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Social Media and Social Class in China: How Social Media Accelerates Class Consolidation and Social Stratification(Based on Socio-economic Indicators)

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the development of Chinese social media platforms and corresponding socio-economic indicators. Applying Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and Fukuyama's concepts of social capital, this paper analyzes various social media platforms and their impact on mobility across social classes in China. Government regulations are highly involved in Chinese social media platforms. Through measuring education, consumption, income inequality, social mobility, and other related socio-economic indicators, this paper argues that the emergence of social media platforms revolutionizes the traditional social class structure and results in a unique social stratification in China. Social media platforms empower upper classes, middle classes, and working classes differently. This paper's central proposition is that the rise of social media blurs boundaries between middle and working classes, but strengthens the upper classes' distinctiveness and further consolidates their capital. The models applied in this paper advances our understanding of the rise of social media and its role in advocating for social mobility while also its role in facilitating class consolidation.

1. Introduction

Social media involves, not only exponential growth of the online community with active users, but also exchanging and trading information, goods, and skills (Heinrichs, 2013) via personal and commercial channels. The global growth of social media users numbers at 3.48 billion in 2019, up 9% year-on-year (Bullock, 2019) (also known as YOY).The exponential growth of internet users has sparked numerous social debates about the power of social media (Brezoiu, 2014), partially as it influences several sectors including the economy. In the debate about the rising influence of social media, China, having the largest amount of internet users, garners the most attention. More than half of the population of China (59.6%) are currently internet users (CNNIC, 2019). This is because the social media industry is providing an alternative economy in China, and as emerging markets develop, social media user's impact and change China's economic structure. Cases of Chinese social media platforms expanding globally shows that channels of cultural output have taken various forms and have engaged with more than 829 million internet users (CNNIC, 2019). By June 2019, China has run ahead of all nations in the world with the largest amount of internet users, with a growth of 3,584% from 2000 to 2019 (Internet World Stats, 2019).

Social media platforms allow companies to upsurge traditional media and forge relationships directly with internet users, or in other words, customers (Harvard Business Review, 2016). Well known and widely used social platforms in China are WeChat, Weibo, Zhihu, TikTok,

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TaoBao, and Red, among millions of social networking sites and mobile apps, the majority of which are integrated with e-commerce. E-commerce emerged through social media platforms and political intervention. In 2018, the online retail revenue reached CNY 9.0 trillion (USD 1.3 trillion) with a YOY of 23.9% (CNNIC, 2018, 2019). The revenue generated from sub-areas (rural areas, towns, and villages) e-commerce increased to CNY 1.4 trillion with a YOY of 30.7 % (2018 to 2019). The growth of e-commerce retail in sub-areas may still maintain at a higher rate than the general growth of e-commerce retail by taking account of the rural population and internet users (CNNIC, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019).

The growth of social media e-commerce has led to increased income among the Chinese middle and working classes. E-commerce opened up a massive consumption need from all over China, and government regulation also helped to boost the e-commerce industry. Social media has proven to be the most effective way for businesses to reach new audiences globally (Adweek, 2018). Digital technologies have not only created potent new social networks but also dramatically altered how culture works (Harvard Business Review, 2016) regardless of geographic limitations.

China's social media is local and fragmented and among those features, social networking (WeChat, QQ), microblogging (Weibo) and e-commerce (Taobao, Red, WeiPingHui) cover the majority of social media activities and are usually multifunctional. However, China's social media landscape was not open to all, and compared with other nations, Chinese social media has clear boundaries on what people can and cannot do on these platforms. The Chinese government censorship restricts certain activities, especially if they are deemed to be political in nature. The Chinese government demands government-issued identification cards from all buyers of mobile phone numbers (The Guardian, 2010), and this action made users' online activity traceable. For example, Wechat users are required to register their phone numbers to use the social media application. The Chinese government also intervenes with internet access by blocking foreign internet sites, such as Google, which has helped foster the growth of homegrown internet services (Wu, 2018) like Baidu, the country's primary search engine.

Two key developments in China's information and internet infrastructure have boosted the growth of the social media industry. In 2006, the National Informatization Development Strategy (2006–2020) received official approval and the government distributed it to the public promoting internet companies and information and communications technology (ICT) (Chinese Government News, 2006). ICT is regarded as a transition to a new era, from manufacturing to a knowledge-based economy. In 2013, the Chinese government also launched a "Broadband China" strategy (China Communications, 2013) in order to significantly improve the country's information infrastructure. During this time, the mobile internet gave rise to social media users and consequently gave rise to the tech sector. The mobile internet is the world's largest digitally-connected middle-income class (Ma, 2017). As the number of internet users increases tremendously year to year, the social media industry has accumulated billions of domestic users.

Social media created information; including, social, cultural, and capital streams, is unique in China. Social media eliminates the geographic limitations and lowers barriers to access business, educational and social opportunities. Thus, Chinese social media brings not merely economic but also social transformation. The Chinese social media industry is becoming a hub of social studies, social behaviors, and psychological testing domestically. However, a limited number of available research was performed to study the social media industry from an economic perspective. By measuring socioeconomic indicators, this research argues that the emergence of social media platforms revolutionizes the traditional social class structure and forms a unique social stratification in China.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study uses concepts derived from culture and social capital from Bourdieu (1984; 1986) and Fukuyama (1996) and expands it into the Chinese economic context. Thus, this paper tries to combine tangible derivation from culture capital and social capital to illustrate to what extent social media platforms in China affect social class in either class stratification or class structure. Bourdieu's sociological theory (Bourdieu, 1986) has been put to work in theorizing and empirically studying structural inequality and the reproduction and conversion of capital in Chinese society (Mu, 2018). Zhang (Zhang and Kramarae, 2014) found that social media in China, with the rise of capitalism, offers an alternative channel for citizens to engage in global cultural discourses and actions. Bourdieu (1986) defines cultural capital existences in three forms: embodied state, objectified state, and institutionalized state. Corresponding examples are the long-lasting disposition of the individual's mind and body (embodied state), objects and instruments in physical form (objectified state), and academic credentials (institutionalized state) (Bourdieu, 1986). This study measures education level as a type of cultural capital, implementing his framework of "The education system reproduces all the more perfectly the structure of the distribution of cultural capital among classes will also be considered in this research (Bourdieu, 1986)". Throsby (1999) points out that cultural capital should be specificity the interpretation of culture as a set of activities, thus cultural capital represents the "cultural sector" of the economy. Bourdieu's ideology on social class structure, the dominant and the dominated, ultimately sits at the heart of power distribution which is inscribed in the division of labor. (Bourdieu 1984). Experience of power is found to shape self-concept, which affects everyday consumption practices (Henry, 2005). Consumption practices can be found directly from the e-commerce app as well as an indirect implementation of advisements in social networking app. The growth of social media e-commerce has led to increased income among the Chinese middle and working classes (Mu, 2018). But what constitutes middle-income class in China is harder to determine with accuracy. As Du (2014) suggests, the use of terms such as "lower classes" "middle class" and "upper class" as delineations of social classes are inadequate in the case of China because China's political and economic structure is a form of state capitalism. Further, these terms are conceits borne out of a capitalist economic model. This classification of social classes is not an ideal model for China because of its unique single-party political regime, the Communist Party. Alternative social classifications in China have also been offered, one of which divides Chinese society into eight different tiers: (tier 1) the head honchos; (tier 2) the bigwigs; (tier 3) the powerbrokers; (tier 4) the privileged; (tier 5) the very comfortable; (tier 6) the squeezed; (tier 7) the marginalized; and (tier 8) the underclass (Lu, 2014). Such a classification, however, leads to ambiguities because the tiers conflate occupation ("head honcho") with other forms or levels of class status ("the comfortable," "the privileged"). Therefore, despite the limitations of using the terms lower, middle, and upper class, these classifications are useful because income is a direct indicator associated with various classes (Li, 2017). Following Yang's framework, in this research paper, we classified social class based on Gross National Income Per Capita (GNI/Per Capita).

