

# Straight Guy Index: Conversation Strategies of Social Platform in Formulation on the Collective Identity of the Oppressed Minority

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## ABSTRACT

Feminist voices are believed to have a great development in nowadays online social media. However, with the influence of feminism, some niche or minority internet forums choose the opposite way to gain popularity from men or male adolescents of the younger generation. This article examines one of the growing websites Hupu in the context of Chinese online social media development. Using the cases of Chinese celebrities and their comparison, the discourse community's mechanism grows with the cultivation of gender-based social platforms will be discussed.

**Keywords:** *Straight guy, collective identity, internet minority.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION: HUPU AND CHINESE GENDER-BASED INTERNET ECOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT

Chinese social media and mobile apps were once considered very promising by the IT industry. Despite the shrinking demographic dividend, some platforms with high user stickiness and user characteristics are growing very fast. The internet industry has fully exploited the demographic dividend of 18-40 years olds. Considering this situation, those social media platforms that occupy users with special characteristics are still believed to be potential and promising [1]. Hupu, a Chinese social media platform, was founded in 2004 by an entrepreneur who is a basketball fan. Hupu started as a website covering basketball-related events. As the website develops more comprehensively nowadays, it has become a socializing application that consists of posting and streaming content. Hupu still has a strong connection to basketball information [2].

Unlike other Chinese social media, which have quite an equal ratio of male and female users or dominant female users, the biggest characteristic of Hupu is its user group, which consists of more than 90% male. Hupu was first a website for basketball games information, but later it expanded into broadcasting

various sports events and added forums for games and sports equipment, making it a popular social media for Chinese men. Gradually, people refer to the male users who are active on Hupu as "Straight guys". Unlike the English meaning of "Straight guys" which purely indicates heterosexual men, in Chinese common sense, straight guys are characterized as low EQ, less component of social communication, and mainly featured by their sexual orientation. For example, a hot meme in Chinese social media conveys a low EQ and high EQ sentence. The low EQ way of speaking always symbolizes how a straight guy speaks in daily life. Besides, another characteristic of straight guys is their homophobia. The straight guy users in Hupu embody sentiment toward homosexuals and the guys who lack manliness [3-5]. As the example given in this article, a Korean pop star posted a video of himself playing basketball in a k-pop way. This video has been critiqued negatively by male users on Hupu because they think basketball should be played in a manly way rather than an entertainment show. Another feature of Hupu is its distinct community classification. Its community is very finely categorized. Besides football and basketball, there are tags for users to show their identification as jobs, games, women, and sports equipment, which have become hot topics in platform user interactions. According to Hupu Community Forum Data Analysis

Report by Tecdat, the top three popular sub-sectional communities are sports equipment, pedestrian street (a community that include any daily life topics), and NBA.

Hupu and its user-community development is a remarkable example of gender-favoured online community construction. It has released a mobile application version while its website has remained a leader in the Chinese website page view competition and unique visitors (UV) per day. This article treats the Hupu case as a colacobisis phenomenon that social platforms and its male users' collective identification help fulfil value proposition. Using the cases of Chinese celebrities and their comparison, the mechanism that discourse community grows with the cultivation of gender-based websites will be discussed.

## **2. STRAIGHT GUY IN THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Goffman sees life as a presentation, society as a stage, and everyone is an actor [6]. Face-to-face interpersonal communication is a process in which people perform their 'selves' with a 'mask' made of symbols. To Goffman, self-presentation's sense is a daily performance, but self-presentation is closer to a 'display' in social media. This display in different user groups will produce completely different user patterns. Firstly, social media, such as the circle of friends, is formed mainly by friends who know each other well. It is a refined self-representation that pays more attention to self-imagination. In Goffman's Mimetic Theory, the manipulation of the "front stage" and "backstage" is known as "impression management" [6, 7]. In social media self-presentation, the words we say and the photos we upload can be carefully packaged.

Secondly, in forum networks, a user is anonymous. People don't know each other, and there is no perception of authentic identity. Having hidden a lot of information, negative or positive, the number of cases shared by users willingly becomes greater. In face-to-face communication, this self-presentation lacks the kind of image-maintenance attempt described by Goffman. It is more of an expression of self-expression under cover of online anonymity. An emphasis needs to be placed on defending one's opinions and voicing grievances. However, in today's Hupu group of specific media literacy, anonymity is less decisive. The forum's data distribution capabilities enhance users' data mining and analysis capabilities. In this way, the forum users can be tagged through previous postings, reply and other language behaviours. These have changed the basic mode of forum interaction based on anonymity in the past, so the anonymous characteristics of the forum are not significant here.

