

# The Secrets of “Tree Hole”: Analysis of Online Interpersonal Interaction Based on @Tree Hole Account in Weibo

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## ABSTRACT

With the development of digital technology, online communication presents a trend of diversification and complication, making it critical to explore different forms of online interactions. This research explored “Tree Hole” phenomenon on Chinese social media with specific sample: @树洞 (Shu Dong, hereinafter referred to @Tree Hole), examining the psychological motivations of users who send private messages to @Tree Hole, as well as the features of this type of online interaction. Drawing on the theory of self-disclosure, dramaturgy, weak-tie, the study argued that individuals mainly take “Tree Hole” accounts as the safe field to release emotions through disclosing highly sensitive information, instead of establish relationships with each other. Thus, this interaction in @Tree Hole is a weak-tie without enough intimacy and closeness. The study showed how special online interaction environment and social reality have affected and shaped online interaction.

**Keywords:** *“Tree Hole” accounts; online interaction; psychological motivation.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of “Tree Hole” implies a place for secrets, deriving from The Emperor’s Donkey Ear, a famous western mythology. This story talks about a king named Labhraí Loingseach who has a pair of donkey ears. He held this secret and threatened his barber that if the barber revealed this thing to others, he would be beheaded. The barber had nobody to pour out so he went to the forest and told this secret to a tree hole. Therefore, the tree hole gradually has the meaning of the place buried secrets. With the development of the Internet and media technology, social media has gradually infiltrated into our lives and provided greater convenience for individuals’ self-expression and interpersonal communication. Online “Tree Hole” account has become the main platform for individuals to confide in secrets, due to its anonymity, few restriction and rapid release. This study focuses on “Tree Hole” account on the Internet in Chinese context, and explores features of this unique phenomenon that attract many individuals to share their personal lives with strangers.

The development of “Tree Hole” phenomenon in China has gone through several stages, and different research have different ways of dividing [1][2]. On the whole, “Tree Hole” originated from the social media websites that were popular among the universities, such as Renren and BBS, in which students expressed their opinions and conveyed emotions to each other anonymously. It was all the rage soon and attracted more people in addition to students. Subsequently, “Tree Hole” appeared on Weibo, a social micro blog platform that is popular in China just like Twitter in western countries. At first, “Tree Hole” still relied on the official accounts of universities, receiving and publishing anonymous letters. Meanwhile, “Tree Hole” accounts that were operated by individuals have gradually increased, which expand the audiences. These different accounts provide rich and diverse contents. For example, the accounts like @Tree Hole and @衣锦夜行的燕公子 (Yi Jin Ye Xing De Yan Gong Zi) focus on individuals’ emotional life, another kind of accounts like @PITD 亚洲虐待博士组织 (PITD Nue Dai Bo Shi Zu Zhi), @办公室吐槽君 (Ban Gong Shi Tu Cao Jun) and @本硕博吐槽君 (Ben Shuo Bo Tu Cao Jun) pay attention to specific groups and their lives. By receiving private messages from every users of

Weibo, the operators of these accounts collect and select information and post on their home pages. Through this operating model, "Tree Hole" accounts have accumulated a certain number of fans.

With the popularity of mobile devices as well as the emergence of various new social platforms, "Tree Hole" online has further expanded influence and aroused the interest and attention of sociology, communication and other fields. In China, the existing research on "Tree Hole" accounts mainly carry out from analyzing the development, content and influence of this phenomenon. Studies mostly choose "Tree Hole" accounts on Weibo as research objects, and much attention is paid to "Tree Hole" accounts that belonging to deceased people. The account, @走饭 (Zou Fan) is the representative of this kind. Its user committed suicide due to depression and the blogs she posted during her lifetime became the "Tree Hole" for many people who also suffer from depression to gather and communication with each other. Through big data analysis, several research explore the comments in the homepage of @走饭(Zou Fan) features from the features of expression like language, time and emotional characteristics [3-6], in order to provide early warning and intervention support [4-5], as well as other social services [7] for suicide.

Other studies pay attention to the anonymity of "Tree Hole" accounts, which is the most important feature that attracts individuals to participate in. However, anonymity may also bring negative effects such as false content, which need stricter checking [2][8]. In addition to the sense of security and freedom brought by anonymity, individuals' psychological needs about speaking and expressing [9-10] as well as looking for resonate and support from others [11] are the practical reasons that generate and promote online "Tree Hole". However, little research has been done on how individuals use "Tree Hole" to reveal information and why they have this practice. Thus, this study is designed to shed light on the conditions that determine this online interaction.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review contains two parts: Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) as research area and Weibo as research platform.

