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The Influence of Social Media on the Social Identity of Young Homosexuals

Dong Lu, Huidan Liu

College of Education, North China University of Science and Technology, Tangshan 063200, China

Abstract: ***After the 21st century, the homosexual communities in China have gradually entered public vision with the help of the Internet platform, but they have not been fully accepted by society, the identity issue of this group has been more and more concerned by the academic circle. From the perspective of constructivism and social identity theory, this study has explored how online social media affects the identity process of young homosexuals through internet ethnography and in-depth interviews. Results show that young homosexuals complete the process of "self-discovery" and become aware of "others' gaze" through interaction and information acquisition; Social media has become the main way for young homosexuals to perceive opinion climate; Active vocalization can regulate cognitive dissonance to a certain extent, thus contributing to the positive in-group identification.***

Keywords: Homosexuality, Social identity, Identity, Social media.

1. Introduction

Compared with heterosexuals, the self-perception processes and identity processes of homosexuals are more tortuous, they are prone to self-incongruence, depression, low self-esteem, and other psychological problems. Among which, young homosexuals, who are the indigenous of the Internet era, tend to be more motivated to organize and participate in sexual minority activities on the Internet, and are able to adjust their cognitive dissonance, compare and confirm their identities by interacting with others more actively and constantly. Therefore, it is necessary to observe the identity processes of young homosexuals in online contexts and to explore the impact of the Internet on them to improve the researches in this field.

The discussion of identity can be divided into two perspectives: essentialist and constructivist (Yang, 2019). The essentialist perspective argues that the self is innate and the process of identity is a continuous process of self-knowledge and acceptance by the individual, emphasizing individual identification (Liu & Wang, 2011). The constructivist believes that identity attribute is the result of social factor constructs, the process of individual exploration of identity is a process of continuous interaction with the external environment, and identity is influenced by social environmental factors (Liu & Lei, 2018; Liu & Zhang, 2009). From a constructivist perspective and based on the stage theory of social identity, this study has examined the involvement of online social media in the identity process of young homosexuals and its influence mechanism.

Social Identity Theory (SIT), first proposed by Tajfel and Turner et al. in 1978, thinks that social identity stems from the acquisition of group identity, individuals develop in-group preferences for the group they belong to and prejudice against out-groups (Zhang & Zuo, 2006). The process of social identity is divided into three stages: (1) social categorization, in which group categorization is achieved by exaggerating the similarities among in-group members and the differences among out-group members; (2) social comparison, in this stage, in-group and out-group members are distinguished by making comparisons, the former is given higher evaluations; (3) positive distinctiveness, individuals tend to perceive their own group as superior to out-group members in specific dimensions of group categorization, thus individuals can obtain positive social identity and self-esteem through their group identity (Tajfel H, 1982). The above three stages include two components of identity, namely "categorizing oneself as a homosexual" and "assessing the social situation of the homosexual group", which are summarized by Florence Tamagne in History of Homosexuality in Europe as "the discovery of self" and "the gaze of others' (Tamagne, 2006).

2. Method

Firstly, conducted a non-participatory observation for five months on six WeChat groups, Microblog accounts and WeChat official accounts with high visibility and activity, and with young homosexuals as the main participants or audiences, to examine how the research subjects took part in the homosexual community activities through online social media. Information about the objects of observation is shown in Table 1.

Secondly, in order to explore the use and perception of online social media from the perspective of homosexuals themselves, conducted semi-structured interviews with young homosexuals, having obtained 16 valid interview transcripts based on the principle of information saturation. Information about the respondents is shown in Table 2.