Suppose WeChat, Instagram, and other social media self-presentation is closer to the self-display after

refined management. In that case, Hupu is closer to the characteristics of user groups, which is the so-called "straight man" display. They are more inclined to use a large amount of data and event analysis to support their concept expression—express core ideas in a seemingly rational display of self. However, there is also a subset of users whose posts are not necessarily seeking an answer or achieving a goal. For example, this meaningless but attractive behaviour expression is also a way for Hupu users to display themselves.

It is worth going through Hupu users' comments and judgments by using Chinese celebrity Cai Xukun as an example. Some moves about basketball dribbling were added to Cai Xukun's dance segment in the talent show as dance elements [8]. The video sparked a huge debate among the male community, especially those who love basketball. The unprecedented topic is that Cai Xukun's beautiful and feminine appearance is in great contrast to the image of the basketball stars that the male loves. Compared to other social media platforms, Hupu, the users focus more on the star's prowess in their ball games as a basketball forum. In other words, if Hupu users can recognize a star's basketball ability, he is not going to be mobbed and trolled. When Cai Xukun's events were fermenting, the saying "you play basketball like Cai Xukun" was more like an insult in Hupu basketball forum. It may mean someone who is not good at basketball. According to the opinions and statistics of other media platforms, on Cai Xukun event, Hupu forum has no different from the other mainstream media. The user feedback mechanism of Hupu also existing in other mainstream media.

Most of the opinions sorted out on the Cai Xukun event show that the majority parrot others, featuring high conformity. The straight men group did not put forward landmark opinions, repeating and carrying opinions from other platforms, but more conforming opinions. This is the expression characteristics of the Hupu straight men group over the incident: even the most characteristic slogan was not originally created by the Hupu straight men group. The incident embodies the fuzziness of Hupu forum and its lack of ability to generate opinions.

The whole event shows that even though user characteristics and user stickiness are obvious, the opinion formation of specific events and characters will be determined by the communication strategy rather than by the user group characteristics. Preference and prejudice did not affect the image construction of public figures and the occurrence pattern of events. On the contrary, the preference and prejudice of straight men were affected by the communication strategy. Had there been any value appeals from their judgments on social celebrities to be called creative, it would have been only a matter that the mass media information dissemination strategy drives them with the invisible whip.

### **3. HUPU'S DEVELOPMENT AND THE KRIS WU VS. LU CASES**

After several years of development, Hupu has become the largest online sports forum in China. Beyond that, its online community section covering, entertainment, movie and other fields [9]. In 2020, Hupu launched the "Hupu Index" system in the "Hupu Movie" community [10]. Through this system, users can express their subjective views on specific characters or events. "Hupu Index" usually provides users with two options: "like" and "no feeling" (the latter implying "hating"), setting up a comment area below for users to discuss their views. Hupu also arranges a line chart of the index on this page to show the index change over a while. The Hupu Index ranks celebrities who are most liked or hated by the votes of users, and idols in Mainland China are often the most hated group by Hupu users. "Hating idol" is the label attached to Hupu by the outside world.

Hupu's user group is usually defined as "straight guy/man" in China. Labels as conservative thinking, stereotype aesthetics and inflexibility are attached to them. They live on their own worldview and values, judging all aspects of females and express dissatisfaction with the trend of "girlish" of Asian men, which resonate the stigma of the Asian male in the western context [11, 12]. Hupu symbolizes the antagonism between Chinese men and women's online voices. The conflict between the idol, Kris Wu, and Hupu users in 2018 were regarded as the fuse that caused Hupu to be disgusted by many Chinese females.

There are two modes of interaction between Hupu users and forums about a certain event. The former is to create topical enthusiasm through feedback from a single user to guide the voice of the entire forum. The latter is to generate feedback from the user community on a certain event under the guidance of Hupu. For example, the conflict between Kris Wu and Hupu originated from a discourse conflict led by a single user. On July 25, 2018, a Hupu user posted the original soundtrack (video) of Kris Wu and immediately attracted a large number of users to ridicule him in the comment area. At the same time, Hupu also reposted the video on its Weibo account and conducted public opinion guidance, firing a lot of quarrels among Kris Wu's fans and Hupu users on the Internet platforms.

