

The Impact of Censorship of LGBTQ Content on Xiaohongshu on Queer Expression

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Abstract: This essay delves into the impact that the censorship of LGBTQ content on Xiaohongshu can have on the expression of queer individuals. This research conducted an analysis of the censorship mechanism of Xiaohongshu, collected tags commonly used by LGBTQ users, and proceeded to analyze the data. Subsequently, the examination of the connection between the causes and effects of the adjustments made at the societal level is done, as well as the stereotypes surrounding the LGBTQ community. Tumblr is being used as an example of how it can help LGBTQ members to find their identity, find peers and friends, and locate communities. All in all, it is concluded that LGBTQ members' attempts to pass censorship can facilitate engagement with the public, which may dispel stereotypes. However, it is essential to acknowledge that these adjustments may also inadvertently create new stereotypes.

Keywords: LGBTQ, queer expression, censorship mechanism, hashtags, stereotype

1. Introduction

In the current era, the rapid development of social media has allowed LGBTQ content to spread. On social media, more and more pictures, videos, and text about queer experiences are posted by the community. An epitome is Tumblr, which has played a significant role in constructing the LGBTQ community in the 2010s. It categorizes posts through tags, allowing content creators and audiences under the same identities to gather and form a space of queer belonging on the platform. Xiaohongshu has also become a similar affiliation for the LGBTQ community in China, bringing queer people together through tags and algorithms. Speaking of content creation, censorship mechanism is also an inevitable topic, directly affecting the release of content; specifically, the censorship of LGBTQ content created a pattern of Chinese queer expression. Firstly, the study will focus on the impact of the censorship mechanism on the LGBTQ content published on the Xiaohongshu app.

Next, the study on the background of LGBTQ content publishment on social media and their censorship systems will be done. The case of the Xiaohongshu app is analysed, as well as collecting quantitative and qualitative data on tag usage, algorithms, and click statistics of LGBTQ content and investigating its relation to the censorship mechanism of the app. Finally, the social stereotypes of LGBTQ members created by social media and their implications will be discussed.

2. Background Study

For the research topic, some literatures are searched and selected as references and extracted the necessary parts for the discussion and explanation. To begin with, the research looked into the censorship of Xiaohongshu and how the whole system monitors and rectifies the media, how Xiaohongshu monitors public sentiment as well as the accumulated cases and then extracts sensitive words [1]. The definition of public opinion monitoring events in this document includes acute social events and public opinion, that is, social events that may trigger political and social unrest and endanger national security. This is also the category in which LGBTQ content falls under the Xiaohongshu censorship system. Xiaohongshu has its own internal public opinion emergency handling process. After being reported, Xiaohongshu will clarify the scope of processing and assign review tasks to each group, including checking and extracting keywords, blocking newly uploaded blogs, background checks, etc.

After understanding the basic definition of the censorship mechanism and its operational steps, the discussion on the empowerment and governance of social media for minority groups can be done. The previous study explored the interplay between the empowerment of sexual minorities in China through social media and its impact on the bargaining power of society and the state on LGBT issues [2]. While Chinese censorship suppresses collective discourse, social media empowers sexual minorities in China to promote open information and raise their public profile. The cases discussed in this article show that Chinese society is still weak at this stage, and its power still depends on the tacit approval of the authorities. In the long run, however, with the empowerment of social media, the bargaining power with the state may be stronger.

Upon research, stereotypes of LGBTQ people in China are more serious than anticipated. This may be partly the result of China's strict media censorship. The present study undertook a comprehensive examination of Chinese university students' views towards homosexuals, as well as the origins of these preconceived notions. Specifically, the investigation posits that the formation of stereotypes concerning gay individuals is influenced by factors such as the size of the community, the willingness to pursue knowledge about homosexuality, and personal encounters [3]. The findings of the current research demonstrate the intricate interplay between stereotypes of homosexuals and the utilization of diverse information outlets, thereby allowing for the deduction of certain conclusions that shed light on the stereotypical impact of Chinese media. With such power of media, the representation of LGBTQ people in China is also highly reliant on queer content publishment. An epitome is Tumblr, which has become an extremely active platform for the LGBTQ community. Its historical impact on queer expression is studied to find a possible pattern similar to Xiaohongshu, since Tumblr is known for the use of tags to categorize posts when publishing and engaging an audience viewing the same tags that Xiaohongshu learned from *Tumblr fandoms: Community & Culture* investigates the motivations of Tumblr fandom users to engage in fandom and how they interact within the Tumblr community [4]. The conclusions derived from the article indicate that there are various mechanisms that motivate individuals to participate in Tumblr fandoms. These mechanisms encompass acknowledgement from fellow users and officials, the potential to exhibit authenticity facilitated by anonymity, and the opportunity to partake in matters of social justice. There is an identical pattern playing out in Xiaohongshu and the community building based on LGBTQ identity. However, under the censorship of LGBTQ content, LGBTQ content creators on Xiaohongshu have to modify and adjust their display methods to avoid blocking and viewing limitations, which this research will study.

