

A Friendly Zone or Malicious One?

Research on Social Media Platforms for LGBTQ Groups

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ABSTRACT

Contemporarily, LGBTQ groups have gained increased attention on social media in China. In this paper, the social media environment for LGBTQ groups in China has been investigated. Plenty of literatures argue that social media is an empowering tool for this marginalized group because of its role in learning, exploration, communication, interaction, and identity construction. Based on the results, these functions could also be fulfilled in the offline context and the downsides of social media would overwhelm these advantages. Besides, the unregulated cyber bullying is oppressing different views, regardless of its correctness. If we want to create an all-group friendly social media platform, many changes of design features need to be realized.

Keywords: *LGBTQ groups, social media, offline context.*

1. INTRODUCTION

A recent issue on Weibo, which is a mainstream Chinese social media app similar to Facebook, caused a fierce debate among the public. A girl named Xixi found out a textbook of Ji'nan University titled "University Students Mental Health Education" noted that homosexual is a kind of "psychosexual disorder," and described it as "a kind of disorder from the perspective of sex or inversion of sexual partners". She thought the content stigmatized homosexuals and suggested to recall the wrong textbook and correct the mistake. The editor and publisher did not react to her suggestion, i.e., she filed a lawsuit against the press and the sales company. However, Xixi failed the lawsuit in both trials. In February 2021, the failure of this case incited a great online debate. Some people supported Xixi and criticized the content of the textbook, but a great number of people supported the adjudication because they believed that homosexual is a kind of illness. Thereinto, some people argue that LGBTQ is a new vocabulary introduced into China, which represents the western political correctness. Although LGBTQ might be a new word, the historical presence of this group could be dated back to the first time the evidence of homosexuality and same-sex love emerges. In addition, there was related documentation of homosexuality from ancient literatures and cultures around the globe, e.g., in ancient Greek, Assyria, and China. However, this group had long been seen as a kind of gender deviance. Homosexuality and same-sex love

faced harsh criticism for centuries for various reasons from the perspectives of nature, religion, psychology, AIDS, etc.

Though increased scholars and the public helps LGBTQ groups to get de-stigmatized, there are still a variety of views on LGBTQ people. However, under the impact of mass media, a trend of seemingly greater acceptance of LGBTQ is emerging. In this paper, the aim is to investigate the effects of social media on LGBTQ groups.

Many literatures argued that social media platforms provide LGBTQ youths a safe space to communicate with other people belonging to this community. They also indicated that social media apps allow youths to explore and affirm their gendered and sexual identities [1, 2]. In this paper, the applicability of these arguments will be evaluated in the Chinese context and proposed argument on roles of social media in the lives of LGBTQ youths.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on information retrieval, the impacts of social media on LGBTQ are investigated from both Chinese and American, where some illuminating points have been found. Thereinto, some studies focus on studying the impact of microblog Tumblr on LGBTQ communities. From analysis of both pros and cons of Tumblr, Tumblr is a queer space which is similar to its predecessors e.g., gay bar [3]. It creates a queer utopia, that makes queer

potential flourish and a queer vortextuality which means the experience that people are sucked into the black hole with limitations. Another literature also investigates the role of Tumblr as an example of new media narratives in curating the myriad of selves of LGBTQ youths. It argues that Tumblr allows the youth to snap selfies and curate their livestreaming. Besides, by streaming texts, youths are able to affirm their gendered and sexual identities in both online and offline contexts [1]. Except Tumblr, there are also many researches focusing on the impact of Facebook. They argue that social media provides a safe space for multiply minoritized youth, i.e., both a LGBTQ person and a minority can express and explore issues of sexuality and gender in the same platform. Similar to Wargo's piece [2], it also talks about how social media like Facebook helps LGBTQ youth to explore and safely navigate their lives through learning, participation, engagement, communication, and construction of identity in online spaces. The difference is that Wargo investigates how multiliteracies framework is operationalized to traverse online/offline contexts, while Lucero only investigates the online context. Similar to general optimistic view from Refs. [1, 2] on social media's function, an author also states that the internet and social media provide a safe space for the marginalized youth, giving them hope, compassion, and support [4]. He raises two campaigns with the purpose of helping and saving LGBTQ youths, including "It Gets Better Project" (IGBP) on the YouTube channel and the Trevor Project which according to the author. According to the analysis [5], though there are a lot of criticisms around the IGBP, (e.g., deceptive, condescending, homonormative, lazy, self-congratulatory, and inextricably tied to racial, gendered, and economic privilege), IGBP opened up a line of communication and gave despair LGBT kids hope. Moreover, the success of this campaign might be illustrated by the conjunction with other campaigns including "Straight but Not Narrow" and "Make It Better Project" [4]. In Fox & Ralston's research, they found out that social media has three educational functions for LGBTQ youths: 1) traditional learning, like acquiring information related to LGBTQ), 2) social learning, like observing role models or other LGBTQ individuals' experiences, and 3) experiential learning, including using online dating apps. They argue that in their case, informal learning through social media among LGBTQ users is common. In addition, social media networks are LGBTQ friendly, which serves different purposes in a given moment whilst overall underpinning a culture of care [6].

