# The Interest-Based Communities
# on Xiaohongshu Recreate the Era
# of "Tribalization"

Xingjian Hu[1], Tiannan Jin[2(✉)], Yunjing Lu[3], and Shuyu Zhong[4]

[1] University of Science and Technology of Macau, Macau 999078, China
[2] Jilin University, Jilin 130000, China
3180101670@zju.edu.cn
[3] Yangzhou University, Jiangsu 225000, China
[4] Jilin University, Jilin 130000, China

**Abstract.** This paper aims to explore how the online interest-based communities on *Xiaohongshu* reflect the development of the new "tribe" form predicted by McLuhan and how this tribalization contributes to the vitality of the online interest-based communities and the maintenance of healthy content production. Within the framework of McLuhan's media theory of tribalization, this paper compares the development of different interest-based communities on *Xiaohongshu* and the differences between *Xiaohongshu* and *Douban*, another famous online interest-based community platform. By doing horizontal and vertical comparisons, this essay points out that *Xiaohongshu* has well promoted the connection between and the development of the online interest-based communities through accurate real-time data transmission, vertical management of platform, and encouragement of participation. This paper enriches the observation of the interest-based communities on *Xiaohongshu* from several perspectives, pointing out how the tightly connected "tribes" maintain the vitality of the online interest-based communities.

**Keywords:** Xiaohongshu · Online interest-based community · Triblization · Douban

## 1  Introduction

McLuhan has predicted that human beings would move from tribalization to decentralization and then back to tribalization [1]. In the digital era, various media platforms connect people with things through the Internet, creating a new media environment in which online communities are emerging and expanding. *Xiaohongshu* is a representative of re-tribalization. Therefore, this paper studies McLuhan's theory of tribalization, especially re-tribalization, through the interest-based communities on *Xiaohongshu*. Compared to traditional communities based on location, blood, and occupation, *Xiaohongshu* is one of the typical online interest-based platforms. For these interest-based communities,

---

Xingjian Hu, Tiannan Jin, Yunjing Lu and Shuyu Zhong contributed equally

tribalization can effectively strengthen the connection between users, promote content production and cultural output, and form a benign "participation culture".

Current research on online communities of interest is usually macroscopic, combining theory like McLuhan's tribalization, Alvin Toffler's theory of audience communication, and Henry Jenkins' theory of "participatory culture" [2]. Studies of specific platforms, such as *Douban* and *Xiaohongshu*, on the other hand, generally focus on one platform and look into its development history vertically, without considering the overall development of Internet communities or doing horizontal comparisons [3].

Based on McLuhan's theory of "tribalization", this paper looks specifically at the development of *Xiaohongshu* and compares it with *Douban*, another representative platform. In vertical analysis, this research uncovers the dynamics in *Xiaohongshu*'s history with the help of the data from the Xinhong Website [4]. Moreover, it does a horizontal comparison with *Douban*, using the data from Avery Consulting [5]. Gathering into a real effective tribe is the crucial reason for the Internet interest-based communities to stay alive and keep producing valuable content. This research compares it with other interest-based communities without strong tribalization and those interest-based communities at an earlier stage. It estimates the popularity of these two platforms through the monthly activity of users. *Douban* and *Xiaohongshu* have similar interest-based communities, but *Xiaohongshu* takes more measures than *Douban* to tribalize their users. *Xiaohongshu*'s official measurements have attracted more users and encouraged them to create more valuable content. Its success also confirmed McLuhan's re-tribalization theory.

## 2    The Tribalization and Its Feature Embodiment on *Xiaohongshu*

### 2.1    The Introduction of Tribalization Theory and the Form of Xiaohongshu's Interest-Based Communities

McLuhan put forward the theory of tribalization and divided it into three stages: tribal era, de tribal era, and re-tribal age. In the tribal age, people could only feel the whole world with their organs and only communicate with people close to them. What they could receive was limited because tools did not extend their organs and people who lived in the tribal era were in a state of "sensory balance". In the de tribalism age, the vision was extended through the medium of printed words. The "sensory balance" was being destroyed and the emergence of words enabled people to understand the world independently. The inevitable connection between people gradually weakened, and the West turned from collectivism to individualism. People may have different understandings through words. Printed words are a communication medium, and the characters of words have changed the way in which people perceive the world. The emergence of many printed matters provided people with shared values and cognition. In McLuhan's words, "media is information" [6]. Media have changed people's thinking and living habits, thus changing the social form. In the re-tribal era, the emergence of the Internet, television, and other media have extended people's organs like visual and auditory and other senses; the "sensory balance" was recreated. This is from McLuhan's theory called *global village* [7]. McLuhan accurately predicted the re-tribalization in the

1960s. People have re-established small tribes on the Internet; re-tribalization is well reflected on *Xiaohongshu.*

In 2013, the initial positioning users of *Xiaohongshu* were mainly young and middle-aged females. *Xiaohongshu* catered to this potential community from the beginning, and the community's content was primarily shopping strategies. In 2014, *Xiaohongshu* began accumulating users' behavior data to improve and mature the communities. In 2015, *Xiaohongshu* introduced the e-commerce system and integrated it well with the communities. Now the content of its communities is gradually diversified, covering not only shopping strategies but also other interests and hobbies.

