



Examining the Leaderlessness of a Networked Social Movement on Weibo and Douyin

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Abstract. From the late 2000s to the 2010s, researchers have focused on the formation of networked social movements, which are built on existing social and organizational connections through the use of networked media technologies. The key difference between conventional social movements and networked social movements is the shift from 'collective action' to 'connective action'. In this paper, regarding the recent social issue that a PhD. student complains her supervisor for his sexual harassment behaviors. The author observed the creation of many hashtags or 'chaohua' (topics) on two popular social media platforms, Weibo and Douyin which received thousands of millions of views and accelerated the progress of 'online-to-offline social movement'. Author intends to examine the formation and evolution of (opinion) leadership on Weibo and Douyin by examining the how social influence was distributed regard to different platforms, and exploring whether inequality in social influence was stable.

Keywords: Networked social movement, leaderlessness, informal leadership, Chinese social media platform

1 Introduction

From the late 2000s to the 2010s, researchers have focused on the formation of what Castells [1] termed networked social movements, which are built on existing social and organizational connections through the use of networked media technologies. Although regional issues and political circumstances were vastly different, the main participants were connected to each other and to more marginal participants and bystanders through digital media [2]. The key difference between conventional social movements and networked social movements is the shift from 'collective action' to 'connective action'. The latter refers to participants engaging with issues primarily on individual bases, identifying shared concerns in easily personalized frames of action that 'enable diverse understandings of common problems to be shared widely through digital media networks' [2]. In this paper, regarding the recent social issue that a PhD. student complains her supervisor for his sexual harassment behaviors. The author observed the creation of many hashtags or 'chaohua' (topics) on two popular social media platforms,

Weibo and Douyin which received thousands of millions of views and accelerated the progress of 'online-to-offline social movement'. This process of coordinating actions and achieving goals [1] has made the concept of virality particularly relevant, leading to one of the two foci of this article: the influences of (opinion) leadership on Chinese popular social media platforms Weibo and Douyin on users in relation to the national incidents.

Addressing aforementioned focuses, author intends to examine the formation and evolution of (opinion) leadership on Weibo and Douyin by examining the how social influence was distributed regard to different platforms, and exploring whether inequality in social influence was stable. The author emulates and follows the research design of Liang and Lee [3], who applied two statistical methods to measure the stability of (opinion) leadership: Gini coefficients and coefficient of variation. The following sections will begin with literature reviews on networked social movements and leaderlessness.

2 Networked Social Movement: From 'Collective Action' to 'Connective Action'

The networked social movement, Anti-ELAB movement which seen as one representative case study in greater China area, mobilized millions of Hong Kong citizens to express their political appeals and values, through digital forum 'LIHKG' [4]. Although this article focuses on online-to-offline mobilization in mainland China, Lee's [5] argument revealed the core facets of networked social movements: 'it was decentralized and apparently leaderless, and involved a diverse range of actions initiated by ordinary protesters using digital media technologies'. To further understand the formation and characteristics of the networked social movement, it is necessary to discuss the literature on social movement studies. Diani [6] defined a social movement as 'a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups, and/or organizations engaged in a political or cultural conflict on the basis of a shared collective identity.' The 'network' mentioned by Diani [6] refers to the social relationship between individuals and individuals with organizations, providing insights to evolve it within the digital media framework. In addition to Diani's [6] notion of a social movement, and 'collective action' as another important aspect [7].

Originally conceptualized by Olson [8], collective action emerges when 'individual actors collaborate to achieve a common goal or purpose'. A collective action or social movement is not a particular event or performance, but a sequence of contentious incidents that are enacted over time in order to get their demands heard by their target audiences [9]. For instance, it is frequently understood to include 'a range of group activities such as marches, demonstrations and strikes' [10]. The concept of collective action emphasizes the importance of organizations and constituencies in motivating individuals to participate in actions where the costs of participation outweigh the benefits. The literature on social movements has undergone a paradigm shift with the advent of the internet and digital technologies, particularly in terms of the ways in

which civic movement engagement is theorized and the criteria for assessing movement effectiveness [11].

In terms of the academic debates on the emphasis on decentralization, leaderlessness or structurelessness, Lee [5] posited that the crucial question to consider is 'not whether organizing without organization can substitute organizing through formal organizations', but to explore the interconnected actions of networked social movements. Furthermore, Wang [12] also suggested that rather than focusing on the material outcomes of a social movement in the political realm, another approach is to assess its ability to achieve symbolic power, which is defined as 'the ability to intervene in the course of events and influence the actions of others through the production and transmission of symbolic forms'. In summary, the effectiveness of a modern networked social movement lies in its ability to successfully communicate core values.