Table 1: Information about the objects of observation

Platform	Name	Number of members/ fans	Activity/Read	Member Features
WeChat Group	Group S	232	more than 100 chat logs per day	young lesbians predominantly
	Group A	180	20-50 chat logs per day	young homosexuals predominantly
Microblog	Homosexual Voices	2.06 million	Average daily reads over 100k	domestic homosexual news and events
	Light Blue LGBT+ News	1.13 million	Average daily reads over 100k	global homosexual news and events
WeChat official accounts	Chengdu Mirk (out of service)	unknown	Article hits ranging from 0.5k to 20k	high visibility in Chengdu
	BeiTong Culture	unknown	Article hits ranging from 0.5k to 3k	high visibility in China

Table 2: Information about the respondents

No.	Nickname	sex	age	occupation	Location	Education	Religion	Interview Form
1	Flag	M	21	student	Chengdu	undergraduate	none	voice call
2	X	F	21	student	Tianjin	undergraduate	Buddhist	typing
3	Little W	M	22	student	Shanghai	undergraduate	none	typing
4	Wang	M	22	student	Yunnan	undergraduate	none	voice call
5	Dessert	F	23	student	Northeast China	undergraduate	none	typing
6	Toast	F	24	student	Fujian	master	none	voice call
7	Orange	F	24	Teacher	Yunnan	undergraduate	none	voice message
8	Angelito	F	21	student	Chengdu	undergraduate	none	voice message
9	Boat	F	19	student	Yunnan	undergraduate	none	voice call
10	Raccoon	F	20	student & soothsayer	Yunnan	junior college	Buddhist & Taoist	face to face
11	L	F	22	student	Yunnan	mater	none	voice call
12	David	M	22	student	Xi'an	undergraduate	Buddhist	
13	Sheep	M	22	student	Yunnan	undergraduate	none	voice call
14	Kin	M	20	student	Yunnan	undergraduate	none	voice call
15	Little Chen	M	20	student	Poland	undergraduate	none	typing
16	Zhua	F	20	student	Dali	undergraduate	none	voice call

3. The Uses and Gratifications of Social Media: The Discovery of Self

In the process of participating in online social networking, sexual orientation is highlighted as a dimension of group identity, young homosexuals receive feedback from the outside world through interacting with both internal and external group members, because of these continuous social categorization and social comparison, they can identify themselves as homosexuals gradually. Online social media influences the process of self-discovery by meeting users' needs for interaction and information.

1.1 Use Social Media for Interaction

Microblog account is a channel which can provide fast and timely interaction. The "Exposure Platform" section of Microblog account "Homosexual Voices" is specifically designed to receive and display reports from netizens on incidents or remarks that discriminate against homosexuals, which can, to a certain extent, force those being reported to correct their behavior through online exposure. For example, Microblog account "Light Blue LGBT + News" has set platform "Light Blue Chat Room" to post a topic on homosexuality for fans to discuss everyday. For instance, on World Book Day 2020, "Light Blue Chat Room" started the topic "A Good Book for Homosexuals".

In addition to providing promotional support for offline activities, WeChat official accounts can also provide services that are participatory and interactive for users by building online interactive platforms. Typically, "Beitong Culture" is able t collaborate with other LGBT WeChat official accounts across the country to hold large-scale online activities, such as the "LGBT career experience sharing session", co-organized with Shanghai Pride Festival in March 2020 to share workplace experiences with LGBT people.

WeChat groups provide a platform for young homosexuals to exchange ideas directly and this is an important way to build emotional connections with their peers. The most discussed topics in group S are daily life, coming out experiences, domestic and international homosexual-related news, and attitudes toward homosexuality of people around them. Moreover, group members also seek advice from their peers on how to cope with the troubles brought by homosexual identity, such as how to euphemistically refuse a blind date arranged by parents, etc. Group A, different with group S, is characterized by "internet community of offline organization", the chatting contents of it are mostly extensions of or serve for offline activities, and the topics of offline activities are basically the same as those in Group S.

3.2 Use Social Media for Information

Besides participating in activities and interacting with peers, obtaining information is another important purpose for young homosexuals to use social media. WeChat and Microblog have a large number of users in China's social media market, they have their own "media language" and display their own characteristics as information sources. Microblog encourages short newsflashes and timely interaction, it is characterized by rapid and wide spreading and visual interaction; WeChat has become one of the preferred media for communicators due to its various forms of information, convenient access and unlimited article length.