Social media may provide one outlet for the promulgation of particular ideals through advertisements and conversations, and it becomes a new arena for peer competition (Christopher). E-commerce operators in China are constantly building interest-oriented social e-commerce to reach the first-line consumer, and this theory applies in Nielsen data on monthly active users of social e-commerce increased 439% in 2018, almost 10 times the growth of second-hand e-commerce (46.4%), cross-border e-commerce (38.5%) and integrated e-commerce (21.9%) (Nielsen, 2018). This extraordinary increase in consumption on e-commerce is because third- and fourth-tier cities still prefer to trust recommendations by acquaintances and group-purchasing platforms, and up to 66% of consumers have bought products recommended by relatives, friends or colleagues (Nielsen, 2018). Even more online

social networks have become a major platform for the Chinese to gather information and to make friends with like-minded individuals (Asur, 2011), an alternative form of cultural and social capital. According to the 43rd CNNIC report, by December 2018, age 10 to 39 take over 67.8% of entire internet users in China, age 20 -29 composed up to 26.8% to overall internet users (CNNIC, 2019). Active users now serve as very effective and prolific innovators of culture (Harvard Business Review, 2016).

Social Media has become a powerful tool in the arsenal of marketers, entrepreneurs, advertisers, and public relations professionals (S. and Hendricks, 2013). Social media, bringing values beyond interaction and entertainment (S. and Hendricks, 2013), have changed the way society communicates, learns, and conducts with peers. The frequent moving in China, as the society communicates and learns, would dramatically change the structure of our local social relationships fundamentally. The positive role of social capital could be moderated by societal residential mobility (Li, 2017). The geographic location will be considered as to what extent social media decrease social mobility. Social mobility may bring a moderating effect on the role of social capital in affecting people's lives. Chinese social media brings not merely money capital and cultural capital but also social capital.

Fukuyama (2000) points out that social capital constitutes the cultural component of modern societies. Social capital is a byproduct of religion, tradition, shared historical experience, and other cultural norms. This study analyzes the influence that social media had on social and economic factors. This work is underpinned by Fukuyami's theoretical framework. Fukuyama (1995) ties social capital with capitalism, the creation of prosperity, and embraces the idea that capitalism erodes social capital but also regenerates it. Fukuyama's definition of social exchange and how capital is regenerated is also applicable to how social media platforms generate and regenerate capital as users are accumulated.

The astonishing growth of consumer spending in China has contrasted with Chinese cultural on debt. China still exhibits the characteristics of a cash society (Efendioglu, 2004). As Efendioglu examines that the cash society characteristics adhere to a way of thinking that users wary of using credit (credit card) to buy goods on the Internet (Efendioglu, 2004). Based on the National Bureau of Statistics report, Chinese official data authority, China's per capita consumer spending increased by 6.2% year on year in real terms to reach 19,853 yuan (2,877 U.S. dollars) in 2018. In 2018, retail sales rose 6.9% year on year approximately 38.1 trillion yuan. The growth rate of retail sales grew faster in rural areas (10.1 %) than the growth in urban regions (8.8 %). Retail sales, a main gauge of consumption, rose 9% from one year earlier. Online retail sales in 2018 rose 24% to 9 trillion yuan. In 2018, consumption remained the major growth driver, contributing 76.2% to GDP growth (Nielsen, 2018). Therefore, the adoption of loan ratio and debt ratio will be considered as another measurement.

Fukuyama's definition of social capital is that social capital a rational concept based on forms of social exchange (Fukuyama, 2001). The concept of a social capital system can be applied to Chinese cultural contexts but must be adjusted to consider state intervention, market fragmentation, organizational formation, and other factors. The vulnerability of social capital in mobile contexts may make social capital become a stronger predictor of success in mobile contexts than in less mobile contexts in China (Li, 2017). Shi (2016) argues that social media can serve as an important empowerment tool for forming "imagined micro-communities and connecting their users around a wider range of common concerns" (DeLisle et al., 2016). Lien also indicates that Chinese is skeptical of information derived from news sources and advertising and thus recommendation from social networking connections (friends, family, and key opinion leaders) has more credibility (Lien, 2014). Wu indicates that the emergence of China's indigenous social media outlets lends social media sites (especially microblogging) as a powerful tool for Chinese users to organize their voices and protest against unjust social issues or policy practices (Wu & Alaimo 2018). The awareness of a state's routine practice of

silencing traditional news outlets rather than a sizable body of individual and anonymous social media users, GAO claims that Chinese users are more likely to trust social media rumors (Gao 2012). Resources can be accrued by accessing social network connections, which is enduring, and consequently, cultural capital might be earned through social capital (Bourdieu, 1986).
This paper combines tangible derivation from culture capital and social capital to illustrate to what extent social media platforms in China affect social classes in either class stratification or class structure.

3. Methods

This paper will introduce two sets of data for comparison, one is an official source, another is a survey. The CNNIC (China Internet Network Information Center) annual report from 2010 to 2019 provides detailed socio-demographic variables and socioeconomic variables: gender, location, age, education, app usage, time distribution on apps, and income distribution, etc. Other sources of the official data set are from accredited agencies, for example, Wordbank, IMF (International Monetary Fund), National Bureau of Statistics of China, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, etc.
The survey, which expands on the theoretical framework and determinant factors of social classes will be compared to official data trends. Two major questions from the data will be examined: 1) To what extent does social media influence different social groups based on selected socioeconomic indicators; 2) among selected socioeconomic indicators, which factors accelerate or consolidate different social groups. Two hypotheses are also held to test in this survey. Hypothesis 1: various categorical social media apps all impact differently positively on users' social network web offline. Hypothesis 2: Education level does not positively influence income earned from online To test the proposed model and data from the official statistical report, I conducted an online survey drawn from online survey panels created by Tencent and distributed randomly from December 13th to 24th 2019. The final selected sample included 596 respondents from diverse demographic backgrounds in China at different ages, genders, income, and education levels.