### 2.1. Computer Mediated Communication

Communication is the unique practice for human beings, through which individuals build relationships between each other. In general, individuals make use of verbal and non-verbal signals to express and exchange ideas and emotions, establishing interactions that connect and influence each other [12]. In the digital age, much attention has been paid to Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). According to The 47th China Statistical Report on Internet Development [13], China

has 989 million netizens in 2020, including 986 million netizens using mobile phones. Internet and social media are deeply integrated into Chinese lives [14]. Domestic and western research on CMC have gradually increased. Some studies showed that the difference between CMC and traditional face-to-face (FTF) communication lies in the absence of bodies[15]. Individuals disseminate information through media platforms from which interactions are generated [16]. CMC is capable to overcome the obstacles of time and space, achieving the goal of interacting with anyone at every moment [17], as well as connecting with others [18]. Therefore, individuals with the common interests in specific events or celebrities gather and form countless virtual communities[19], looking for emotional support, social belonging and the need came from social capital [20]. Studies based on Twitter and Facebook also state that social platforms can help individuals conduct different types of interactions online. So, individuals who are less satisfied with FTF communication, or have difficulty in FTF communication because of shyness, social anxiety and the lack of social skill view CMC as a functional substitute to get affinity and satisfaction [21]. Social media is helpful for the infinite expansion of our social contacts, and CMC is an important force to promote social change, stimulate economic growth and create new culture, profoundly affecting the construction of society [22].

On the other hand, however, the negative influences of CMC also arouse attention. As[23] pointed out that the Internet is actually a real virtuality space, it is difficult to maintain close relationships online [16], and so most individuals are just incidental audiences [24]. Moreover, CMC actually brings isolation and negative emotions such as loneliness and depression, which enlarge the distance among individuals, and between people and society [25]). In some cases, individuals are even addicted to the Internet, triggering erosion of social cohesion [18]. Domestic scholars like[12] examined the impact of CMC in Chinese context and reported that CMC filters out non-verbal clues and is not as timely as FTF communication, which may cause slander and deception. Further research should analyze the complex influence of CMC on individuals as well as the whole society from a more comprehensive perspective, and provide specific cases from different cultural backgrounds.

### 2.2. Weibo

Weibo [26] was established in 2009. It has gradually become an attractive media platform with wide users through 10 years of development. According to Weibo 2020 User Development Report, Weibo has 551 million active users monthly and 224 million active users daily. Among users, the post-90s accounted for 48% and the post-00s accounted for 30%, who are the main force on

the Internet. Weibo is quite functional; users can post text, pictures, videos and other types of content on their homepages. In addition, the special functions like Hot Search List (热搜榜), Super Topic Community (超级话题社区) and other columns satisfy users' demand of information acquisition and emotional expression. Research on Weibo mainly focus on communication, sociology and economics field. Using Twitter as a reference, studies confirmed that Weibo facilitates self-expression and interactivity, leading to more frequent contributions and longer stay on social media [14]. And self-present has gradually become the center of online practice[27][20]. Chen[28] investigated the rituals and mechanisms for individuals' interaction in Weibo, indicating that this new type of social media enables individuals to express more specific and clearer thereby forming various interaction styles. There are other studies examined the construction and function of Weibo, reporting that there are two main functions: the acquisition and release of information as well as the social interaction [29]. This interaction mechanism certainly has influence on self-identity, group psychology and social structure [30], which echoes previous research. Further research is needed to determine the full impact of this media platform.

### **3. RESEARCH QUESTION AND RESEARCH OBJECT**

The following study chooses @Tree Hole account in Weibo as research object, exploring "Tree Hole" phenomenon in Chinese background. The major question is why individuals use online "Tree Hole" account to reveal their secrets? In order to answer this question, the content and function of @Tree Hole needed to be explored first. Moreover, the psychological motivations and demands of contributors also need to be studied. A small number of research has been done on "Tree Hole" before. Thus, this study tries to shed light on why individuals reveal themselves to online "Tree Hole" from sociology and examine the characteristics of this type of online interpersonal interaction, thereby investigating the significant changes of the society, culture and values reflected from "Tree Hole".

For this research, I collected, sorted, counted and analyzed data about @Tree Hole account from March 1, 2020 and 26 May 2021. @Tree Hole account was created on January 10, 2019, with a total number of 556 million fans and 7,917 blogs (as of May 20, 2021). @Tree Hole account is highly active so it has a certain accumulation of fans, can be used as the representative sample for observing the "Tree Hole" phenomenon. Within the target time period, there are a total of 1535 blogs selected from contributors' private messages, monthly distribution as: 250 in March 2020, 152 in April 2020, 149 in May 2020, 132 in June 2020, 101 in July 2020, 144 in August 2020, 108 in September 2020, 106 in October 2020, 83 in

November 2020, 79 in December 2020, 84 in January 2021, 68 in February 2021, 79 in March 2021.

