing a certain class-struggle-like act, where the all-powerful people who are used to getting away with mischief appear to be approached by the fearless youth and brought to justice.

The selected ten most popular StopXam episodes from its Russophone YouTube channel range from five to nineteen million views and feature a diverse set of drivers in terms of their ethnicity and gender. Although the featured vehicles approached by StopXam range in their 'prestige' and value (from Soviet-era Ladas to a Lamborghinis), severe confrontation and physical fights between participants and targets in luxury vehicles are present in all selected episodes. Participants follow a persistent structure where several drivers are featured in a single video, while the central target is given more airtime and tend to inspire the episodes' catchy titles. In nine out of ten videos analysed, the central target owns an expensive vehicle; six of which feature VIP licence plates. Table 2 below provides a brief overview of selected videos in terms of their release date, number of views, and featured targets/vehicles.

As can be seen in the table, most popular StopXam episodes (five out of ten) take place in 2016, which is also the year when the 'movement' was shut down for the first time, based on the decision of the Ministry of Justice (NTV, 2016). StopXam was rehabilitated later in 2016, and shut down again in 2018 based on the decision of the Moscow City Court (Novayagazeta, 2018). As of 2019, the group continues its operation and regularly uploads new episodes on YouTube.

Based on the content analysis of selected episodes, several observations can be made in terms of participants' framing of the targets. In conversations that took place between participants and their targets, such themes as sexuality, perceived gender roles, female dependency on rich sponsors, and issues of national belonging came to the surface.

An episode titled 'The Day of the Car Guard', published on 11 July 2016, begins with a smiling StopXam participant gluing the group's sticker on a luxurious Mercedes, while telling the public that this act, in fact, is 'not bringing [him] any joy' (StopXam, 2016a). The central targets in the episode are several Russian middle-aged men, on a Mercedes-Benz Gelandewagen with VIP licence plates, escorting a Mercedes-Benz minibus. The men are evidently bodyguards protecting the boss' vehicle from receiving the infamous sticker. After several minutes of verbal argumentation, the sticker is placed on the windshield of the minibus, which escalates the conflict as the targets ask the participant to 'step aside' with them. To this, the participant responds 'I am not stepping aside with men, I have a traditional sexual orientation' (StopXam, 2016a). We observe a reinforcement of homophobic values by these vigilantes.

In the episode from 3 May 2018, titled 'A Muscovite Born and Bred', one of the participants states that 'all troubles are caused by women' and urges the female target to 'behave like a woman' (StopXam, 2018). In addition, the participant addresses the public 'who would want to marry such a woman?' and adds 'no one would trade a hamburger for you!' (StopXam, 2018). The viewers are reminded of the perceived gendered variations in female-like and non-female-like behaviours, while reinforcing the idea that all women anticipate successful marriage and should, therefore,

Table 2. Overview of selected StopXam episodes.^a

Episode title	Date published	Number of views	Main target's vehicle	Main target's descriptive markers
Tracksuit and AK-47	18 November 2014	19,576,592	Lexus with VIP licence plates	Caucasus males
Cutie Worldstar	29 June 2015	15,013,315	Kia SUV with VIP licence plates	Female
Chechen Derby	19 September 2016	11,600,414	Mercedes-Benz	Chechen male; sports figure in Russia
137 Crazy's Catcher	19 May 2014	7,628,649	Toyota SUV with VIP licence plates	Female
A Muscovite Born and Bred	03 May 2018	7,171,474	Mazda	Russian female; 'third-generation Muscovite'
Get a Shovel	26 January 2016	7,131,845	Audi with VIP licence plates	Russian male; the driver of an 'important boss'
Baseball Russian-Style	31 January 2016	6,941,704	Toyota SUV	Russian males
The Exorcist	21 March 2016	5,529,802	Porsche and Lamborghini with VIP licence plates	Russian female
Guest Star Davidych	04 February 2015	5,424,659	Toyota SUV	Russian males
The Day of the Car Guard	11 July 2016	5,094,554	Mercedes-Benz with VIP licence plates	Russian males; bodyguards

^aData related to the number of views last updated on 12 October 2019.

behave in a 'marketable' manner. The target is featured stating that she is a 'Muscovite born and bred' – a statement mocked by participants in the episode's title. Given Moscow's status as the capital and financial centre of Russia, the city attracts new residents, creating tensions between the 'original' Muscovites and the newcomers.

