

Social Media in Online Advocacy and Identity Negotiation for China's LGBTQ+ Community

Abstract

This paper examines the importance of social media in online advocacy and negotiation of identity for the Chinese Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ+¹) community. It draws upon several notable case studies, including Qiu Bai's legal campaign against the Ministry of Education, Sina Weibo's attempted sanitisation of homosexual content, and the removal of the super topic² '#les', to discuss the crucial role of social media in disseminating information for online activism, and supporting LGBTQ+ individuals in understanding and negotiating their sexual identities. While social media in China is not as 'free' as their western counterparts (e.g. Twitter or Facebook), and susceptible to state censorship, this paper concludes that social media is vital because it provides an alternative space for the LGBTQ+ community to share information and knowledge, provide community engagement and support, resulting in greater publicity and visibility for sexual minorities in China. Thus, this paper will be presented in the *Identity and Online Advocacy* stream, as it explores how social media is leveraged by the Chinese LGBTQ+ community in online activism and identity negotiation.

¹ Many different initialisms can, and are, used, with LGBT being (arguably) the most common. For this paper, LGBTQ+ will be used.

² A super topic is like an online discussion group. Users form communities through creating and posting in 'megathreads' under a particular hashtag (Mullin, 2019).

China is home to the world's largest Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ+) cohort of approximately 40 to 70 million people (Wang et al., 2020). While homosexuality has been legal in China since 1997, there is still a lack of policy and legislation in place to protect sexual minorities, and they still face stigmatisation and discrimination in public and private spheres (Yang, 2018; United Nations Development Programme, 2016; Wang et al., 2020). Social media has provided an alternative space to the strictly controlled state media, enabling sexual minorities to challenge the dominant discourse through online advocacy, share information and knowledge, and promote community engagement and support (Liao, 2019). This paper will examine the important of social media in the negotiation of identity and online advocacy for the LGBTQ+ community in China.

Social media is an important tool for online advocacy in China for the LGBTQ+ community. Although homosexuality was removed as a mental disorder in 2001 from the *Chinese Classification of Medical Disorder 3rd Edition*, public opinion of the LGBTQ+ community is still largely negative (Yang, 2018). This was further exacerbated by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of P. R. China's (SAPPRFT) 2016 ban of all LGBT depiction on television (Yang, 2018). Public prejudice, caused by a lack of visibility and misinformation about LGBTQ+ people, is still a major obstacle for LGBTQ+ advocacy in China. As a result, the LGBTQ+ community has increasingly turned to social media as a tool of empowerment and change. Drawing on Pettigrew's (1998, as cited in Wu et al., 2017) intergroup contact theory, information and knowledge about a stigmatised group is crucial in reducing prejudice and changing public opinion. For the Chinese LGBTQ+ community, social media can accelerate the dissemination of information through a vast network of internet users—data from China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) indicated that approximately 70% of 620 million internet users also used social media—combating the harmful narrative of state-owned media (Yang, 2018). For example, a broadcast by China Central Television (CCTV) focused only on HIV and AIDS prevention for LGBTQ+ people; the public may easily confuse and associate the LGBTQ+ community with being HIV-positive and AIDS-affected (Wu et al., 2017). In contrast, the Internet and social media provide a more nuanced portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community. In the case of Qiu Bai, a lesbian university student who sued the Ministry of Education over its poor regulation of psychology textbooks indicating homosexuality as a 'mental disorder' (Yang, 2018). Social media played a crucial role in increasing the visibility of the case. Bai created a public WeChat—a popular multi-purpose messaging app—account (秋白的自由野 or Qiu Bai's Free-field) documenting her campaign (Yang, 2018). Activities and events posted to the account generated many online discussions and offline activities among different communities, including LGBTQ+ individuals, university students, and the public; Bai's efforts also garnered state-owned media coverage

(Yang, 2018). Bai's followers, which included hundreds of university students around the country, not only posted messages of support, but some also 'came out' publicly under the encouragement of her campaign, a reflection of how social media is leveraged by sexual minorities in a non-confrontational way to advocate for their legal rights (Yang, 2018). Similarly, in 2016, Ms. Ou Jiayong raised a lawsuit against Jinan University Press regarding their psychology textbook, wherein being gay was labelled a 'mental disorder' (Wee, 2020). Her case garnered 26.7 million views on Weibo and several traditional media news covered the hearing (Wee, 2020). Both Qiu Bai and Ou Jiayong's cases demonstrate how the affordance of social media to disseminate information and incite social action makes it crucial in online advocacy in China. Through social media, Bai was able to promote discussion about LGBTQ+ issues, organise supporters to broadcast the campaign, and encourage both LGBTQ+ and public participation, something which is not easily done without social media (for example, they cannot easily street protest, as this requires government approval) (Yang, 2018). While the government in China remains at an impasse around LGBTQ+ issues, the case of Qiu Bai and Ou Jiayong demonstrate how social media plays a crucial role in online advocacy, increasing the visibility of the LGBTQ+ community to the public.