The main contents of the Microblog account "homosexuals Voice" are news and activities related to homosexuality in China. For example, in April 2020, it focused on the first case of homosexual couples child rearing in China and continued to carry subsequent news; the Microblog account "Light Blue LGBT+ News" mainly sends blogs about the news and activities related to homosexuality abroad. For example, in April 2020, "Light Blue" posted news about a hockey player

in the United States who chose to reveal his homosexual identity because he was disgusted by homophobic views.

The WeChat official account "Chengdu Mirk" (now defunct) was an extension of an offline homosexual organization in Chengdu, supporting for the organization's own offline activities was its principal function. The major contents of it were the promotion of offline events and the sale of six-color rainbow (the identity emblem of sexual minority) products. For example, on August 30, 2019, the organization organized a large-scale offline thanksgiving party for sexual minorities, the publicity of it was spread through its" WeChat official accounts both before and after the party; the WeChat official accounts "BeiTong Culture" mainly sends news related to homosexuality in China, opens a fixed column to discuss common problems faced by homosexuals, and also provides online psychological counseling services.

In general, homosexual Microblog accounts have their own distinctive features and precise user position. Therefore, the contents of them are rarely repeated and forms are diverse. Specifically, the main contents of homosexual Microblog accounts usually are homosexual-related news, discussions on homosexual concerns, "anti-homosexual" and "pro-homosexual" behaviors of others and so on. As for the WeChat official accounts, they tend to post articles to express systematic views, pay more attention to the fluency and aesthetics of text expression, and are more capable of finding novel topics for articles and organizing activities when news is relatively scarce. Many WeChat official accounts have established their own brands and started to sell tangible products and hold offline activities.

In conclusion, online social media has participated in the process of self-discovery of the homosexual youth as an important channel to access homosexual-related information and interact with peers. On the one hand, when young homosexuals join in-group interactions, "homosexuals" becomes a common identity symbol for group members which is constantly emphasized. Through social categorization and social comparison, participants distinguish "peers" from "others" and establish emotional ties with "peers", obtain a sense of belonging to the group and finally acquire a group identity. On the other hand, the dissemination of homosexual information not only can provide information for homosexuals to participate in group interaction, but also is an important way for them to deepen their knowledge of homosexuality and evaluate the attitudes of the public toward homosexuals. The acceptance with the identity of "homosexual" is constantly reinforced in the statements of "we" and "others".

4. Pathway to Perceive the Opinion Climate: The Gaze of Others

Social identity theory suggests that after acquiring group identity, people tend to give higher evaluations to in-group members in order to meet the need for high self-esteem. This is a process of making positive distinctions between in- and out-groups, involving the assessment of one's social position and the perception of the opinion climate (the attitudes of others towards this group), and noticing the "gaze" of others from a first-person perspective. Since the mainstream media hardly report information about homosexuality, online social media has become the main way to perceive the opinion climate.

4.1 Absence of Mainstream Media

Many respondents of in-depth interviews believe that they can gradually feel others' attitudes toward homosexuals when they are using online social media, and official media are often absent in disseminating information about homosexuality or sexual minorities. Because of China's relatively conservative traditional cultural atmosphere and the controversial nature of homosexuality-related topics, the mainstream media usually hold an avoiding and ignoring attitude toward these topics, which makes it difficult for official media with a high threshold of information production to meet the information needs of audiences on homosexuality-related topics.

X feels that the information and news she gets about homosexuality mainly comes from the self-media, and she is disappointed by the avoidance attitude of the official media.