Hupu users' criticisms of Kris Wu focused on questioning Wu's ability, for Wu's singing skills are overestimated. And these criticisms have a huge conflict with the "fandom" which females dominated. In fandom culture, fans often defend their idols for the small criticisms and even use quarrels to prove their correctness. The image construction of idols in China's entertainment industry symbolizes the grasp of the discourse power. On many social media platforms in

China, the image and behaviour of idols always tend to be "absolutely correct." Driven by fan culture, artists and their studios can often guide the public's perception of information through various means. Therefore, the purpose of controlling comments and eliminating criticism is achieved. The conflict between Kris Wu and Hupu means that the strong discourse represented by the entertainment industry is competing against disadvantaged groups such as "straight guy".

In the debate about Kris Wu, some Hupu users used vulgar words to attack women. This has caused many female fans to attribute the behaviour of Hupu users to the negative side of "straight men" and raise it to "gender opposition" in contemporary Chinese society.

On July 31, Hupu disclosed evidence (Lawyer's Letter) that Kris Wu and his studio threatened Hupu, gaining the upper hand of online public opinion. The lawyer's letter is the trump card of the entertainment industry to the confrontation of the discourse system because the authority of the law often occupies the correct position in the public's information cognition. However, Hupu's exposure to the lawyer's letter in this incident showed the forum's confidence in gaining support from the Hupu user group. At the same time, Hupu was facing the situation of going public in the stock market. Therefore, it needed to use such a means to intensify the contradictions and get as much attention as possible. The symbol of the lawyer's letter also began to become ironic at this time. It turned from a symbol of a strong discourse to the most powerful evidence that a disadvantaged group has poked the entertainment industry's weakness. Hupu users began to mock themselves with "lawyer letters" to show that their criticism of Kris Wu was so correct that the entertainment industry could only suppress "rational opinions" through such methods.

When Hupu launched the Hupu Index scoring mechanism, it set up Kris Wu's page first, which showed Hupu's absolute confidence in gaining user support. Looking at the changes in the Hupu Index's ratings for Kris Wu, Hupu has successfully guided users' public opinion. The Hupu Index was born in accordance with the discourse characteristics of Chinese male forums, that is, the enthusiasm for "ranking". As a sports forum dominated by male users, the Hupu online community is full of rankings of various characters or events, such as "Hupu Goddess Ranking", "NBA Goat Voting" and so on. The ranking is always the hottest topic in Hupu posts, and Hupu has strengthened this forum feature by launching a scoring system. At the same time, increasing users' stickiness to the community also strengthened Hupu's impression of users on other online platforms to gain attention.

At the end of 2019, Kris Wu appeared in the entertainment program FOURTRY. In this show, the conversation between Kris Wu and the underage idol

Zhao Jinmai caused controversy. At the same time, affected by the Kris Wu-Hupu incident in 2018, the Hupu Index dropped his score from 37.3 to 20.8. On August 14, 2020, when Kris Wu was participating in a charity project, his bodyguard overturned a PLA soldier who had taken part in flood relief [10]. The Hupu Index's score (Kris Wu) dropped from 20.8 to 16.5 within a week (August 16, 2020 ~ August 23, 2020). On July 7, 2021, Kris Wu was exposed as a suspect of rape of underage females, which caused huge controversy on the online platform. Kris Wu's Hupu Index scores have been on a downward trend since July 21, 2021. Under this conflict of discourse initiated by a single user and intensified by Hupu, the disgust of "fandom culture" and the aesthetics of contemporary Chinese females makes the vast majority of Hupu users maintain the negative view of idols represented by Kris Wu. In the scoring mechanism of the Hupu Index, Kris Wu's score is often around 10 points. Looking at the rankings of the Hupu Index, the most unpopular celebrities are usually "awarded" to these idols. Idol culture represents the opposite of Hupu ideology, while Hupu culture pursues masculinity, straightforwardness and rationality.

However, one idol has received positive reviews from Hupu's values, and the exception is Lu Han. Users' spontaneous group feedback deeply influences the change of Lu Han's evaluation at Hupu. At first, Lu Han was not popular in Hupu. His idol status and works caused him a lot of disgust in the discussions among Hupu users. In August 2019, the movie "Shanghai Fortress" starred by Lu Han, was released in China. The Hupu Movie community rated this movie as 6.9, and Hupu users questioned Lu Han's acting skills. Affected by this issue, Lu Han's score on the Hupu Index dropped from 40 to 35.2. in March 2020.