Social media plays an important role in destigmatising homosexuality in China. Its ability to facilitate immediate dissemination and exchange of information is crucial in reducing the stigmatisation of the Chinese LGBTQ+ community. Drawing on Pettigrew's (1998, as cited in Wu et al., 2017) intergroup contact theory, bias and prejudice can be reduced through mediated contact, such as that between the in-groupers (heterosexual) and the out-groupers (LGBTQ+) via social media. The ability for in-groupers to interact with people they otherwise would not have—among the LGBTQ+ population in China, most choose to remain closeted—fosters a greater sense of empathy and understanding (Wu et al., 2017). Furthermore, the Chinese government still maintains a conservative stance on LGBTQ+ issues; the dissemination of content related to homosexuality is restricted, and often correlated with pornography (Liao, 2019). For example, in 2018, Weibo removed content related to homosexuality in an attempt to limit 'sexually suggestive and violent content' and create a 'clear and harmonious' environment (Hernández & Zou, 2018; Liao, 2019). The move provoked a flood of online backlash, with users rallying under #IAmGay#³, and the topic page 'I Am Gay' garnered 60 million views and 60,000 shares (Liao, 2019). Users condemned Weibo's decision as a form of censorship that disingenuously correlated homosexuality with perversion or deviance (Liao, 2019). Under #IAmGay#, LGBTQ+ Weibo users posted their experiences, which were often deeply personal, specific, and emotional; these stories formed

³ Weibo requires a double hashtag format (#topic#, #IAmGay#) because there is no space between Chinese characters (Liao, 2019). This is the original format used in Liao's 2019 paper.

a different image of the LGBTQ+ community, challenging the typical, oversimplified portrayal in Chinese mainstream media. For example, Weibo user 'Elwin' posted: "#IAmGay# I do not break the law; I do not commit a crime. I work hard, love my life, contribute what I can to society. I love to make friends with people identified with different genders and sexualities. I love my parents and my family. I am a decent, moral human being. I am normal, a biological male. I like men. I am gay (Liao, 2019, p. 2321)." Stories such as these, posted to social media, humanise the LGBTQ+ community, emphasising dignity and a desire to be treated as a 'normal' human being. Such storytelling can reduce the stigma against gay people by portraying homosexuality as something that is intrinsic, echoing Swank and Riaz's (2010, as cited in Wu et al., 2017) study wherein tolerance increased if homosexuality was presented as something inherent (i.e. caused by genes/nature) rather than a choice (Wu et al., 2017). While social media in China is not as free or liberal as their western counterparts (e.g. Twitter, Facebook), it is still an important platform upon which homosexuality is given greater visibility, and common misconceptions are dispelled, thus reducing the stigmatisation of homosexuality within China's general public.

Social media is an important tool for Chinese people in the LGBTQ+ community in negotiating their identity. Media in China is strictly controlled by the government (e.g. what is acceptable to show or broadcast) (Hu & Li, 2018). Information that could help an LGBTQ+ individual understand their sexual identity is not easily accessible (Hu & Li, 2018). As a result, social media has become a crucial aspect in understanding identity for sexual minorities; the openness, interactivity, and anonymity facilitate information sharing and community support. For example, many gay men come to understand and accept their sexuality after accessing positive texts on the Internet (Yang, 2018). Social media is also crucial in negotiating identity. Turning to Goffman's (1959, as cited in Marwick, 2013) theory of identity as a performance—that is, a person presents themselves differently based on the who they are with (audience) and where they are (context)—postmodern identity practices can be observed in the social media practices of the Chinese LGBTQ+ community. For example, social media is a common space for the anonymous 'coming out' of LGBTQ+ people (Yang, 2018). The anonymity of social media enables them to announce their sexual identity—thereby increasing public visibility of the LGBTQ+ community—while remaining closeted to family and friends (only 15% of LGBTQ+ people come out to their families) (United Nations Development Programme, 2016). LGBTQ+ people can explore and develop their sexual identity, where offline they might be required to present as heterosexual, or otherwise limit the expression of their ideal sexual identity (Craig & McInroy, 2014). Furthermore, for many Chinese people, there is a strong emphasis on family honour and continuing the family line (Wang et al., 2020). A study by Wang et al. (2020) found that the greatest source of pressure for LGBTQ+ people was from family;

a likely cause being the expectation for children to uphold filial piety (i.e. a duty to one's parents) through heterosexual marriage and procreation. Coming out as LGBTQ+ can involve friction between the parent and child, garnering feelings of disappointment, shame, or anger. As a result, social media is a crucial tool for LGBTQ+ people to connect with community, receiving support and information. This is evidenced in the 2019 Sina Weibo case. In 2019, the popular Chinese microblogging site blocked access to the online discussion group (super topic) #les (abbreviation of lesbian) (Shepherd, 2019). The super topic had a following of 140,000 members and a total of 46 million views. Although #les had a modest following, when compared to the overall 204 million users, for many LGBTQ+ people, such online groups are a source of support and information, particularly for those who may be located in small, conservative areas (Shepherd, 2019; Hu et al., 2018). The removal of #les was criticised by Yanzi Peng, director of LGBT Rights Advocacy China: "Imagine someone who begins to identify as a lesbian, and needs help from internet. They can't find the information anymore from #les. That's why it's important. It's not just a hashtag that was deleted. It's a whole topic (Mullin, 2019, para. 6)." In a media climate where information about being LGBTQ+ is extremely limited, social media communities, such as #les, are a valuable source of knowledge for a questioning individual.

The Chinese LGBTQ+ community leverage social media to increase publicity and visibility of sexual minorities. Social media facilitates the dissemination information and knowledge to a wide network, challenging the dominant discourse perpetuated by state-owned media. It is also a valuable tool in negotiating identity; LGBTQ+ people are able to access positive texts about sexual identity and are able to engage in a community that is usually hidden from society due to stigma and discrimination. Thus, social media is crucial in identity negotiation and online advocacy for the LGBTQ+ community in China.

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