*Xiaohongshu* uses big data analysis to deliver content which its users may be interested in. It uses a waterfall method to deliver content. The content contains pictures and titles, enabling users to find more accurate content which they are interested in. At the bottom of most of the pages, there are several tags indicating the content category, which helps the platform classify the content more quickly and accurately. Users of *Xiaohongshu* can also know the content through these tags. By clicking similar recommended content, users will accurately receive content regarding their interests and hobbies. They will also be tribal through the content because a creator often has his creative style; its unique style will help him attract more fans to form a tribe that belongs to his style. People will subscribe to different creators, and they are developing their own communities' step by step. These are the two main methods to form a small tribe. People in these tribes have similar interests and hobbies. Many users have a habit of commenting. They can find people with similar interests and views in the comments, and many people will subscribe to each other to extend the communities. They will establish common interest-related groups in the form of group chats and fan groups. These interest-based groups are online tribes.

## 2.2   Xiaohongshu and Its Users' Main Features

As a typical web 2.0 company, *Xiaohongshu* has the following main characteristics—decentralized, sharing, and open. The first is decentralization. The official of *Xiaohongshu* is not the primary publisher, or it never publishes anything in its communities. Each interest-related group is a node. They create different content based on different interests and hobbies. The second characteristic is a sharing platform. *Xiaohongshu*'s communities give users a platform to share. People could share their daily lives and experiences. Sharing is the core of *Xiaohongshu*'s communities; information could be accumulated because of people's sharing behaviors. Some of this helpful information will attract more people who have similar interests to form various interest-related communities. The third characteristic is openness. Everyone could share whatever they want in the communities. The platform is open to users, and users maintain high loyalty because of their interests. They will actively participate in it. With these three main features, *Xiaohongshu*'s communities have attracted hundreds of millions of active users and formed thousands of interest-related tribes in its communities.

People often have similar interests and values in these small communities. They are parallel, decentralized, and have weak interference. They often have the same answer to a question and create similar content on *Xiaohongshu.* They also rarely explore other

communities which have different interests or thinking methods. They prefer to chat with people who have the same interests and values.

## 3 Compare the Early Communities and the Emergence of Interest-Based Communities on *Xiaohongshu*

### 3.1 The Process of Building the Interest-Based Communities

The theory of re-tribalization confirmed the development history of *Xiaohongshu*. When *Xiaohongshu* first appeared in June 2013, its founder's goal was to create a PGC-oriented (Professional Generated Content) product with KOL (Key opinion leaders) who share overseas travel experiences and shopping strategies. It aims to spread culture by creating an interest-based communiy with a strong emotional identity and effectively gather a large heterogeneous group of people and make it decentralized. The content provided by professional local shoppers is mainly about tax refund policies, discounts, travel information, recommendations of special brands in the destination, map index of shopping places, and local practical information. Ordinary users initially focused on sharing their shopping results and exchanging shopping experiences. Therefore, it is different from the traditional posting bar, which is classified into the following types: topic discussion, experience sharing, questions and answers, information integration, and entertainment. The initial interface on *Xiaohongshu* was dedicated to "experience sharing" with three main columns, namely, "destination", "notes", and "experience". In this model, *Xiaohongshu* quickly achieved the goal of profitability that other interest-based communities could not achieve. It personalized the recommended products to users and cooperated with overseas brands for users' feedback and a unified delivery system. During the anniversary celebration on June 6, 2015, *Xiaohongshu* APP made it to the 4th place in the total list of Apple App Store, and the number of users exceeded 15 million.