During the confrontation with a driver framed as a 'Chechen' in the episode titled 'Chechen Derby' published on 19 September 2016, participants assure the target that they are Chechens themselves, and, therefore, are not intimidated by him (StopXam, 2016b). Finally, the most popular StopXam episode, with nearly 20 million views is dated 14 November 2014 and is titled 'Tracksuit and AK 47'. After a brief confrontation with the 'Caucasus' drivers in a black Lexus, participants are aided by a stranger in a tracksuit – an outfit affiliated with the Russian working-class males in the periphery. The driver in the track suit (participants blurred his face in the video) begins to threaten targets in the Lexus with an AK47 machine gun and commands them to 'Get in the car and drive away!' (StopXam, 2014). This encounter illustrates several layers of frustrations on Moscow roads and in the Russian society at large, including the struggles between the rich and the working class, as well as tensions between Russians and people from the Caucasus. The episode also demonstrates that weapons can serve as an unbeatable argument in such confrontations.

‘Crap parking’ and the missing narrative in the West

[S]ocialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires. (Wright, 2004, p. 124)

In this study, the Anglophone context is understood as including the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia. In view of significant cultural and political differences between these countries, our aim here is not to account for the contours and content of an expansive category, but rather to treat their denunciatory practices as a broader counterpoint to the tendencies described in the Chinese and Russian contexts. Media discourse in this context is shaped by the normalisation of class stratification. The above quote exemplifies a comparative sense of support among middle- and working-class Americans of policies that exclusively benefit the wealthy. Recent political and economic discourse in these countries is characterised by the reframing of the wealthy as ‘job creators’ (Peck, 2014). These beliefs have recently culminated in articles in the press and digital platforms claiming that billionaires should not be labelled as such, due to potentially stigmatising and incendiary connotations (Cowen, 2019).

In terms of scrutiny and denunciation of owners of nice cars, there is a dearth of comparable mobilisation of tropes in the United States. It may be possible to locate some errant discussion about rich people and their vehicles, given the magnitude of digitally mediated content. However, when instances of scrutinising public spaces does locate such vehicles, it does not expand on the social significance of the drivers of nice cars, nor does such a potential conversation gain any traction beyond the immediate group or page in which it first appears. One approximation of the denunciation seen in China and Russia is the range of so-called ‘crap parking’ communities, which themselves are primarily UK and Australia-based. These include Facebook groups and pages where members publish photos of cars parked in a manner that cause offence. These groups tend to be localised: not only are they typically named after a city or town, but the central content (photographs of vehicles) are localised through licence plates (which are typically not concealed by the uploader), as well as when submissions include geolocation details. These groups do not discriminate in terms of vehicle. Rather, nice cars are featured prominently alongside inexpensive models in photos and in discussions that may follow.

These groups serve to make particular motorists visible to scrutiny and denunciation. While many photos are taken from inside another vehicle, others include a baby carriage in the frame, usually when a parked car obstructs a sidewalk. These communities do not identify exclusively as either pedestrians or motorists, with only one page referring to its members as drivers. Crap parking communities vary in terms of viability: while some pages and groups are scattered in their engagement, others are more enduring, and seem especially rooted in local cultural references (like the notoriety of particular supermarket parking lots), and disputes between members (over, among other issues, the appropriateness of photographing vehicles).

In posts where nice cars appear, it is common that there is little to no commentary, either from the original poster or from other community members. Given the sparse amount of user activity in some cases, it is difficult to attribute the lack of commentary to disinterest in class politics, or disinterest in the Facebook group. When users do comment, there may be an acknowledgement of the status of the vehicle, and some discussion of the kind of person who drives such a vehicle. The notion of entitlement is often attributed to these drivers, for instance, when a user states that ‘[I] easing a BMW doesn’t give you the right to take up two spaces! Park with consideration for others! It’s sheer arrogance to park like this’. Users will sometimes focus on the brand of car (primarily

upmarket brands such as Audi and BMW) as a talking point. In doing so they link some roadside conduct with the brand, such as speeding off, or taking up two parking spaces in order to prevent their car from being scratched. Although posts and comments are typically limited to a few words, there appears to be some awareness of class-based associations with nice cars. In the case of a photo of a Range Rover occupying two parking spots, the sole comment below reads: ‘So posh bastard, I expect lol’.

Based on the descriptions and user activity found on these groups and pages, it is clear that they are not spaces for discourse or denunciation over broader societal factors that shape or determine bad parking incidents with nice cars. Yet these data suggest a clear awareness of class distinctions in crap parking communities. Even in spaces with relatively low content, a BMW photographed may be met with one comment, and that one comment may acknowledge class-based associations with the car. In denouncing luxury vehicles parking badly, a link is reaffirmed between being able to afford such a car, and feeling entitled to violate traffic rules. No further political-economic conditions are called into question during these exchanges. There is a curious absence of further mobilisation, both in terms of (a) a more explicit discussions of ‘us’ (as a group, a collective) and ‘them’ (nice car owners as a firm socially relevant category, rather than reduced to brand), as well as (b) a call to action beyond photographing and uploading parking violations.