Despite plenty of optimistic arguments towards the roles of social media in the lives of LGBTQ youths, Salter argues that the public/private politics have applied to online spaces. On this basis, it means that though social media seems to empower the marginalized groups. In other words, the dominant values circulating on the social media are still aiming to further marginalize the

traditionally marginalized groups who used to stay in the private sphere and thrust these groups out of the public sphere [7]. Furthermore, though social media might empower subordinated groups and help them to seek equality and expand their dating pool, social media apps like Tinder might make them face more direct insult and discrimination [8].

There are also parallel research and findings in China. A representative dating app in China called Bleud has a wide range of homosexual users. A research states that the app serves as a "backstage," which provides the homosexuals a shelter and a place to seek identification. Additionally, social media enhances the group identity within some people under closed circle culture [9]. Another research demonstrates that many dating apps exclusive for gay groups provide them a specialized space to associate with each other, promoting their communication, satisfying their physiological needs, safety needs, social association needs, respect needs, and self-realization needs [10]. However, the excessive pursuit of low-level needs and self-identity crisis, and frauds accompany the usage of these dating apps. Moreover, when LGBTQ youths incorporate new media into their daily lives, the group could enter the public sphere, construct their images, pursue equality, and strengthen interactions with the public. Nevertheless, as many youths consider homosexuals as something idiosyncratic, their curiosity or the sense of pursuing the trend may let them attempt to be part of it, misleading their recognition of their sexual and gendered identities. This will not break up stereotypes, but further formulate the new type of stereotype [11].

Combining findings from both Chinese and American literatures, the derived conclusion is following. On the one hand, social media acts as an empowering tool and creates online spaces that allow LGBTQ youths to interact with their groups and the general public, explore and affirm their sexual and gendered identities, expand their dating pool, and play educational functions. On the other hand, social media allows more open and direct discrimination towards LGBTQ group, which may strengthen or create new negative stereotypes.

3. METHODOLOGY

Following the literature about the roles of social media play for LGBTQ groups, this paper focuses on the roles of social media played in the lives of LGBTQ young people, primarily around its communicative potentiality, design features, and comparison with offline contexts.

Under the critical theory framework, the five semi-structured in-depth interviews will be examined, which are conducted with two lesbians, two gay, and one bisexual. Since the subjects are limited, secondary sources are relied on to complement this defect. By placing these arguments in Chinese context, the feasibility of applying them to the Chinese context will

be evaluated by using the method of virtual ethnography. All the interviewees are domestic Chinese university students, whose ages are around 20 to 24.