4. Results

The preliminary findings of official data are that there are trends of significantly less dependence on education and geographic location for income. Chinese consumption and earnings on social media has increased tremendously, whereas loan ratio and other debts remain steady (CNNIC, 2018, 2019). The middle classes are expanding, and lower classes are shrinking. Upper classes have significant advantages over the middle classes. The gap between the two is further consolidating the upper classes. In comparison, the survey was covering questions including how social media impact their life and how social media affects the social network at a microlevel. Aiming to achieve a representative sample, I eliminated online respondents who shared the same IP addresses, in total of 596 respondents. Among all respondents, 23.3% were identifying themselves as women, and 76.7% were identifying as men. 27.4% of all respondents had received some college education and above. 65.3% of respondents spend more than 3 hours on social media apps daily. In terms of social networking APP usage, approximately 84.6% of the respondents are using social media apps on a daily basis, and 10.1% use social media apps every week. 43.3% of respondents (258 respondents) claims that more than 50% of their social network comes from or build on social media apps. Other preliminary analyses of the data showed that 83.1% of respondents mainly use social media to maintain their social networking. 51.5 % of the respondents explore social media apps because of an increased chance of meeting new friends. 48.7% of respondents think that social media can broaden their perspectives of understanding society. Up to 13.3% of respondents generate more than 50% of income derived on social media. Followed the same categorical

social media apps conducted in CNNIC, the survey collected shows some variation towards the official data. As shown in Figure 1.1, various social media apps do not all significantly impact on users' social network web offline? 3.9 % of the variation of social media help on social network offline is explained by a total of 15 categorical apps (the intercept is dating apps), and gender. Adjusted R square penalizes each categorical apps add to the calculation. Microblogging apps, e-commerce apps, streaming apps, knowledge-sharing apps, and several social apps shows its insignificance (p-value <0.01 is significant). This paper also considers the income distribution derived from online from the highest level of education received. CNNIC report (Figure 1.5,1.6,1.7) indicates that relatively less variation compared to the survey (Figure 1.2). The extreme side education that one receive either master level (graduate degree including a master, Ph.D. or post-Ph.D., etc.) (p-value <0.01)or middle school (middle school and below including elementary school) (p-value <0.01) make a significance on social media income in both number and portion of overall earnings.

5. Further Application

The emergence of social media platforms revolutionizes the traditional social class structure and results in a unique social stratification in China. Middle-class and working-class boundaries blur due to the elimination of geographic locations, the lack of restriction on education level, and age group diversity. However, upper classes still remain distinctive and further consolidated because of capital derivation. This paper advances our understanding of the rise of social media in China and to what extent social media helps to facilitate class consolidation.The display of conducting the survey in terms of measuring social media, rather than only analyze governmental data served well in future studies.Given the public demand for transparency and openness in the social networking industry in China, language barriers play a critical role for western scholars to understand the mechanism underneath rapidly developed industry. Moreover, the theoretical frameworks applied in China do not fit comprehensively on Chinese uniquely formed state governmental capitalism. The future study on Chinese social media could also expand to the gray area of several aspects of the social media industry, which remains unclear. Content analyses on the prevalence of particular social media apps could also be studied to what extent it changes users' behaviors. On a related note, e-commerce and its related industries like logistics (express delivery), AI advertising, or substitute goods. All those topics significantly impact Chinese national culture and could result in various movements, either online or offline. This paper also illuminated future policies making on how to decrease inequality on the social media industry, especially in various social classes.

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Appendix

Figure 1.1

Regression Statistics	
Multiple R	0.199644269
R Square	0.039857834
Adjusted R Square	0.015026571
Standard Error	0.292432865
Observations	596

ANOVA

	df	*SS*	*MS*	*F*	*Significance F*
Regression	15	2.059010246	0.13726735	1.605147289	0.067619624
Residual	580	49.59984881	0.085516981		
Total	595	51.65885906			

	Coefficients	*Standard Error*	*t Stat*	*P-value*	*Lower 95%*	*Upper 95%*	*Lower 95.0%*	*Upper 95.0%*
Intercept	0.581144328	0.044872986	12.95087254	7.09606E-34	0.493010977	0.669277678	0.493010977	0.669277678
Gender (Male =1, Female	-0.058988023	0.029972134	-1.968095523	0.049532964	-0.117855168	-0.000120878	-0.117855168	-0.000120878
D1 Microblogging Apps	0.027690506	0.03058003	0.905509429	0.365571561	-0.032370585	0.087751597	-0.032370585	0.087751597
D2 Social Apps	0.046632872	0.034008202	1.371224285	0.170835339	-0.020161362	0.113427106	-0.020161362	0.113427106
D3 E-commerce Apps	0.017627767	0.033353997	0.52850539	0.597350773	-0.047881568	0.083137102	-0.047881568	0.083137102
D4 Streaming Apps	-0.004323572	0.033136579	-0.130477315	0.896234041	-0.069405885	0.060758742	-0.069405885	0.060758742
D5 Knowledge Apps	0.03260525	0.032204013	1.01245924	0.311740698	-0.030645444	0.095855944	-0.030645444	0.095855944
D6 News Apps	-0.066892593	0.032415761	-2.063582398	0.039501658	-0.130559173	-0.003226013	-0.130559173	-0.003226013
D7 Photos Apps	-0.022167061	0.029913925	-0.741028143	0.458976281	-0.08091988	0.036585759	-0.08091988	0.036585759
D8 Payment Apps	0.009286203	0.035988948	0.258029293	0.796475829	-0.06139834	0.079970746	-0.06139834	0.079970746
D9 Food Ordering Apps	0.037102983	0.033223328	1.116775035	0.264552944	-0.02814971	0.102355676	-0.02814971	0.102355676
D10 Gaming Apps	-0.008650681	0.031343115	-0.275999406	0.782646834	-0.070210519	0.052909157	-0.070210519	0.052909157
D11 Travel Apps	-0.050555296	0.025098848	-2.014247629	0.044444695	-0.099851002	-0.001259589	-0.099851002	-0.001259589
D12 Commerical Apps	0.02994131	0.034986861	0.855787275	0.39246885	-0.038775072	0.098657693	-0.038775072	0.098657693
D13 Music Apps	0.00438083	0.035302831	0.124092882	0.901284727	-0.064956136	0.073717796	-0.064956136	0.073717796
D14 Drives Apps	0.005673331	0.031912552	0.177777429	0.858959845	-0.057004915	0.068351578	-0.057004915	0.068351578