When these data are taken together and compared to Chinese and Russian contexts, the paucity and absence of certain patterns are striking. First, the framing of types of case/offender (c.f. Guo Meimei) is restricted to a vehicle brand, or a more generic descriptor. We may speculate that there is a lack of a coherent ‘them’ outgroup in user-led framing. Furthermore, participants and witnesses in crap parking communities are framed in terms of being ‘fed up’ with traffic laws, and are also localised. Yet in comparison to groups like StopXam (who frame themselves as activists), interactions with nice cars are routinised, such that no follow-up actions are necessary. There appears to be no significant distancing between targets of scrutiny and participants as well as their intended audience, many of whom can be presumed to be motorists (especially in the case of groups where grievances are based in terms of parking). Denunciations against nice cars are as likely to frame individuals as ‘idiots’, which situates and frames their offence in terms of the motorists’ personality and mental faculties, rather than in terms of sociological conditions. There appears to be no coherent set of references to articulate grievances beyond the scale of personal troubles (c.f. Mills, 1959).

Conclusion

This exploratory study is concerned with the confluence between two kinds of public space: road networks and mediated fora. Both are critically vital infrastructures that each enable important types of mobilities: the circulation of individuals and the circulation of opinions. Obstructions and offences on roadways can be deliberated through social media, and there may be the possibility of broader discussions about conflicts between different social groups in the case of ‘nice cars’.

In China, despite different types of transgressions in DV incidents, nice cars are often regarded as a symbol of the resources that people from the advantaged social stratum have. Through the binary framing of ‘the rich versus the vulnerable’ in DV incidents, Chinese netizens express their grievances about increasing economic disparity without tapping into the structural inequality in Chinese society. In Russia, traffic violations can be highly politicised (Nikiforov, in press). StopXam participants are addressing the pressing issues on the roads, which tend to bring other types of frustrations to the surface – while featuring a variety of drivers in terms of identity markers, and a variety of vehicles in terms of their price tags and prestige. While taking on police duties,

StopXam participants also frame themselves as a fundamentally different force from police, demonstrating that they are not afraid of approaching the elites. In doing so they position themselves as the embodiment of the ‘common-folk avengers’. However, in the Anglo-American context, such scrutiny and denunciations are relatively dispersed, and do not garner much traction or attention on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

Due to the distinct media and political environments we are reporting on, the comparability is in some way restricted. Therefore, the purpose of this article is not to pinpoint a feature in the media environment that influences how nice cars are made meaningful. Rather, we wish to account for a wide range of discursive mobilisations in response to class/stratum-based offences, as well as provide some indication as to how these mobilisations are both culturally situated and susceptible to political or technological change.

In addition to social media, the press can also play a significant role in DV incidents through framing. Given our focus on social media users, we did not include the journalistic framing of such cases, which should be discussed in detail in future research. We also wish to investigate cases where national press provides coverage of foreign incidents. Methodologically, we propose to follow up through interviews with participants in and/or targets of such interventions in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of their motives, experiences and opinions about these practices.


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ORCID iD

Qian Huang  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6322-419X>

Notes

1. Pronounced as ‘Stop Kham’. Orthography and translation used by the groups itself is preserved.
2. In Russia, a licence plate with a specific combination of letters and digits can be a status symbol. For more information, please see <https://www.rbth.com/lifestyle/327032-hidden-messages-of-russian-license>
3. *Chaiqianhu* has a very negative connotation in Chinese. It refers to people who suddenly get a large amount of money because they are compensated by the government to relocate, which makes them rich but still rude and uneducated.

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Author biographies

Qian Huang is a PhD candidate in the Department of Media and Communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her current research considers digital vigilantism on the Chinese Internet. Qian completed her master's study at The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Rashid Gabdulhakov is a PhD candidate in the Department of Media and Communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam. He is researching digital vigilantism and its manifestation in Russia and other former Soviet republics. Rashid holds a Master of Advanced Studies degree from the University of Geneva, Switzerland and a Master of Arts from the OSCE Academy, Kyrgyz Republic.

Daniel Trottier is an Associate Professor in the Department of Media and Communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam. His current research considers the use of digital media for the purposes of scrutiny, denunciation and shaming. Daniel completed a PhD in Sociology at Queen's University, Canada.