The most common social media apps interviewees uses is Wechat and Weibo (Sina Weibo), and the frequency of usage of both apps is everyday. Wechat is a free messaging and calling app, which seems to already replace the traditional text message. The features of Wechat is a kind of similar to the list of contacts, if you know the account ID of someone, you could search it and add the person. Once the person allows the request, they could appear in each other's contact list. Besides, it has a function called "Wechat moments" which allow people to publish posts, but these posts could only be seen by friends you have added. If there are someone you feel not very familiar with, you could still choose to block the person from that post. Therefore, Wechat is a fantastic online space that is between public and private. Compared to Wechat, Weibo is a much more public space that contains hotspot issues, which is an app similar to Twitter and Facebook. Weibo is greatly controlled by gatekeepers and has bad protection of user's privacy. According to the statistics, Weibo has 462 million active monthly users, i.e., the usage of both apps is not unique to LGBTQ group. Except Weibo and Wechat, two lesbian interviewees also mention a dating app called the L. The L (original Rela) is a dating app provided specifically for lesbians.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the interviews, every interviewee report that the attitudes towards LGBTQ youths are friendly and tolerant in certain spaces of social media. For instance, one lesbian interviewee states that "in the LGBTQ forum on Weibo, the attitudes are tolerant because most people who would pay attention to this forum are part of us". Whereas, the attitudes are still unfriendly and malicious in the rest place on Weibo. Another important point raised by this interviewee is that "I think there are a lot of LGBTQ influencers which makes this thing more acceptable, including some entertainment TV shows which are making stars looking like T (omboy)". According to her statement, such trend caused people to be more acceptable of good-looking T, but the comments are still very hostile under the threads of some lesbian or gay couples on Weibo who do not look so great. Another lesbian interviewee mentions that the L is a relatively more comfortable space compared to both Wechat and Weibo. The reason is that she won't afraid of being coming out at least people they met on this app have the same sexual orientation. Other interviewees all mentioned the concerns and discomfort of telling personal information on Weibo in any forms, including through comments and posts. Though the atmosphere they feel is generally tolerant according to their answers, it shows that such tolerance is extremely restricted. Many of them reported that though many people hold positive

attitudes and are supportive, the majority are still holding negative attitudes. They claimed that one doesn't know the attitude of the person on the other side of the screen towards LGBTQ group. Maybe he/she is very hostile to this group, i.e., the person may also be hostile to them. Most of them emphasized the conformity of LGBTQ group with the rest of the general public, and professed that they do not care about others' opinions. However, it seems that while stepping out of their comfort zone, the environment they perceive is still unfriendly and hostile. It is one of the main reasons for them to report that they feel Weibo is not a safe and expressive space.

However, as they mentioned, there are still online spaces which they feel safe. One feature of these spaces is that they are in-group people whose values or characteristics are in congruence with LGBTQ groups, and such online spaces are mainly taken up with LGBTQ peers. For instance, an interviewee mentioned that the L is a more safe and expressive space compared to both Weibo and Wechat, because most people on this app are lesbians, though there are fraud problems in some cases. Other interviewees mentioned that Wechat is a relatively more comfortable online space compared to other platforms, because most friends they add know their sexual orientations and are extremely friendly and tolerant to them. Besides, a gay male interviewee mentions a "super discussion" channel of a hero called "Yang Yuhuan" in a moba game called the "Honor of Kings". He states that in that channel, most people are gay males and it is a comfortable and ideal expressive space, because the channel "is kind of similar to the small groups. It is ok for us to tell all kinds of funny jokes in this discussion channel, but these jokes may not be ok in the other 'super discussion' channels". While being asked how does the channel become an expressive with a relaxed atmosphere, the interviewee mentioned a term "linyu", which is a series usage of words that gay males would use and it represents a kind of self-identification. He said that "most males who like that female hero Yang Yuhuan are gay males, it is like an implicit common sense". Therefore, while in that discussion channel, if someone uses "linyu," they would know each other's sexual orientations.

While looking at possible features of online spaces in which LGBTQ groups feel comfortable expressing themselves, not only the accordance of values of users is crucial, but also social media design features (the anonymous design) would be helpful for LGBTQ youths to express themselves more freely and comfortably. However, there are not many social media platforms using this feature because it may cause more serious problems like crimes. The anonymous design features may be only applicable to a platform that is confined to a small scope, e.g., a social media app belonging to a campus. One lesbian interviewee mentioned that on a discussion forum created by a senior student who already graduated. She said that it was a derivative of a LGBTQ

school association created by that senior student. The discussion forum is specifically for LGBTQ students on campus, and it is one part of the whole campus website. Students could choose to be anonymous to publish posts or comments. She said that “it is a very safe space to express myself, including sexual orientation, because my school gives me a sense of safety and belonging. Additionally, I could choose to be anonymous, which is another feature that makes me feel safe”. Another feature is the blocking feature like Wechat has. As a mainstream social media app that is used by almost all Chinese in daily life, one salient feature of Wechat is that it outstandingly protects the privacy of its users. The first filter is that the person’s account is not publicly visible. People could only see the posts of friends they added, and the user could publish posts with choosing which people could see and which cannot for each post. It avoids the situation where the user does not want someone to see a specific post, but may need to block the person from all the posts he/she publishes, which has the risk of embarrassment that is being found out by that person being blocked.