After the initial accumulation of the number of users, *Xiaohongshu* began comprehensive mining of its own interest-based community attributes and was gradually transformed into a UGC-based (User Generated Content) platform. In the case of individual users, the platform has conducted increasingly more exploration of individual interest-based behavior and guided individuals to explore new interests. For example, at the beginning of the account generation process, it was mandatory to choose four or more interest modules. Unlike the initial development when the main target users were female overseas shoppers, the platform now creates an environment where the top users and merchants in each field can cooperate and make profits on their own. The interface also highlights the "personal information field" in the virtual communities based on the previous vertical graphic communities. The three columns on the main page have become "Follow", "Explore", and "Nearby". In the process, both head users and bottom users complete their personal information paths to enter the network. *Xiaohongshu* provides a convenient channel for users to "look for group" and "look for guidance", while allowing individuals to accumulate cultural capital and social capital in the interaction [8]. These ensure the stickiness of users to the "tribes". With its gradual development, in January 2019, *Xiaohongshu*'s users exceeded 200 million.

### 3.2   Analysis of the Interest-Based Communities on Xiaohongshu

In the research conducted by David L. Swartz, the integrated social world is actually divided into relatively independent small fields, and on *Xiaohongshu* there are also small and large communities of interest in the "fields" divided under the whole platform [9]. The active degree of the traditional posting bars and the public account are influenced by the number of followers and the reading number of tweets. On *Xiaohongshu,* however, the degree was counted quite differently. The numbers of *Likes*, *Favorites,* and *Shares* are also indicators of the size of the interest-based communities, based on different indicators recorded and reviewed on the data analysis platform [8].

They clearly show the amount of information interaction between the head users of each field. Compared to the overseas shopping platform that was first created in 2013, *Xiaohongshu* nowadays focuses on individual who is the main subject of the interest-based communities. The original group of overseas shopping is now scatter in various sections like food, outfit, make-up, parenting, lifestyle, and travel. Due to the long period of time, it has existed and the orientation of the profitability of the platform, the original groups still account for a large proportion of *Xiaohongshu* during the tribalization.

At the same time, in the overall context of social tribalization, *Xiaohongshu* is a platform that focuses more on interest-based individualization, such as giving higher exposure to ordinary users to achieve a higher degree of decentralization. Unlike other platforms where resources are highly inclined to head users, *Xiaohongshu* is increasing the volume of exposure with new content to reduce the difficulty of new users to get more internet traffic, so more ordinary people can participate in the construction of the interest-based communities. As the statistics from Xinhong show, *Xiaohongshu* also allows users to filter new content through a large number of new users, so users are more willing to look for information on the platform rather than specific head users, and the "social tribalization" stays at the level of the platform [4].

## 4   Comparison with *Douban*

### 4.1   The Construction of Douban's Platform and Its Contribution to the Development of the Online Interest-Based Communities

In order to discuss the innovation of *Xiaohongshu* as an interest-based community platform over the last five years, this paper compares it with *Douban,* an earlier representative of the online interest-based community platform during the past decade.

*Douban* seized the core user group of "literature and art lovers" and started with discussions on books, movies, and music, growing into a hugely influential online interest-based community platform. *Douban* has always honed its products with "interest" as its core feature, which can be seen in its slogans, such as "Bringing together the fun lives of 100 million people" in 2014 and "Our Spiritual Corner" in 2016. Capturing the need of China's early Internet communities to communicate about hobbies, founder Yang Bo conceived and launched *Douban* alone in March 2005, and within just nine months of its founding, it had more than 50 million registered users and has been around for 16 years. As of September 2015, *Douban* had more than 230 million registered users, and ranked

third in terms of monthly registered users and cumulative average daily reach, behind *Sina Weibo* and *Renren*, according to Avery Consulting [5].

However, with the huge changes over time, *Douban*, which has witnessed the rise and fall of forums such as *Renren, Tianya,* and *Catpou*, is not as brilliant as it used to be. According to the Qianfan data platform, from January to June 2020, *Douban*'s monthly active users shrank from 9.035 million to 8.9874 million, while *Xiaohongshu* steadily increased from 80.3062 million to 100.569 million, ten times as many as *Douban. Xiaohongshu* has 44.8% of users under 24 years old, while *Douban* has 40.15%. With young people as the main users and interest communities as the core feature, *Xiaohongshu*'s user activity occupies the 1st place in the comprehensive community forum category and ranks as a social platform, while *Douban* has fallen to the 4th place as a forum, after *Xiaohongshu, Zhihu*, and *Baidu Post*, and even dropped to the 16th place in the social category [10]. In recent years, *Xiaohongshu* has gradually taken over *Douban*'s position and become one of the most influential interest-based community platforms on the Chinese Internet. A comparison of these two platforms helps us understand the factors necessary for the development of interest-based communities online.