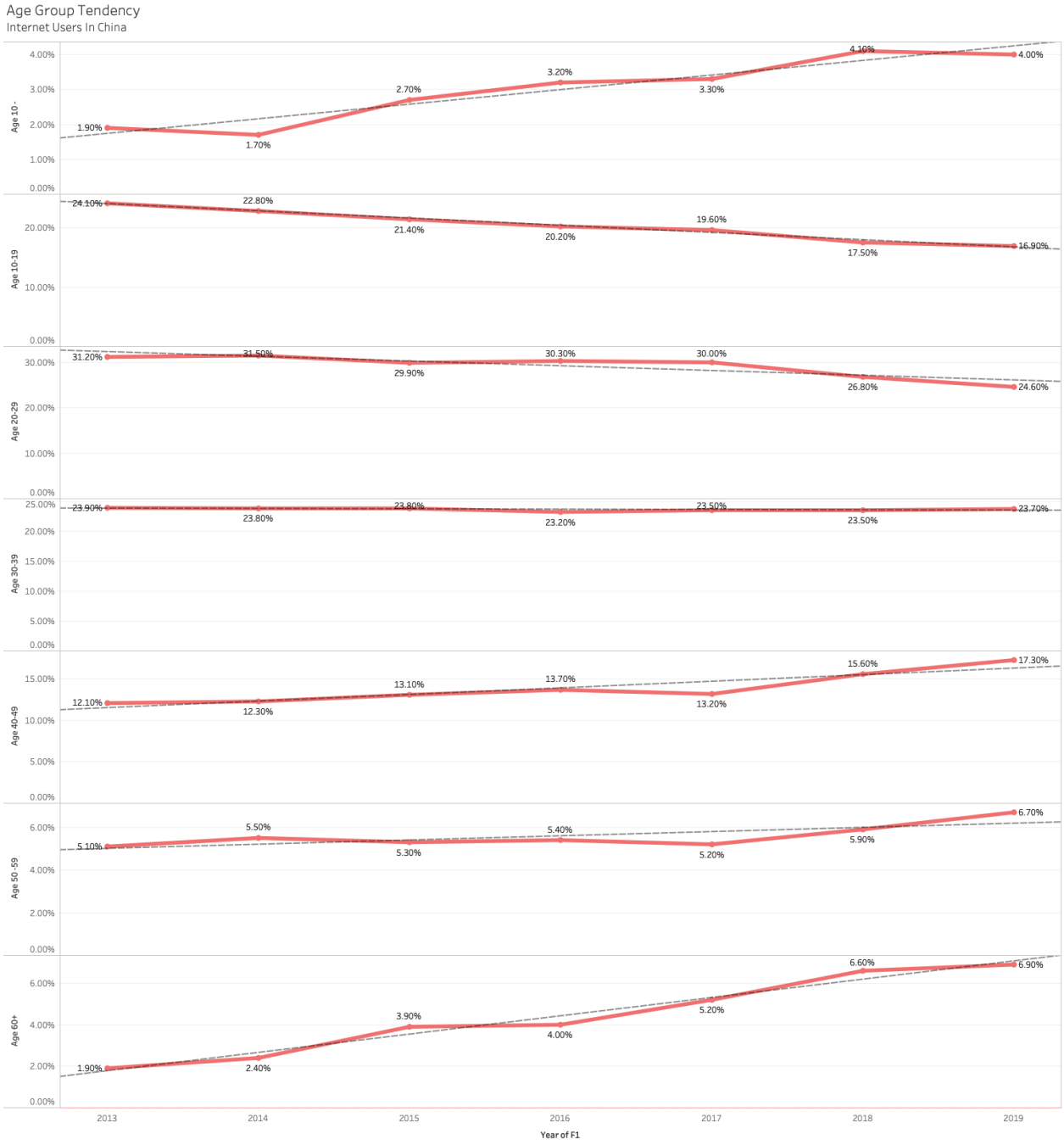
Figure 1.2

ANOVA

	df	*SS*	*MS*	*F*	*Significance F*
Regression	3	19602549	6534182.9	3.2429316	0.021710031
Residual	592	1.193E+09	2014900		
Total	595	1.212E+09			

	Coefficients	*tandard Erro*	*t Stat*	*P-value*	*Lower 95%*	*Upper 95%*	*ower 95.0%*	*Upper 95.0%*
Intercept	743.3265896	107.92044	6.8877277	1.452E-11	531.3730863	955.28009	531.37309	955.2800929
Master or above	790.1234104	273.15279	2.892606	0.003961	253.6569929	1326.5898	253.65699	1326.589828
Undergraduate	-2.600635397	164.40115	-0.015819	0.9873842	-325.4810804	320.27981	-325.4811	320.2798096
High School/ College	-26.1092819	139.27109	-0.187471	0.8513556	-299.6348151	247.41625	-299.6348	247.4162513