## **4. RESEARCH FINDINGS**

According to data analysis, the number of blogs posted in @Tree Hole is relatively large, showing a declining trend over time. However, the amount of discussions, reposts and likes under each blog is gradually increasing. For example, in March 2020, the repost of a single blog mostly is 0, and the comments are below 50, and the likes are between 100-200. While in August 2020, the data increased significantly, for the reposts of a single blog maintain at 200 or more, the comments are between 200-300, and the likes are more than 500. By March 2021, the data become steady, the reposts of a single blog are higher than 500, the comments are below 500, and the likes are more than 900. The process represented that the contents of @Tree Hole account are more appealing that attract more people participate in the interaction with others.

### **4.1. Form**

How do people submit messages to @Tree Hole? Analyzing from the data, we can see that individuals make use of the function of Private Message in Weibo to send text messages to the operator of @Tree Hole directly. Anyone can send messages to @Tree Hole no matter whether users follow this account or not. Then, the operator selects some messages and post on the homepage of @Tree Hole. In most cases, contributors request anonymity to protect privacy and they avoid sending photos or videos that may have risks of uncover their true identities, and the operator takes screenshots of private messages without contributors' nickname and avatar, which is beneficial to protect individual's privacy. This mode can provide contributors a sense of protection and boundary that make them freer and more unrestrained to reveal their lives.

Another feature of the form is the way operator posts these private messages. As we mentioned before, the operator of @Tree Hole post the screenshots of private messages, which means he/she do not make any modification of the original contents. Normally, the operator would design a title for each post, and the title is a short summary which points out the central idea or problem of certain private message. The title is quite general without the subjective view from the operator, for example "What do I do to copy with this situation?" In addition, the operator never participates in the discussions following each post. Therefore, @Tree Hole offers an objective and emotionless field that anyone is free to speak without worrying the restriction and judgment from the operator.

## 4.2. Content

Analyzing the data from @Tree Hole, we can see that the submissions are related to family, marriage, friendship, work and other aspects about daily life. As the operator said in the first blog: this is a mysterious place where you can share secrets anonymously, and I will keep it secret for you (14:20, January 10, 2019). Individuals can share everything about themselves or others without limitation. The majority of these are about how to deal with negative emotions engendered during different types of interaction with others. Basically, the content of @Tree Hole can be divided into five parts. First is surrounding affection between lovers and among marriage, which accounts for 81.8% (1257), the largest proportion of the content. For example: should I break up when there are conflicts in relationship? (11:51, August 9, 2020) Next is about relationship with parents, brothers and other relatives, accounting for 11.9% (183). Such as: what should I do if my mother always belittles everything I do? (19:55, February 11, 2021) The number of messages about relationship and interaction with friends, classmates and roommates is about 3.6% (56). For instance, How to deal with friends' fluctuating attitudes? (23:12, December 24, 2020) There are 2.9% (46) of blogs asking for help about some specific issues: I'm not interested in learning, what should I do to change this attitude? (23:44, August 11, 2020), and the last category is 1.8% (29) complaining about jobs and coworkers: how to get along with colleagues? (11:57, August 21, 2020).

Through careful analysis of the content, we can find that most contributors have troubles in relationships with mate, parent, friend and other people that trigger negative emotion. Some posts certainly arouse strong resonance and spark heated discussion among audiences of @Tree Hole. Here I select a few blogs with relatively more comments and likes to reflect the hot spots of public concern. One blog was posted in May 23, 17:06, and it talked about "my girlfriend likes to use emoji while I don't like it at all. Is there some problems with my aesthetics?" He posted the specific emoji that his girlfriend liked to use. This blog has 4186 likes and 946 comments and most comments expressed their favorite to this emoji, which can reflect people's positive attitude toward emoji in a certain extent. Another blog described a mental affair of a married woman which posted in 23:56, September 9, 2020. There are 6408 likes and 1715 comments below this blog and the majority of comments showed the attitude of condemnation, representing the Chinese culture tradition that attaches great importance to loyalty and morality. Another blog talked about the similar event that a man cheated and his girlfriend was confused what to do (15:58, November 25, 2020). This blog has 3177 likes and 2610 comments, and the attitude of comments resonates with previous blog. In summary, the public are more interested in love stories like affairs,

which may reflect their curious about other's most private and intimate information.

## 5. DISCUSSION

From data analysis, several features can be concluded from individuals' messages contributions to "Tree Hole" account in order to explore their motivations deeply.