*Douban*'s updates and optimizations over the past ten years have provided other platforms with valuable experience in building and "tribalizing" Internet communities. With the concept of "interest and discovery" as the logic to establish the connection between people and things, *Douban* started as a tool-based website in 2005, mainly for searching and evaluating books, and has since then expanded the coverage of hobbies and refined users' interests. In 2012, *Douban* App 2.0 added travel, fashion, food, and other diversified interest categories. To capture users' interests and promote community gathering, *Douban* has started to use personalized recommendation algorithms to disseminate content as early as 2005, based on personal favorites and browsing habits. In addition, users' productivity is also valued. Without interfering too much, *Douban* has always defined itself as an intermediary that brings people and things together, helping people discover surprises in their lives through algorithms and user interactions. Through the evaluation functions of "I read", "I see", and "I listen", users can experience the dual identity of content producers and content sharers at the same time, thus truly creating the "participatory culture" described by Jenkins—a culture that is less demanding and more supportive of individual creation and sharing [11]. Users can freely share books, movies, and music, create favorites based on their interests, find and join *Douban* groups based on their hobbies, and build a strong social network based on vertical interests through private messaging and group chat. "*Douban* groups" are the center of *Douban*'s interest-based communities. Currently, *Douban* already has more than 600,000 interest groups of various kinds. The social structure of *Douban* groups is relatively flat. Group leaders have the highest authority to approve member applications, remove members, and close groups and administrators are responsible for daily review and management of posts and ordinary group members. After a group is created, members can post content and reply to other members' posts. In this way, various interest "tribes" gathered on the *Douban* platform, which was the first attempt to tribalize China's online interest-based communities.

The communities on *Xiaohongshu* and *Douban* are both hobby-centered virtual communities. The relationship between the two is not superiority or inferiority. To some

extent they are complementary, shaping the diverse development of online communities. What are the potential advantages of the emerging *Xiaohongshu*-style communities compared to the *Douban*-style communities? The main analysis is from the following aspects, including the organization of community, the management of the platform, the way of content presentation, and the construction of users' identity.

## 4.2 The Development Potential of Online Interest-Based Communities Between Douban and Xiaohobgshu

### 4.2.1 The Construction of Communities and Intergroup Communication

*Douban*'s community communication is a parallel process of mutual exchange and is not built up with a single user as the core figure, which shows a relatively loose and weak relationship. *Xiaohongshu*, on the other hand, uses PUGC (Professional Generated Content+User Generated Content) as its information organization model, which is a diffused communication process, with well-known bloggers as the centre of the diffusion circle, to enhance user stickiness [12]. In this way, it lowers the cost of communication and facilitates the monitoring and management of the platform.

Different *Douban* groups have their intergroup divisions. For example, the *Douban* "Goose group" uses "Goose" as its nickname, gathering a group of netizens who love entertainment news; the *Douban* "Korean Entertainment group" uses "Fish" as its nickname, a gathering place for Chinese K-pop fans. People who despise the Korean community and Korean fans are not welcome to join the group, "Korean Entertainment". On *Xiaohongshu*, on the other hand, despising or excluding each other is rare in intergroup communication. Although there is a distinction between different kinds of preferences under the same interest, such as the love of iced Americano and the love of cold brew. They both love coffee and do not create barriers between communities, and the situation is not antagonistic or contemptuous. The elimination of social stigmatization and antagonism is of great importance to the development of a healthy online community.

### 4.2.2 The Concerns of the Official Platform

*Douban*'s communities are mostly spontaneous organizations, with weak ties to the official platform, which therefore plays a regulatory and supervisory role. *Xiaohongshu*'s communities are organized by both users and the official platform, and the official organizations have a strong influence and attraction, such as the "Creative Academy" the "Fashion Academy", the "Photography Academy", and the "Academy of vlogging". It is a great way to gather users with the same interests and combine them to create quality sharing, including online seminars and offline events. In the age of the Internet, it is also concerned with the dual-track development of community culture, clarifying the boundary between the virtual and the real. It is a good adjustment for users who are simply indulging in virtual social interaction.

### 4.2.3 The Design of the Content Presented on Online Social Platforms

In *Douban*'s communities, users mostly communicate with texts and pictures in the form of postings, while *Xiaohongshu* mostly uses videos to trigger empathy. This video

approach can engage the human senses more fully and resonate among the users more visually. At the same time, *Douban*'s groups are more refined and life-like, and many groups that are seen as "weird" in real life can come together and find their own places. In *Douban* groups, there are interesting groups that are difficult to gather in real life, such as "homosexual groups", "obsessive-compulsive groups", "groups for researching weird issues", and "groups for sharing cute things" [13]. *Xiaohongshu*'s communities correspond to the interpersonal, interest-based, and geographic-based squares, where the "Discover" page is designed as a "waterfall" layout, with graphics and videos highly focusing on each interest category. The backend algorithm presents a customised home page based on the user's identity information and content of interest, which allows users with the same interests to browse similar information.