3. Methodology

To study the censorship of LGBTQ content on Xiaohongshu, the secondary data is searched and both quantitative and qualitative data are collected, which involved non-participant observation. The most commonly used tags by LGBTQ users on Xiaohongshu were counted and sought patterns within LGBTQ content creation in relation to the censorship mechanism. For data analysis, inferential statistics is used, which employ measurements derived from the experimental sample of subjects to compare the treatment groups and draw conclusions about the broader population of subjects.

To better analyze the views of homosexual group, collecting data is necessary. This research needs to collect data from two perspectives: 1) from previous research which is the second-hand data; 2) from the popular social media, Xiaohongshu as the first-hand data.

3.1. Collecting Data from Previous Research

The first step is to explain the censorship system Xiaohongshu app adopts by analyzing the document of the process of how Xiaohongshu monitor information online [1]; censorship on Xiaohongshu is defined as 10 categories of public opinion events, including those that "may cause political and social unrest, social incidents that threaten national security" and "targeted criticism and suggestions of the people against the Communist Party of China and government agencies." Public opinion is divided into two categories: censorship instructions issued by the government and "internal public opinion", that is, the voluntary self-censorship of Xiaohongshu. To the censorship instructions from the Cyberspace Administration, Xiaohongshu requires an immediate response. In particular, it is necessary to respond immediately, requiring internal public opinion to respond within 5 minutes, and the CAC (codex Alimentary Commission) directive requires that be ready to respond at all times. In the background inside the Xiaohongshu, there will be a "blocker", which is used to detect sensitive words, here how Xiaohongshu disables certain tags will be described in detail.

As can be seen in the section of "Emergency incident handling process", the review department not only requires that the relevant content be quickly offline but also needs to use the deleted samples to "extract derivative words" and conduct a secondary check. In this article, a positive light found is that attention is also paid to limiting the spread of the concept of homosexuality in view of "homophobia".

Therefore, in the face of various censorship mechanisms of Xiaohongshu, LGBTQ content creators on the platform develop ways to avoid censorship by adjusting and modifying their way of posting and presentation in aspects of the shooting angle, photo layout, specific tagging, etc.

From the perspective of image posting, gay couple bloggers tend to avoid photographing two people into the frame and have a variety of camera angles to avoid blocker scrutiny, mixing pictures of themselves and their partners with scenery or food or in-style photos.

3.2. Collecting First-Hand Data from Application

The LGBTQ community often uses specific tags to evade censorship and search. Various LGBTQ-related hashtag clicks are surveyed and were plotted on the table below.

Table 1: Hashtags Used by the LGBTQ Community on Xiaohongshu and the Number of Tag Views.

LGBTQ Group					Hashtags			
LGBT	#LGBt	#(Rainbow emoji)*	#Rainbow (Caihong g)*	#Rainbow + Rainbow emoji (Caihong + emoji)*	#pride	#(Rainbow Flag emoji)		
Views (million)	15.46	220	340	87.391	3.323	6.928		
Homosexual	#Homo (Tongxing)	#Contact Book (Tongxunlu)* [1]	#txl[2]	#Homo (tong)	#homo			
Views (million)	67.786	70.219	49.508	3.493	1.652			
Lesbian	#Le	#LE	#IES	#LeS	#Female Contact Book (nvtongxunlu)[3]	#Les (Lala)	#the L (Rela)[4]	#Wink (Jiyan) [5]
Views (million)	1860	95.516	66.25	8.748	40.892	58.474	31.188	4.708
Gay	#Gayboy	#Male Contact Book (Nantongxunlu)[6]	#White Socks (Baiwa)*	#Male Comrade (Nantongzhi)*[7]	#blued[8]	#Hot Boy (Ladi)	#Husband-husband (Fufu)	
Views (million)	3.421	27.594	2000	3.893	5.95	9.222	70.906	
Bisexual	#bi	#Bi (Shuang)						
Views (million)	17.483	16.538						

Note *: Asterisks are not necessarily used only by the LGBTQ people in the image

1. Homophonic pun refers to homosexual 2. Abbreviation of Pinyin for homosexual 3. Homophonic pun refers to homosexual 4. Dating app used by lesbians 5. Nickname for the L 6. Homophonic pun refers to gay 7. A way of calling gay people 8. Dating app used by gays.