### 5.1. Safe Digital Environment

Online interactions have become increasingly central in our daily lives. Individuals enjoy spending time on social media with friends or strangers. Studies indicated that some individuals envision social media as a utopia where they can overcome confines facing in real world [21]. There is no doubt that the cyberspace provides a comfortable and free field compared with real world for individuals to carry out different practices. Accordingly, participating in interaction and sharing information are the basic activities of online practice[20-21]. In the context of "Tree Hole" account, it has supplied a relatively more private and nonthreatening environment. First, it guarantees individuals' anonymity that send messages to @Tree Hole. The operator of @Tree Hole strictly keep the information about the accounts of various Weibo users who send private message to @Tree Hole, which gives them a great sense of closeness and security. Due to this critical feature, individuals are much likely to share significant amounts of sensitive information that are difficult to express in face-to-face communication with others. Second, @Tree Hole has provided a special platform that gathering strangers who are willing to give advises and participate in the discussion. In social medias, individuals choose anyone as disclosure recipients to divulge information [31]. They even engage in greater self-disclosure with strangers [32]. In the homepage of @Tree Hole, individuals can disclose information about themselves to others who are not in normal social circles and may never meet in person. In addition, these onlookers rarely repost blogs from @Tree Hole to their personal homepages. The average number of repost in each blog is around 100-300, and the highest is almost 500 pieces. The activity of forwarding blogs is actually breaking the boundary, therefore the smaller number of reposts, and the more secure of the information in this platform. Individuals are much likely to create "intimacy" with others without concerning about the leakage of information.

### 5.2. Private Topics

What are individuals express and talk about in @Tree Hole? As the study mentioned before, individuals share almost everything about their lives. One important theme is related to some unspeakable secrets. First kind is about cheating. For example, "I have fallen in love with a married man, what should I do?" (22:00, March 20, 2021) "My husband has an affair, and we have a child. Should I

divorce or not?” (23:01, October, 2020) Another kind is some relationships that violate social morals and ethics. Such as “I have sex with my nephew.” (15:32, August 11, 2020) “I fell in love with my cousin.” (15:57, November 16, 2020) The third kind talks about sexual life. For instance, “I want my boyfriend to learn some new skills about sex” (15:30, April 28, 2020) “I like to have sex with boyfriend in public space such as the small room in fast food restaurant.” (15:47, April 13, 2020) The last kind concerning sexual orientation: I am homosexual and my parent does not understand and accept this fact. (11:45, July 28, 2020) The personal information is very sensitive and intimate, especially in Chinese society. Deeply influenced by Chinese traditional culture and thoughts like Confucianism, Chinese people are very conservative and strictly obey rules [33]. Accordingly, they are reserved about discussing highly private information like sex with others. Considering this specific cultural bound and difference, they turn to Internet arena to uncover secrets. This provides a channel for introverted nation to express intimacy, in which individuals are able to disclose more information about themselves from the breadth and depth [10], as well as maintain privacy and regulate boundary effectively [34].

Another significant theme regarding the social changes and reality. There are enormous profound changes about economy, policy, culture and other aspects that can be reflected through lives of normal people. For example, the characteristic of the patriarchal society. One blog released in 11:24, March 29, 2021 said that the parents of husband prefer boys to girls, while the wife was pregnant with a girl, leading to conflicts. The similar message uploaded in 15:27, June 5, 2020 described that the boyfriend strongly against girlfriend's idea that the child can bear his/her mother's surname. Another aspect is females are not willing to get married causing opposition from others (23:11, January 25, 2021). This kind of contradiction mirrors the confrontation between individuals and the traditional patriarchy, representing the rise of new ideas and new power. Moreover, some blogs are regard to the changes about policy and government control. The most typical issue is about the second child. “I'm 19 and my parent wants a second child that brings me complicated feelings.” (22:20, February 12, 2021) With the liberalization of the family planning policy, many people have another choice about their family composition. This new phenomenon also triggers contradictions and causes cognitive changes to individuals, which reflected in complains in @Tree Hole.