Figure 1.3

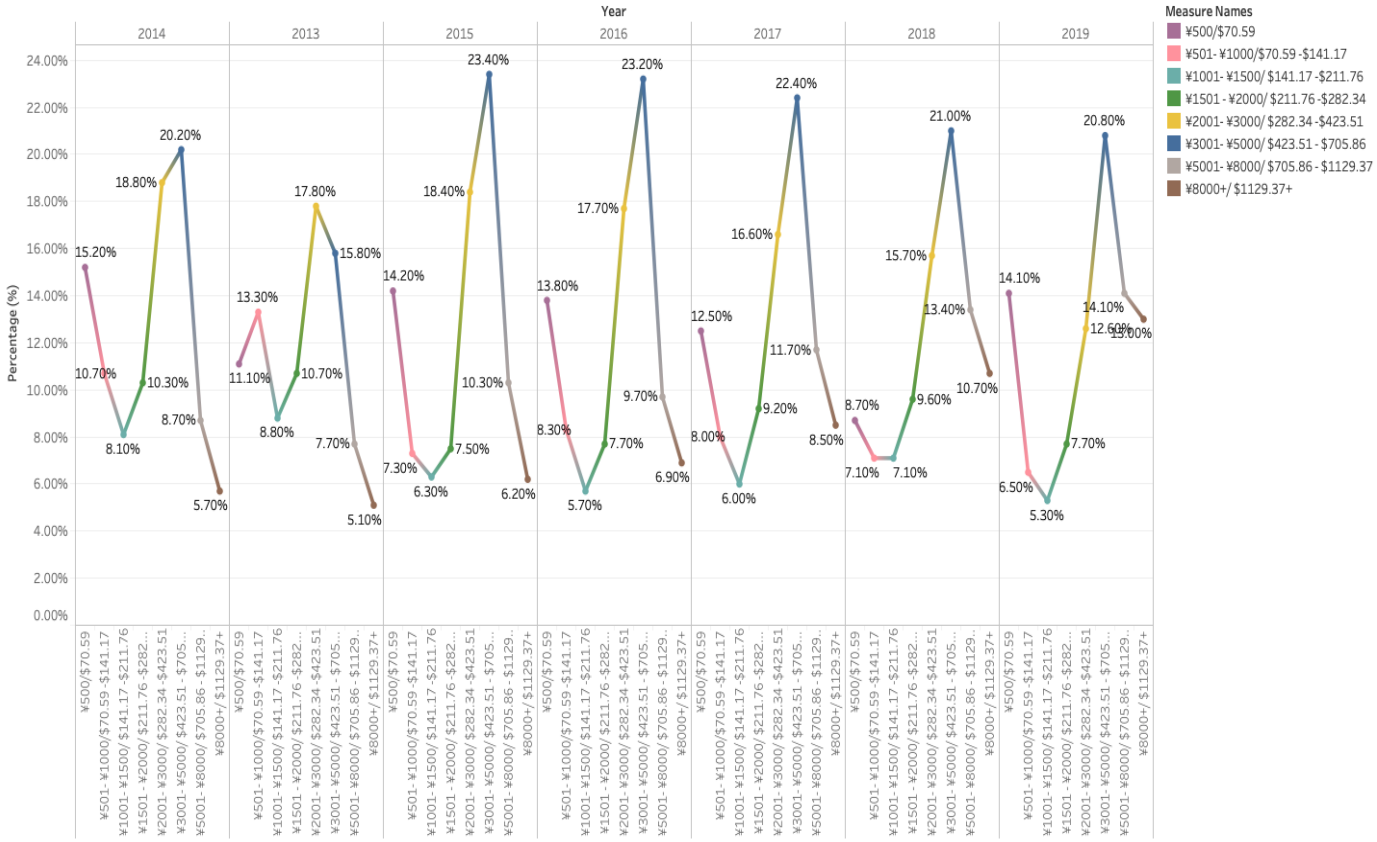


The trends of sum of Age 10 -, sum of Age 10-19, sum of Age 20-29, sum of Age 30-39, sum of Age 40-49, sum of Age 50 -59 and sum of Age 60+ for F1 Year.

Figure 1.4

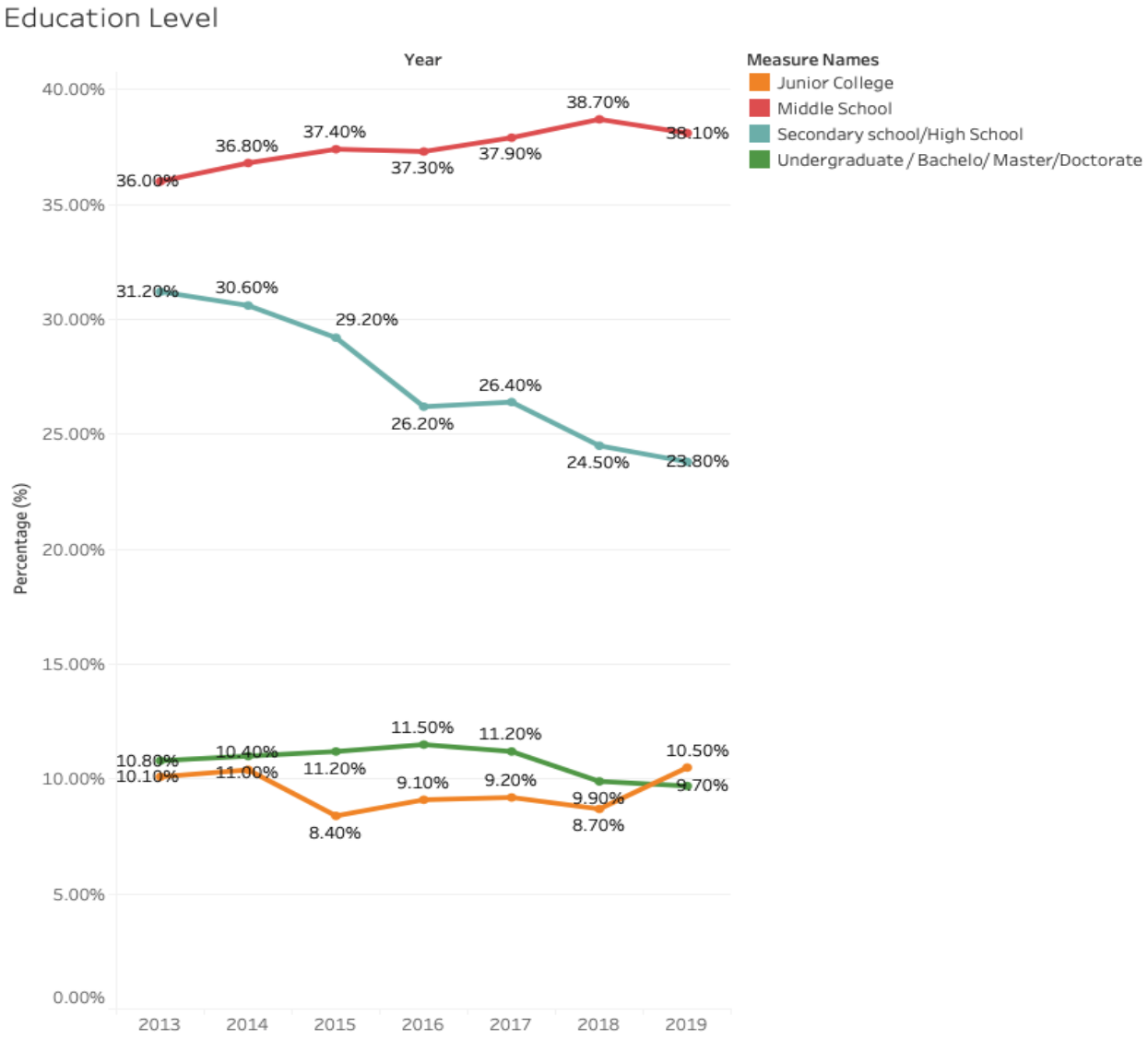
Income Distribution

Source: China Internet Network Information Center (2013-2019)