Research Question 1: On Weibo and Douyin, which platform has the most influential capability to attract people's attention in a networked social movement?

3 Leaderlessness: Unstable Leadership in the Digital Media Sphere

As mentioned above, networked social movements are considered to be 'organization-less', structureless and leaderless. However, empirical studies have shown that this is not entirely accurate. Fong [4] proposed that 'leaderless movements are, in fact, not fully organization-less.' Liang and Lee [3] also suggested that 'networked social movements might be seen not so much as leaderless but leaderful.' To comprehend the reasoning behind these arguments, the author suggests that it is necessary to read about leadership knowledge that is stimulating. Typically, social movements are considered to arise from resource mobilization processes that focus on formal organizations [3]. Furthermore, personal properties and skills play a significant role in the prominence of leaders, in which leadership is often explained in terms of individual attributes, such as charisma or eloquence, that allow leaders to motivate action by clarifying what a movement stands for [13].

However, leadership is not a personal quality but a collective attribute. Members refer to and defer to the leader [14]. For instance, the ability to define the issue, frame the injustices and make strategic decisions which emphasize the capability to do such things, which means that there could be several different and unstable leaders in a social movement. In other words, when a person creates a conversation topic and 'receives many replies and reactions (e.g. likes), that person is influential and could be considered a leader' [3]. Thus, in a networked social movement, numerous individuals and groups can influence the movement through their ideas and actions [3], which is the concept of informal leadership or leaderlessness, and 'are not a totally new phenomenon.'

Considering the variety of action manifestations present, the frequently complicated and accidental development of networked social movements, and a culture that favors grassroots and voluntary participation, leadership positions are most likely to be distributed across a wide range of people. As a result, the leadership structure is

also likely to be more open to change [3]. However, in the censored media sphere of mainland China, there is a relative paucity of research on whether informal leadership in a networked social movement still has the same characteristics. Therefore, empirical investigation of this conceptual framework is noteworthy. To summarize,

Research Question 2: To what extent is (opinion) leadership dispersed or concentrated on Weibo and Douyin?

Hypothesis 1.1: On both platforms, participants' influence is unequal, as it is more concentrated on a few users.

Hypothesis 1.2: When comparing the inequality of users' influence, it is relatively more dispersed on Weibo than on Douyin.

4 Method

4.1 Data

This article collected online texts as the raw data from two Chinese social media platform. Specifically, the author collected the original posts and videos within two 'chaohua', "PhD. Student reports her supervisor" on Douyin, and "Renmin University's official statement" on Weibo. The purpose of this paper is to examine the influence of users or the attention of public, therefore, the indicators of this set of data are views, likes, number of videos and articles, and number of users.

4.2 Measures

Regarding different research questions, the author employed various analysis method and measurement into three steps, including descriptive statistic results, the computations of Gini coefficient and coefficient of variation.

Influence of Two Platform and Response of Participants. The influence in this step refers, to the extent to which two social media platforms are mobilized. As such, four indicators were taken as the measurement: views, likes, number of videos and articles, and number of users. The latter two figures represent how many videos and articles were published in the case-related 'chaohua', and how many users were involved as participants in this networked social movement. While having many views and likes does not necessarily equate to persuasive ability, receiving attention is a prerequisite for influence, and 'if a user's content can attract attention, it is likely that other users will find their posts agreeable and appealing' [3].

Inequality of User Influence. The Gini coefficient was used to measure the inequality of user influence over time. 'The Gini coefficient is a widely accepted measure of economic inequality that ranges from zero to one' [3], with one indicating a complete inequality. The presence of leadership in this networked social movement is indicated by the inequality of user influence in both platforms.

4.3 Results

Mobilization on Two Popular Social Media Platforms. According to the platform's official records, shown in Table 1, Weibo has a total of 740,000,000 views, while Douyin has 23,697,000. These figures suggest that Weibo has a greater ability to attract people's attention. The other two indicators may provide a same perspective. On Weibo, there were 2,752,908 likes across 484 articles. On the Douyin platform, there were 487,048 likes across only 94 videos. The average views and likes for each user on Douyin were 252,095 and 5,181, respectively, which is lower than the average influence for each Weibo participant, which was 1,528,925 views and 5,687 likes. On the other hand, the findings may also suggest that Douyin has fewer participants and less content in this networked social movement. However, two factors are worth considering: firstly, video content is generally more difficult to produce than conventional articles; secondly, some participants in the movement on Douyin did not use the relevant hashtags related to the case.