### **5.3. Unbalanced Gender Proportion**

Previous research has examined gender differences in interaction with technological support through social networking or texting. According to Weibo 2020 User Development Report, female users account for 54.6% while male users account for 45.4%, meaning women are

much inclined to spend time on social media and participate in various online activities[14], which confirmed that women are more likely to provide help and information to others through Weibo. Although there is no need to indicate gender when individual sends messages to @Tree Hole, it is difficult to identity the gender of the contributor from some expressions. However, for the majority of blogs, several key words can be utilized to identity the gender, such as girlfriend, boyfriend, husband, wife, and some specific descriptions that related to certain gender. From the contexts of blogs in @Tree Hole, it is found that most of the individuals who send private messages are female, roughly accounts for 96%. The current research resonates with previous research that females are the main users for “Tree Hole” accounts. Gender differences are also reflected in the topics they choose to reveal online. It has been discussed that females tend to uncover more highly sensitive information [35], which is echoed by current study that women express their feelings about very intimate information like sex life openly. In addition, information about child and romantic partner is central topic for women, and the sex life and car are talked more by men [36]. However, this study is partially inconsistent with existing findings. From previous analyses, the female users talked much about their romantic partner, but little about children. This phenomenon may relate to the age of women, as well as the influence of later marriage and later childbearing views. Besides, females also talked about sex in @Tree Hole as the research mentioned before. And for males, except several blogs are related to sex, much blogs are about their ideas and confuses on how to deal with conflicts and breakup in romantic relationships. For example, “I want to get divorce with my wife, should I do that?” (17:23, March 18, 2021) “I want to maintain the relation with girlfriend, what can I do?” (21:47, October, 11, 2020) This indicates that both men and women are much concerned with love relationships; there is not obvious difference in the context of disclosed information between genders.

### **5.4. Two Motivations**

The blogs in @Tree Hole from private messages have embodied two motivations of the contributors. First is emotional release. Individuals desire a space where they can express their feelings unfettered. They do not really need useful suggestions about their relationship with parent, spouse, and friend. Like they said “I know I should do this, but I do not want to do.” Sending messages to @Tree Hole is an effective method to fulfill their emotional needs and provide a sense of intimacy. The second is actually looking forward for assistance. In @Tree Hole, individuals are exposed to a wide variety of different information and viewpoints, obtaining helpful opinions to their difficulties. Such as: I suffer from severe obsessive-compulsive disorder, what can I do to relieve symptoms? (18:03, December 8, 2020) Another example

is how to choose college and major that suited me best? (21:02, August 30, 2020) Some experienced people were kindly offer advises which can help contributors to revise original attitudes and opinions, suggesting “Tree Hole” account as one access to information.

### **5.5. Reflections on @Tree Hole**

Furthermore, the deep factors behind these two motivations need to be determined. Foremost, alone together on the Internet. Despite many individuals spend many times on social media, they are not true companion and individuals still in solitude online [25]. Other study also pointed out that using digital platforms might lead to negative consequences like isolation erosion of social cohesion and addiction to virtual world [18]. Most messages on @Tree Hole express negative emotions like dissatisfaction, frustration, alienation and loneliness about pressures and problem in their life. These feelings might not be received and understand by others, individuals on @Tree Hole has far distance both physical and psychological.

Secondly, there is no guarantee that all blogs on @Tree Hole are authentic. As [37] said everyone is a performer. Some people may use different expressions and written scripts to convey impressions of self-identity before others in front region [37], such as the social media, which offers much convenient to forge information and expressions to attract attentions and seek approvals. The operator of @Tree Hole as the gatekeeper, do not have strict manage and select mechanism. This may cause adverse outcomes to the development of “Tree Hole” accounts.

At last, the relationship formed on @Tree Hole is a weak tie that lacking interpersonal trust and authenticity. Precious research explored interactions in Facebook and Twitter, arguing that most users on socials media are incidental audience [24], their relationships are casual or acquainted without enough intimacy [16]. Weibo users gathered on @Tree Hole are not tend to establish close interaction subjectively, coupled with constraints of objective factors, leading to transient weak ties. However, weak ties are confirmed to be important for their likelihood of being bridges to more information and views [38], which is proved in current study.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The study examined why individuals share intimate personal information to “Tree Hole” account by collecting and analyzing data on @Tree Hole in Weibo. Apparently, “Tree Hole” account has provided a safe and free space that is far away from social circles in real world. Individuals are willing to uncover some secrets and confusions that cannot be shared with family and friend on “Tree Hole” account with strangers. For most users on “Tree Hole” account, they regard this platform as a utopia

to express feelings, especially negative emotions and attitudes about lover, parent, friend and other persons. The content of these messages has partially reflected changes in culture, policy and other aspects of Chinese society, together with the changes in concept, ideology and behaviour of each person. Although this disclosure might be an elaborate performance that tries to get more attentions, lacking authenticity and closeness. According to previous analysis, the research predicted that the interaction through “Tree Hole” accounts is a weak but functional alternative method to interpersonal communication, certainly expanding the breadth of interaction. Given that little is known about online “Tree Hole” phenomenon, further research is needed to examine more specific samples in different digital scopes across intercultural background.

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