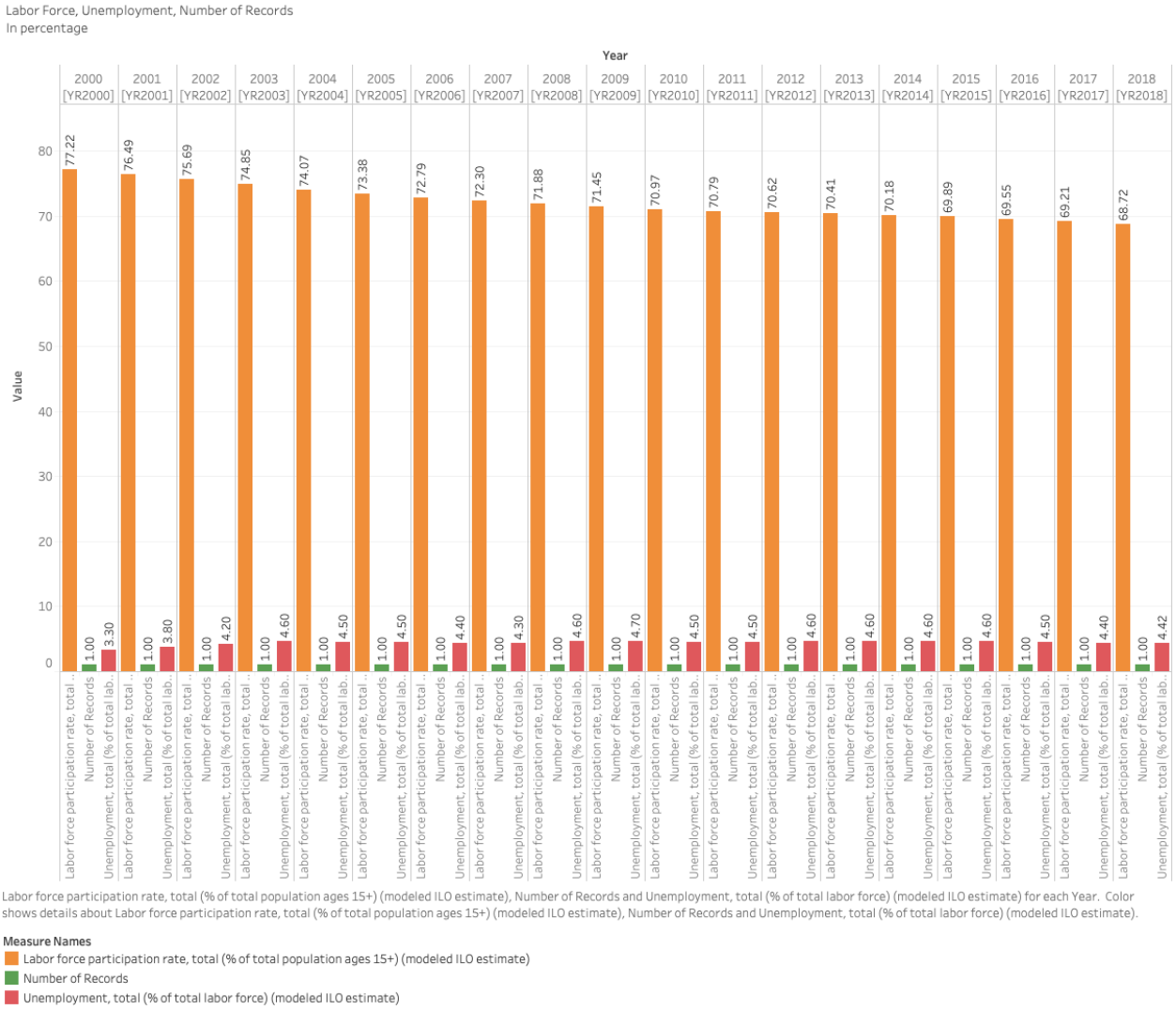
The trends of ¥500/$70.59, ¥501-¥1000/$70.59-$141.17, ¥1001-¥1500/$141.17-$211.76, ¥1501-¥2000/$211.76-$282.34, ¥2001-¥3000/$282.34-$423.51, ¥3001-¥5000/$423.51-$705.86, ¥5001-¥8000/$705.86-$1129.37 and ¥8000+/$1129.37+ for Year. Color shows details about ¥500/$70.59, ¥501-¥1000/$70.59-$141.17, ¥1001-¥1500/$141.17-$211.76, ¥1501-¥2000/$211.76-$282.34, ¥2001-¥3000/$282.34-$423.51, ¥3001-¥5000/$423.51-$705.86, ¥5001-¥8000/$705.86-$1129.37 and ¥8000+/$1129.37+. Details are shown for ¥500/$70.59, ¥501-¥1000/$70.59-$141.17, ¥1001-¥1500/$141.17-$211.76, ¥1501-¥2000/$211.76-$282.34, ¥2001-¥3000/$282.34-$423.51, ¥3001-¥5000/$423.51-$705.86, ¥5001-¥8000/$705.86-$1129.37 and ¥8000+/$1129.37+.

Figure 1.5



The trends of Junior College, Middle School, Secondary school/High School and Undergraduate / Bachelo/ Master/Doctorate for Year. Color shows details about Junior College, Middle School, Secondary school/High School and Undergraduate / Bachelo/ Master/Doctorate. Details are shown for Year.