4. Analysis

From Table 1, it is clearly to see that LGBTQ content creators are using a variety of tags to evade the censorship mechanism on the Xiaohongshu app. Three categories can be divided: internationally accepted LGBTQ labels (e.g. LGBT, sometimes paired with abrupt changes of capitalization to avoid censorship), local variations (e.g. Lala, which are homo phonically translated variations of "lesbian" largely adopted by Chinese lesbians) and labels based on stereotypes (e.g. white socks, based on the stereotype that gay boys prefer white socks) A category of tags will be closely looked are labels named after the stereotype of the according group, such as dark skin sports students, white socks and

so on. Although in a way, these labels have become secret codes for LGBTQ community to recognize fellows especially under the censorship rules, these labels are still largely stereotypes based on physical appearance and style that have little to do with deciding a person's sexuality. It may also create new stereotypes, for example, gay people may be all seen as men who love to exercise, wear white socks, or dress up and act feminine; Both lesbians and T are characterized by a neutral style, misanthrope and short hair. This may become have a negative impact on the self-presentation of both LGBTQ members and people outside the community: Straight women who dress more gender-neutrally may be regarded as tomboys, or straight men who love to crossness may be regarded as gay. If two boys are walking on the road together, they may also be heckled by some people as lovers. At the same time, LGBTQ members who fail to meet the established criteria may also be misunderstood or even unwelcome by the community.

Moreover, as the study looked into the click statics of the LGBTQ tags, the gap between viewing numbers and post numbers is noticed. It is concerned that with the popularity of LGBTQ groups on social media, although young people gradually accept LGBTQ groups, more will regard LGBTQ as a trend and the object of emulation, such as many straight women self-proclaimed as lesbians or stating that they want to find girlfriends, exploiting the space and power of voice media granted LGBTQ members to represent and express themselves.

5. Discussion

As a relatively new social media platform in China, with its strict publishing restrictions on content related to the LGBTQ group, Xiaohongshu has fewer years of development of queer expression and community building. Thus, its earlier equivalent Tumblr is studied. Tumblr is characterized as a platform for blogging where individuals have the ability to generate entries in the format of written text, images, quotations, hyperlinks, audio, and videos. These posts can be labeled with key terms, subsequently enabling other users to explore these labeled posts to retweet, like, share and/or follow other users. Once a user follows someone, their posts will appear on their dashboard. Through the analysis of the published content on Xiaohongshu and a deeper understanding of Tumblr, a social media platform, the use of tags and categories on various social media platforms by LGBTQ groups can be analyzed.

Much literature suggests that many users view Tumblr as "a place to get together about something". Most of them love this community because they can discuss and communicate with people who share their likes and opinions. Previous study investigates the motivations behind Tumblr fandom users' participation in fandom and their interactions within the Tumblr community. [4] The study discovered that users of the Tumblr fandom exhibit a distinct culture, which differs greatly from that of other social networking platforms. These individuals perceive their experience as 'always-on', allowing them to engage at any given moment throughout the day. Additionally, they have embraced a distinctive jargon and employ animated GIFs to align with their preferred fandom activities. The study further revealed that a foundation of social justice underlies the motivation for usage among participants. The opportunity to engage in social justice initiatives serves as one of the driving forces that motivated users to immerse themselves in the Tumblr fandom. In conclusion, the paper argues that users of the Tumblr fandom embody a distinctive culture, and there exists a gap of comprehensive knowledge concerning the utilization of fandoms from a descriptive qualitative perspective. The LGBTQ group also occupies a visible part of Tumblr's fan base. The study that focuses on "how Tumblr can be used to connect with peers, engage with gender and sexual identities, self-expression, and well-being". [5] It also points out that 'Tumblr also affords the possibility of finding and connecting to fan/topic-based communities and individuals with shared interests, particularly through "tagging" posts'. The paper suggests that the intensity of Tumblr use reflects the (disjointed) connection many young people have with queer lives. Tumblr has a lot to offer queer life, especially

queer networking, empathy, and connection through shared experiences. It also provides a shared community to contemplate, promote and realize the queer future people desire.