> Why do you think the domestic social environment is relatively unfriendly to homosexuals? (interviewer)
>
> "The most noticeable example is that in our country, any homosexual theme films and TV productions are not allowed to be released right now." (Interviewee X)

4.2 Use self-media to Speak Out

Compared with official media, it is more convenient to post information through online self-media accounts, and the inspection of contents is more lenient. Therefore, an ecological network of homosexual information is built gradually, these online self-media accounts have their own characteristics, and can provide audiences with plentiful and diverse homosexuality-related information from different perspectives, in contrast to the attitude of official media.

During the interview, Wang said he pays attention to domestic homosexual news and considers the Internet as the main way to obtain relevant information.

> "(Most of the news about homosexuality are) from my WeChat moments or those Microblogs that I have occasionally browsed. I prefer to pay attention to some interesting Microbloggers and WeChat official accounts instead of taking initiative to search for those information." (Interviewee Wang)

Further, not satisfied with being an absolute recipient, Toast is a "small V" (opinion leader with some clout) who focuses on homosexual topics on Microblog, and she often discusses with other netizens on homosexuality topics.

> "I myself am a (Microblog) homosexuals "small V", and I am quite happy about that. I often participate in relevant discussions. At the end of 2019, I also participated in the call for amendments to the

> marriage law and persuaded people to submit their opinions on the Internet." (Interviewee Toast)

Because of the anonymity, immediacy, and spread widely characters of the Internet and the long-term avoidance attitude of homosexuality in official media, the Internet has gradually become an important channel for the homosexual community to get news about homosexuality, communicate with others, and speak out actively. By using the Internet, homosexuals have completed their perception of the attitudes of "the third people" who they cannot contact directly, and have thus formed an overall judgment about the society's attitudes of homosexuals, which would further influence their decision on whether to disclose their homosexual identity or not and to what extent.

5. Motivation for Active Voice: Efforts to Increase Self-esteem

When one perceives that his or her own group is rejected or devalued in society, the need for high self-esteem through group identity cannot be satisfied (Lei & Wang, 2018), and the "positive distinctiveness" stage of the social identity process is curbed, which can lead to strong cognitive dissonance. At this time, cognitive dissonance can be alleviated by changing others' evaluation of one's own group, denying group identity, or avoiding others' evaluation, and online social media becomes the primary tool for homosexuals to regulate cognitive dissonance.

5.1 "The Primary Function of Active Voice is to Increase the Visibility of the Homosexuals."

Compared with "changing others' perceptions" and "denying one's own homosexual identity", "avoiding others' comments" is a more direct and easy way to regulate cognitive dissonance. For example, Wang seldom participated in homosexual equal rights movements and paid little attention to them. He felt that it was not necessary for everyone to accept and respect homosexuality, and it also was difficult to change others' attitudes, so those movements might have little effect.

> "I think the only effect of (homosexual supportive movements) is to make some people begin to aware of the existence of this group, I don't think it can fundamentally change their attitudes, or only a very small number of people will change their minds somewhat because of homosexual parades, it (the struggle of equal rights) is very difficult." (Interviewee Wang)

David hardly participates in any homosexual equal rights movements too, and he feels that such movements are useless in achieving equal rights, it is impractical to put too many expectations on those movements.

> "I haven't and won't join any homosexual supportive movements, I don't care about them at all and also feel they are troublesome, they make homosexual topics conspicuous and can bring nothing but endless arguments. These movements are triggers for cyber-quarrelings. It is difficult to change the attitudes of others through these movements." (Interviewee David)

Although there is no expectation of the actual effect of homosexual supportive movements, "changing the opinions of others" is still the most desirable means for homosexuals to regulate their cognitive dissonance. For example, Orange does not feel that the realization of equal rights for homosexuals can be pinned on diverse movements, the reason for taking part in movements is to fulfill her obligation of being a member of the homosexual group.

> "I have followed a lot of relevant social media accounts to speak out and contribute. But to be honest, I'm not very optimistic about their effects personally. So I'm just finishing my responsibility, but I do not intend to make this my career. I just think that as a member of this group, I need to express such a voice. I hold a pessimistic view, I may not be able to have the right to marriage even until the day I die." (Interviewee Orange)

Kin often participates in public homosexual activities, but he thinks that the impact of homosexual supportive movements is minimal, and the spread range is very limited, and the effect of letting others know is greater than the effect of making others change their minds.