In summary, while the figures cannot provide a definitive answer to the question of which social media platform has the most influential capability to attract people's attention in a networked social movement, they do support the hypothesis 1.2 that the inequality of (opinion) leadership on Douyin is higher than on Weibo.

Table 1. Descriptive summaries on Wei and Douyin.

	Douyin	Weibo
Views	23,697,000	740,000,000
Likes	487,048	2,752,908
Numbers of content	94	484
Average views	252,095	1,528,925
Average likes	5,181	5,687
Views	23,697,000	740,000,000

Inequality of User Influence. Regarding the results of Gini coefficients for the distribution of likes on each platform, the author first compute each users' number of likes per day, and the number of users, then conducting relevant calculations. Fig. 1 present details results, whereas the average Gini coefficient for Douyin is 0.8335, Weibo is 0.9487. This finding reveals that, first on both platforms, in the case-relate 'chaohua', a small number of users attracted the greatest number of likes, which support the hypothesis 1.1 that (opinion) leadership seems significantly concentrated on both social media platforms. On the other hand, the inequality and concentration between two platform is different, whereas the (opinion) leader's influence on Douyin is likely decentralized than Weibo, which not support the hypothesis 1.2 that the inequality of (opinion) leadership on Douyin is higher than on Weibo. However, based the descriptive findings, the results show different insights, thus the hypothesis can not be confirm.

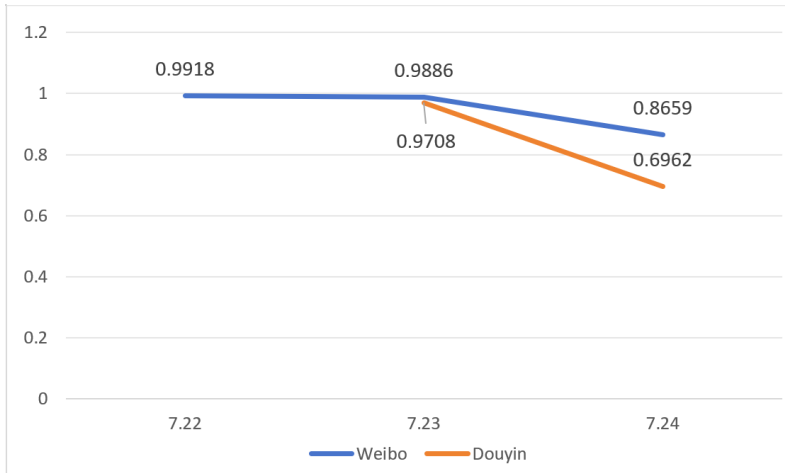


Fig. 1. Gini coefficient of likes per day on Weibo and Douyin.

5 Conclusion

In line with Liang and Lee's [3] research, this article attempts to provide nuanced insights and evidence to examine whether the characteristics of a networked social movement, that is, the spread of information on digital social media and the dynamics of informal and diffuse (opinion) leadership, are still applicable to mainland China. The empirical data suggests that on both platforms, influence or attention is concentrated on a few participants, although they are informal 'leaders'.

Based on the two focuses of this article, there are two main implementations for studying the networked social movement framework. Firstly, although numerous social movement scholar conducts empirical studies on the roles of digital media in democratic nation or region, limit studies examine the mainland China's social media platform. It is apparent that Weibo and Douyin have played a crucial role in this mobilization, involving the rapid expansion of users' interpersonal networks through the combination of easily disseminated personal frames of action and the affordances of digital technology. Consequently, the result resembles collective action, but without the need for formal organizations to act as intermediaries, and 'without the need for individuals to be members of organizations or to share ideological frames set by formal organizations' [12].

Secondly, the author applies the Gini coefficient to calculate the inequality of the informal leadership of this networked social movement. Overall, the results of Gini coefficient support the hypothesis of this article, which is consistent with a few exceptionally influential individuals, regardless of the topic of discussion, are a general pattern resulting from the competition for attention in online discussions. Liang and Lee [3] provided a reasonable interpretation: 'in a networked social movement where people do not recognize central leaders, there is still a need for people to pay attention to the same few highly influential opinion leaders or risk information overload.' Fur-

thermore, the concept of leader, sometimes rather than a person who gets the attention, is the ability, capability and characteristic or people's attributions to the movement. Additionally, one finding provides empirical insights for Chinese social media platform studies, even e-commerce studies: when comparing two popular platform Weibo and Douyin, it is likely that the inequality of (opinion) leadership on Weibo is higher than on Douyin, which means the concentration of users' influence is less than on Weibo. This in line with Douyin's policy and algorithms: decentralization, and decentralized computing (source from baike.com an information search engine created by Douyin company).

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