Behind the feedback from the user community, Hupu began to guide the opinion of users again. On April 22, 2020, the Hupu Weibo account reviewed the details of Lu Han's announcement of his romance. Hupu users expressed their praise for Lu Han's courage. Lu Han's Hupu Index increased from 40.3 (April 17, 2020) to 49.7 (April 24, 2020). In July 2020, the web drama "CrossFire" starred by Lu Han was unveiled, while Hupu immediately initiated a rating of this work on the Hupu Index. This web drama had a rating of 78.9 in the Hupu Movie community, and Lu Han's acting skills have begun to be recognized by Hupu users. On July 26th, Lu Han came to Hupu to discuss as Manchester United ambassador. After experiencing this series of events, Lu Han's score on the Hupu Index rose from 58.5 to 70.9. Lu Han's rating in Hupu has been on the rise in the past two years, and this year (2021), he reached 75 points or more and was awarded the "Most Popular Young Actor in Hupu". In terms of identity background, Lu Han debuted from the same idol group as Kris Wu in South Korea, and Lu Han's appearance is largely seen as a benchmark of "girlish" for Asian male

idols. Although Lu Han and Kris Wu have the same identity background, their evaluations at Hupu are in sharp contrast. In the comment section of the Hupu Index, many users think that Lu Han's behaviour is very masculine. They commented like these: "I admire Lu Han's courage to admit his love affairs", "Lu Han dared to get rid of idol burden when acting" and "Lu Han's soccer skills are at the top of the celebrities".

Lu Han's popularity in Hupu mainly comes from these factors. First of all, Lu Han's image in Hupu is a "soccer elite". He not only has excellent skills but also knows the knowledge of the soccer league. Unlike other celebrities who come to Hupu to market and promote their works, Lu Han chose to leave aside the identity of idols, only to communicate with Hupu users on soccer and his work, which left a positive impression on Hupu users: Lu Han is a man who really loves sports. Secondly, Lu Han's works also resonated among the male user groups of Hupu. Lu Han starred in the network drama "Cross Fire" with the theme of e-sports in 2020. As an IP of a computer game, "Cross Fire" is active in the growth of countless Chinese young male netizens. Lu Han's image in the play contrasts with his idol identity. He played a scruffy but extremely game-loving player in the drama. This coincides with the real-life identity of many Hupu users who love video games. Many Hupu users expressed their recognition of Lu Han's acting skills in their posts and shared their similar experiences with the characters in the drama.

Lu Han and his works have achieved excellent performance in Hupu's various scoring mechanisms by conforming to the values of Hupu straight male users. The most fundamental factor for Lu Han and Kris Wu being treated differently at Hupu is whether their images conform to users' values. Hupu users often regard the positive evaluation of Lu Han as a characteristic of their rational view of the entertainment industry. Although in the Hupu community, the entertainment industry is often subject to a variety of negative reviews, Hupu users are still sticking to their own values to screen out celebrities and works they recognize to show their independence (not blindly following mainstream opinions).

In general, in the evaluation of the entertainment industry and idols by Hupu users, whether it is due to a single user's information explosion or the feedback from a user group, Hupu always plays a leading role in this process. Compared with other social media's condemnation and criticism of "straight men", Hupu is actively creating an image of protecting "straight men users". This is the foundation of Hupu based on the online community. These strategies and methods enable it to grasp the user's orientation and support firmly, and at the same time, create topicality for the forum to gain attention. In a sense, users' identification with their straight men identity is not spontaneously generated but

is influenced or implied in a discourse environment created by Hupu. Although "straight men" are still unpopular in today's online discourse system in China, it is the existence of these prejudices against "straight guy" that helps Hupu gain opportunities for development in online social platforms.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

By using Chinese celebrities of the entertainment industry as comparative cases, this research shows that the so-called Chinese online "straight guy" minority shows less content creativity in their forum or social media engagement. This discourse community mainly comes from male users is taken by Hupu or other social media as an essential means to formulate public opinions. While male users tap their seemingly spontaneous like or unlike buttons, the social environment and social platform use them as a powerful channel to criticize someone or some social event. The value judgments and the strategies are not spontaneous at all, but with deliberated informational dissemination manipulations.

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