### 4.2.4  The Construction of Users' Identity

From the user's perspective, *Xiaohongshu* breaks the incomplete self-expression which is only limited to the interests of *Douban*, and makes the user's identity more complete, thus strengthening the connection between people. The personal homepage of *Douban* users is relatively thin, with reviews of books, movies, and music as the main foci in the form of text. If the number of *Douban* group members is large, the posts will be reloaded very quickly without sending unrelated posts. As a result, the discussion among members is mainly about their interests, but it cannot strengthen the social connection between real people. *Xiaohongshu*, on the other hand, emphasizes individual users, who can easily display their information in the form of video, picture, and text, which helps the interest-based communities to gather under the tag in the form of individual to individual. The scale of this kind of community is relatively small, but the high degree of integrity of users' identity and trust in others' information help form "tribes" with closer emotional ties [14].

## 5   Conclusion

Through the comparison between the early form and the emerging form of interest-based communities on *Xiaohongshu,* and the community development model between *Xiaohongshu* and *Douban*, this paper demonstrates the interest-based communities on *Xiaohongshu* from five perspectives: the management of the official platform, the design of the sensory experience, the immersive identity of users, the construction of community, and the approach of intergroup communication. They reflect the trend of "tribalization" of social relationships in the electronic era as McLuhan predicted. This trend differs significantly from the earlier concept of tribalization of human socialization and shows more of a clustering characteristic based on interests and preferences.

This paper remedies the prejudice of previous research that the main participants of *Xiaohongshu*'s e-platform are mostly women and the narrow impression that it is only a shopping platform. It explores the great value of *Xiaohongshu* in constructing interest-based communities by comparing the communities at different levels of development and with different platforms. It analyzes the qualities required for healthy and sustainable interest-based communities, namely, appropriate platform guidance, quality sensory

experience, high user cohesion, clear community positioning, and high intergroup inclusion. This paper mainly focuses on the e-platforms in China, and it has limitations in understanding the development trend of the international interest-based communities. However, through horizontal and vertical comparisons, it provides a understanding of the process of shaping community relations and it stimulates the virtuous contribution of such emerging communities to society as they grow rapidly both in number and size.

## References

1. Peking University News. "Enlightenment from re tribalization: returning to the original intention of communication - an interview with Professor Zeng Zhi". November 8, 2019. Retrieved on May 17, 2022. Retrieved from: https://news.pku.edu.cn/ztrd/bjlt2019/f4d94556c1954617a5317013de5d455e.htm

2. K. Traynor, "YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture", European Journal of Communication 4 (2020) 191. DOI: https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323120935319.

3. Y. Wang. "A Study of *Douban*'s Community Culture", Master thesis, Hunan Normal University, 2018.

4. Xinhong Platform. "Overview of Recommended". April 17, 2022. Retrieved on May 17, 2022. Retrieved from: https://xh.newrank.cn/market/noteMarket

5. X. Luo. "A Study of Fan Culture and Community Building on Douban Platform", Master thesis, Northwest University, 2021.

6. M. McLuhan, Q. Fiore, The medium is the massage: An inventory of effects, Gingko Press, 1967.

7. M. McLuhan, The Global Village: Transformation in World Life and Media in the 21$^{st}$ Century, Oxford university press, 1992.

8. NEWRANK "2021 new media content of ecological data report". January 21, 2022. Retrieved on April 17, 2022. Retrieved from: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/p5vNRj8iMRMr1TiRDXf6hg

9. D. Swartz, Bourdieu's Concept of Field, Oxford University Press, 2016.

10. Qianfan. "Data Comparison between Xiaohongshu and Douban Platform". December 1, 2020. Retrieved on May 7, 2022. Retrieved from: https://qianfan.analysys.cn/sail/view/exquisite/pageapp/compare?QXRhTUhnOWZDVjNGSU1WNnozbWJSd09HRlNxd2JLZEYxMC9zdVNkUExYND0=

11. H. Jenkins, Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide, The Commercial Press, 2012.

12. J. Gao, C. Wang, "A study on the identity of virtual community interesting groups – A case study of Douban.com", Media Forum (14) (2019) 158–160.

13. J. Stokes, "Predicting satisfaction with social support from social network structure", American Journal of Community Psychology (2) (1983) 141–152. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00894363.

14. Q. Cai "The Dissemination of Interest-relationship Culture in Network Virtual Community" Journalism and Communication studies 21(09) (2014) 5–23+126.