> "I suppose the effect is very small, because I think this thing (homosexual supportive movement) can only influence a very small part of this group. For instance, our advice about the marriage law will not be accepted in any case, it will have a slight impact on society, although this impact is not certain positive, just finally put this topic on the table, so that some people can see it. But it doesn't mean people may agree with our advice after discussion, putting this thing up for discussion, the impact is limited to this." (Interviewee Kin)

Engaging in homosexual supportive movements or not, the majority of interviewees tended to believe that social movements have a very limited effect on increasing the social inclusion of homosexuals, and only have some impacts on increasing the visibility of homosexuals. Although movements are not considered to change the public opinion situation of homosexual group, the viewpoint that homosexuality is not a disease is repeatedly emphasized through these active movements and calls, which can help to achieve a positive group identity with young homosexuals.

5.2 "But it's Better than Doing Nothing"

Toast is an active participant who usually joins public homosexual activities, but she is not sure whether these activities can really help to change the attitudes of the public or not.

> "This is a kind of thing that effort on it is not necessarily useful, but not effort certainly is impossible. We have to understand the whole historical background and traditional ideology of China. I think it's hard to shift the legal system and

> cultural conception so that we can achieve homosexual equal rights, but we cannot stop trying just because it's hard. We should try, but you can't force the ideal outcome." (Interviewee Toast)

Angelito feels that homosexual supportive movements have the effect of "every little helps", although the impact of every voice may be small, it may achieve the goal of equal rights for homosexuals through accumulated efforts.

> "Considerable change is made up of many small steps, and what we are doing now is these small steps. Although I personally feel that these small steps will not make a big difference now, they will at least show that we are making our voices be heard." (Interviewee Angelito)

"But it's better than doing nothing" is the most common response from respondents when being asked why they participate in homosexual supportive movements. Despite the weakness of the belief that movements and activities can change the public cognition and attitudes, the majority of respondents felt that only by actively participating in homosexual activities and speaking out for the group could they achieve the potential to change the public opinions, and it is this hope that gives young homosexuals an optimistic expectation of improving the social evaluations of their group.

6. Conclusion

Affected by traditional cultural concepts, homosexuals have not been fully accepted by Chinese society and have been evaded by official media for a long time, while the prevalence of the Internet has given them a platform for social categorization and social comparison, thus the homosexual community can be formed and homosexuals can finish the process of social identity. It is impossible for young homosexuals to abandon the Internet social media in the process of acquiring social identity through group memberships.

To be specific, firstly, young homosexuals make social categorization and social comparison in the process of interaction and acquiring information, thus classifying themselves as homosexuals and acquiring a group identity, completing the process of "self-discovery". Secondly, young homosexuals distinguish "peers" from "others" and are aware of the "gaze of others", online social media becomes the main channel to perceive the opinion climate and evaluate their group's public opinion situation. Thirdly, due to the perception of negative social assessments of own group, the process of positive distinctiveness is suppressed, in-group preferences contradict the perceived results of the opinion climate, and speaking for homosexuals through online social media becomes one of the important ways to regulate cognitive dissonance. Although young homosexuals have a negative perception of the actual effects of active struggles, a "better than nothing" mentality can help to alleviate the negative effects of cognitive dissonance. At last, active participation in homosexual supportive activities or movements is also a process of constantly affirming the superiority of own group, thus the participants can complete a positive identification with the homosexual group.

Social identity has always been an inevitable issue in the study of homosexuality. In the constructivist perspective, online social media, which can offer a variety of ways for interaction, will undoubtedly participate in the identity process of homosexuals. Clarifying its influential mechanism can help to provide scientific and effective theoretical guidance in improving the mental health of young homosexuals.

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