Figure 1.6

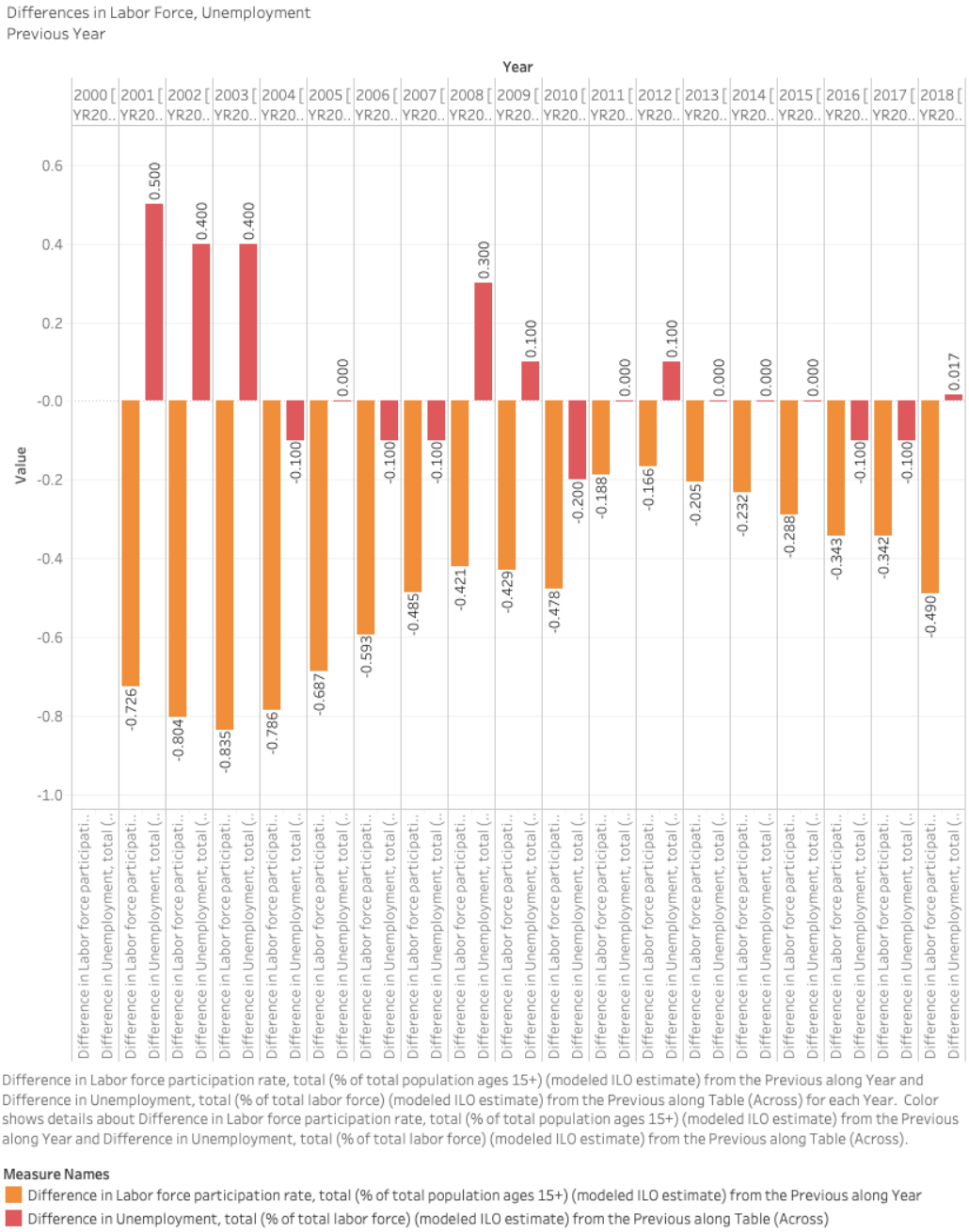


Labor force participation rate, total (% of total population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate), Number of Records and Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate) for each Year. Color shows details about Labor force participation rate, total (% of total population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate), Number of Records and Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate).

Measure Names

- Labor force participation rate, total (% of total population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate)
- Number of Records
- Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate)

Figure 1.7



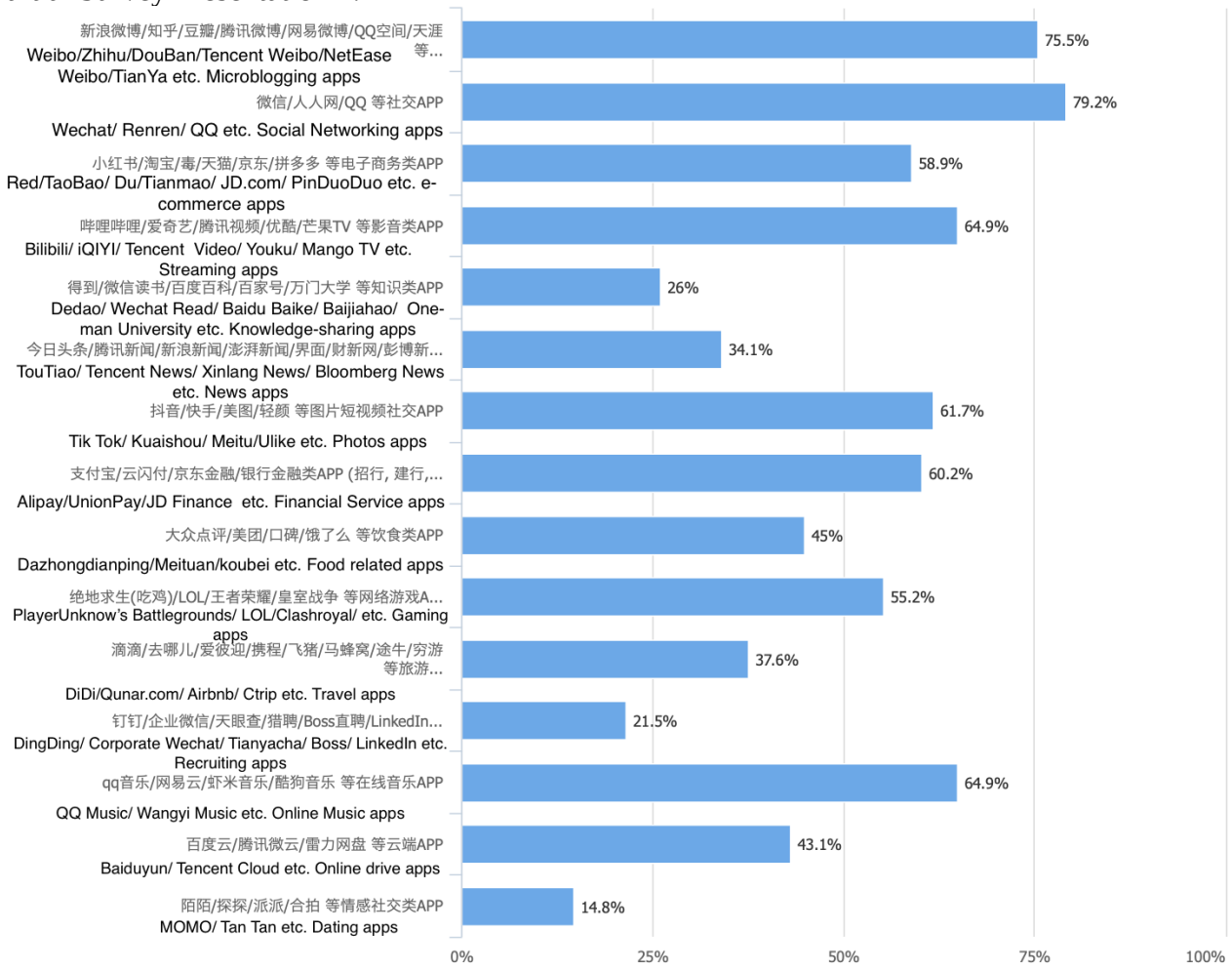
Difference in Labor force participation rate, total (% of total population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate) from the Previous along Year and Difference in Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate) from the Previous along Table (Across) for each Year. Color shows details about Difference in Labor force participation rate, total (% of total population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate) from the Previous along Year and Difference in Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate) from the Previous along Table (Across).