Furthermore, while asking them which kind of conversations is more supportive for them, online or offline, all interviewees chose the offline discourse. Following reasons attribute such results. Primarily, the tolerance of their own closed social circles makes them more comfortable with talking about their gender and sexuality. An interviewee mentioned that she feels that many conversations are only appropriate to have in their own social circles, though she is a transparent close (does not hide her sexual orientations in daily life or care much about others’ judgement about her identity). Another reason as mentioned is the characteristic of face-to-face interaction. They stated that during face-to-face interactions, they could see another person’s facial expressions, body gestures, and tone. On this occasion, it could reflect their thoughts more truthfully, and helps the conversation go deeper. Another significant point is that online spaces allowing them to express themselves are pretty limited.

While talking about identity exploration and affirmation, only one person clearly addressed the role social media played. The rest of interviewees admitted that social media played the part of their identity construction, but they cannot remember the exact role social media played. All interviewees argued that the first time they realized their sexuality was during middle school when they had a secret crush on a person. Then, they found out that they are different from other students because they had the crush on a person of the same sex. Only one interviewee said that she had an identity crisis after finding out this, but it was dissipated after she realized that there were similar people around her. The rest of interviewees stated the similar point, which is that when they found out that there were many similar people in their own social relationships, they gradually viewed

their sexuality as normal. Among them, only one interviewee also mentioned the role of social media: exploration and communication. He claimed that social media was a major tool for him to explore more information and meet more diverse groups, i.e., he could gain more understanding towards this group. Initially, he found out that a gay male blogger online was morbid and grandstanding, though he was also part of the LGBTQ group. Nevertheless, relying on social media to gain more insight, he realized that the gay blogger was just seeking his own lifestyle. In the process of this conversion, social media played a significant role in introducing more information and insight on understanding others and himself.

Though the subjects of interviewees are limited, there are many overlaps with existing findings whilst many new findings. From the perspective of critical theory, one finds the incongruence of reality and the interviewees' answers, and the inconsistency of their own answers. For instance, they claimed that they feel the online atmosphere in social media platforms like Weibo is largely tolerant, but later they stated that they will not see it as a safe expressive space of their sexual and gendered identities because they are afraid of hatred they might receive. Moreover, as a netizen of myself who also browses LGBTQ topics on Weibo and other social media apps a lot, the acceptance of LGBTQ groups still remains very low in China. The argument that “homosexual is a kind of illness” is still dominant, but cyber bullying oppresses diverse voices. If you express the opposite argument under a topic supporting LGBTQ, you will be harshly criticized and face cyber-bullying, and vice versa. The tolerance of LGBTQ influencer couples seems not to be closely connected with their LGBTQ identities, but rather depending on their good-looking appearances. More evidences in this research illuminate the fact that social media spaces are not an ideal expressive sphere for LGBTQ groups, though social media plays a role in promoting communication and identity exploration and affirmation as scholars suggested. Indeed, social media has those “advantages,” but they are overwhelmed by the downsides brought by social media for LGBTQ groups.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, social media is indeed a seemingly empowering tool for LGBTQ groups because it provides a platform for them to enter the public sphere as the subject. Social media offers them more information about their groups, which they could find nowhere in their daily lives. However, these functions could also be fulfilled by the offline environment. Though the offline environment consists of the problem of insincerity, which people might conceal their real attitudes towards LGBTQ groups, their social groups are definitely friendly and the generations of young educated people have a great acceptance of LGBTQ groups according to the interviewees. In the offline context, people could not

choose to associate with those people with conflict values. Nevertheless, there are diverse views towards LGBTQ groups. However, under a thread that supports LGBTQ, there is a trend to oppress opposition voices with large scale cyber bullying. The result is that there is a false phenomenon of tolerance, but the actual acceptance is still low and the dissatisfaction would grow for those people who felt being oppressed to express their view.

As a traditionally stigmatized group, the online survival space for LGBTQ groups is restricted. The features of social media including oversimplification, blurring or compounding key problems, speed of information dissemination, and protection of privacy are not ideal for LGBTQ groups to express themselves. Special features (e.g., anonymity and blocking) should be taken into consideration for social media design companies in order to create an all-group friendly online environment.

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