Next is the discussion of the relationship between LGBTQ moderation of posted content and stereotypes about this group. First, according to the *Social Identity Theory (SIT)* [6], the group people belong to is an essential source of pride and self-esteem, and the group gives us a sense of social identity belonging to this social world. People divide the world into "them (outgroup)" and "us (ingroup)" through the process of social classification. Stereotypes are based on people's tendency to categorize things into groups, and the process tends to exaggerate the differences between groups and the similarity of items within the same group [6]. Once people classify themselves as part of the group, they tend to compare their group to other groups. Members of the ingroup seek out the negative aspects of the outgroup to gain positive group status of the ingroup and increase self-esteem. All in all, stereotypes are produced by the unfamiliarity and estrangement between groups. In this case, according to the *Inter-group Contact Hypothesis* [7]: More exposure or contact people have with different groups, it may play an anti-stereotype role and increase acceptance between individuals from other groups.

In China, individuals who identify as LGBTQ tend to conceal their identity as a result of the cultural influences in the Chinese society [8]. In Chinese culture, due to the historical influence of Confucianism, there is a strong emphasis on obeying to the "laws of nature". Consequently, individuals are expected to conform to a widely accepted gender identity and sexual orientation, which is part of the "Doctrine of the Mean" [9]. Moreover, China embodies a collectivist culture, where family and society exert a profound impact on Chinese people. Chinese society values family, honour, and dignity, as well as maintaining "face" (reputation) in social interactions. LGBTQ identity is still considered stigmatized ("losing face") for the family. It is for this reason that most LGBTQ members will hide their identities from others, which will lead to non-LGBTQ people's understanding of LGBTQ only from media reports and other people's words, thus having no chance to have direct contact with members of the LGBTQ community [3].

After the rapid development of the Internet and significant social media have been invented in the past few years, more and more people have the opportunity to share their lives on social platforms or view the posts shared by others. Under such circumstances, LGBTQ members find new channels to speak out for themselves. By posting content about LGBTQ, more non-LGBTQ viewers can directly contact the outgroup, which may eliminate the barriers and unfamiliarity between the groups and dispel the stereotypes, hence proving that LGBTQ is not "abnormal." However, in recent years, China's attitude towards the LGBTQ community is still repulsive. Many social media will classify keywords related to LGBTQ as sensitive words and block them. In this way, LGBTQ members will lose an opportunity to speak out for themselves and let outgroups understand themselves. Therefore, the adjustments made to avoid censorship can also allow outgroups to continue to see themselves through new channels. This can be seen as changes and adjustments made to remove stereotypes.

However, such changes might create new stereotypes [10]. In the 2020s, many young people have become more accepting of LGBTQ identities. As a result, on the Internet, LGBTQ has changed from a synonym for shame and disgust in the past to a new positive image that members boldly display. While boldness and novelty are positive images, it has also become another stereotype that overgeneralizes the whole community [10]. Some new problems have been created, as illustrated beforehand in Analysis: Labeling and the spread of specific labels thanks to media may develop into stereotypes, leading to false assumptions of non-LGBTQ members that fall into the stereotypes and excluding LGBTQ members that fail to meet the common standards. In a way, these new-born stereotypes are dangerously widely accepted due to the spread of LGBTQ content, limiting expressions and marginalizing outgroups, driven away from the principle of acceptance and free expression that LGBTQ community takes pride in. Moreover, the spread of LGBTQ content through

social media has led many general public, especially young people who are less mature in judgement, to regard LGBTQ as a trend or a novel label; they join the trend to be fashionable, not to become supportive or contributing to the community, consuming the space of queer expression.

6. Conclusion

Generally speaking, Xiaohongshu has had a positive impact on LGBTQ content spreading and community building, empowering queer individuals in China to make connections, advocate for, and interchange. It provides a platform for marginalized voices, raises awareness, and promotes empathy. Recent trends show an increase in support and inclusion, and in the future, the impact can be expected to grow.

In this paper, Xiaohongshu is connected to the broader context of the historically proclaimed social media app Tumblr to study their similar pattern of using tags and algorithms to bond like-minded people under the same identities.

The role the censorship system plays in LGBTQ content creation on Xiaohongshu is recognized; especially given the app's importance to queer community building, it is proposed that censorship mechanisms would affect queer expression and perceptions of the community in turn. By analyzing the shared characteristics of photographs posted and tags used by LGBTQ content creators on Xiaohongshu, the way LGBTQ members adjusted and modified their expression in accordance to censorship rules can be understood. The research further discussed the influence of the adjustments: For example, the expansion of using the same few tags created an interactive community of LGBTQ content creators and viewers; euphemistic tags based on physical appearance shared by some queer people created novel stereotypes.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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