Measure Names

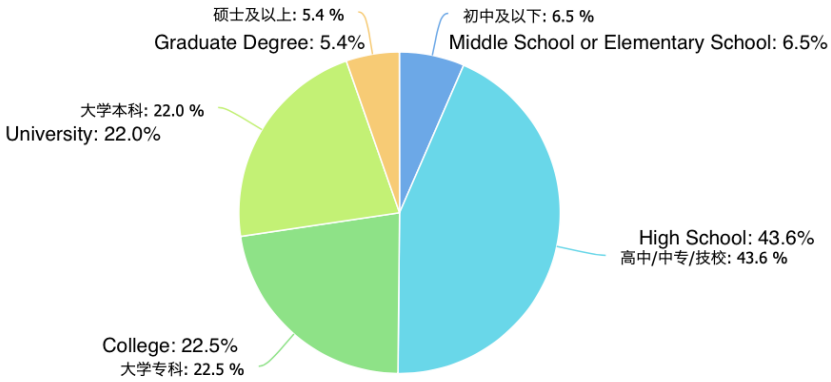
Difference in Labor force participation rate, total (% of total population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate) from the Previous along Year

Difference in Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate) from the Previous along Table (Across)

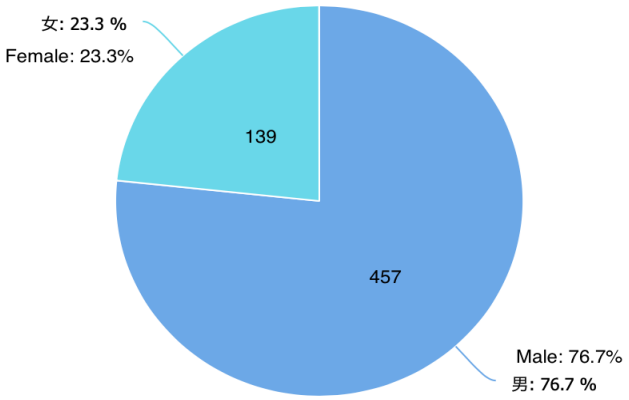
Partial Survey Presentation 2.1



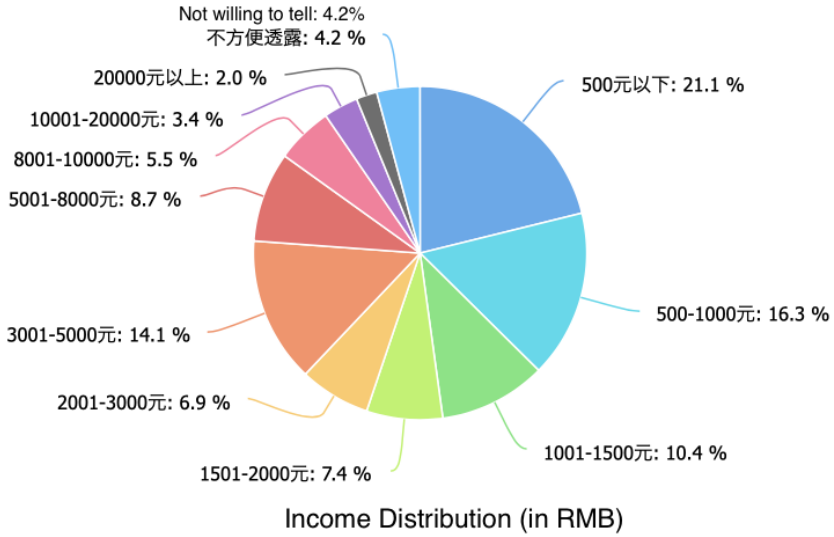
Partial Survey Presentation 2.2



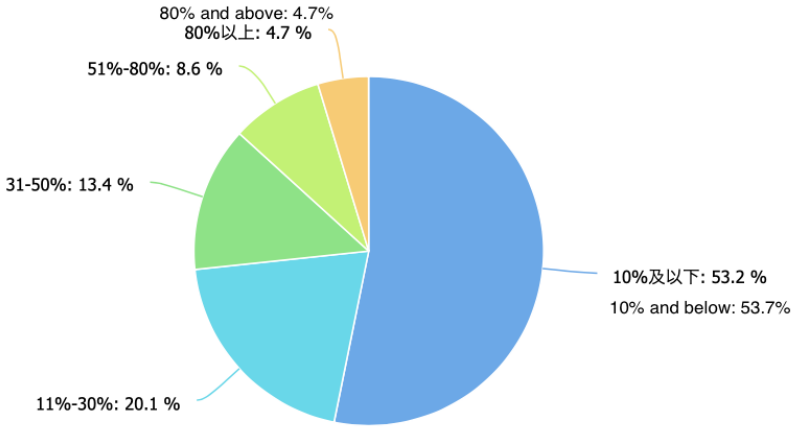
Partial Survey Presentation 2.3



Partial Survey Presentation 2.4

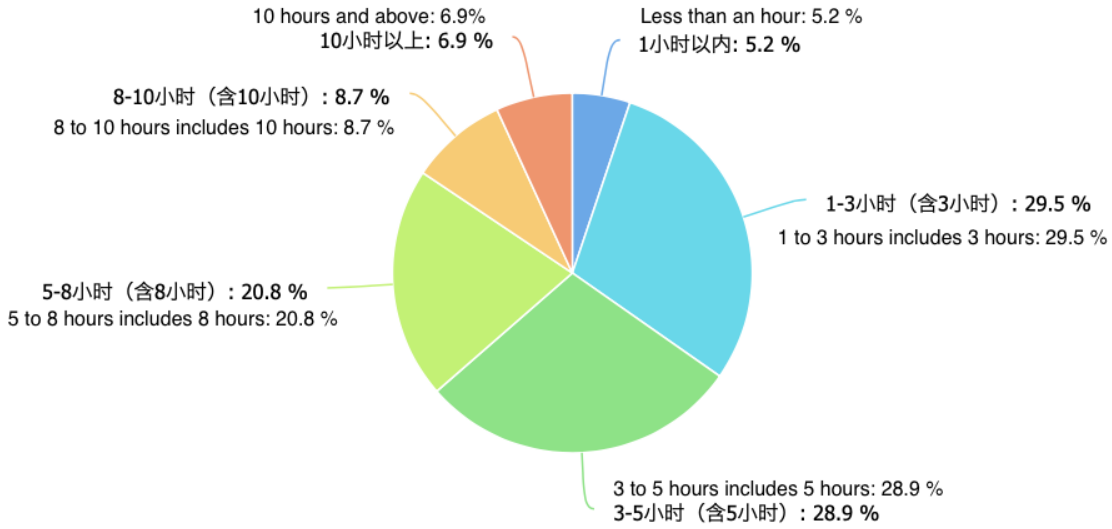


Partial Survey Presentation 2.5



Percentage of Income Derived from Social Media

Partial Survey Presentation 2.6



Hour Distribution per Day on Social Media