

Analysis of Gender Awareness Communication in Different Online Gender Autonomous Regions in China--Taking Hupu App and Red App as Examples

Shuyu Zhang^{1,a,*}

¹*Department of Humanities and Creative Writing, Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon, Hong Kong, China, 999077*

a. 20236581@life.hkbu.edu.hk

**corresponding author*

Abstract: With the popularity of social media and video sites, internet users gather together based on shared hobbies or needs, forming different virtual communities to establish social bonds and develop a collective consciousness, thus forming Internet communities, where the way internet users participate in online social networking also play a reshaping role for the online platform they are on. This paper will focus on Red and Hupu, two gender-focused apps, to analyze the formation of gender-based group subcultures, KOLs-led emotion-oriented consciousness transmission, and sexist right contends in online gender autonomous regions in China's current community-based economy-oriented operating environment. In the era of social media, it is essential for the rise of feminism to fight for their discourse right and to speak up rationally. The awakening of women's self-awareness and the reduction of women being seen, fantasized, objectified, and consumed are not only essential parts of gender studies but also indispensable propositions of media studies, in which social media plays a crucial role. Also, the dilemma of cultural discrimination that feminism, as a non-traditional and imported culture, is currently encountering in China, as mentioned in this essay, is also worthy of attention and further exploration in future feminist studies in China.

Keywords: online gender autonomous region, gender awareness, gender right contends, gender collective subculture, feminism

1. Introduction

With the popularity of social media and video sites, internet users gather together based on shared hobbies or needs, forming different virtual communities to establish social bonds and develop a collective consciousness, thus forming Internet communities, where the way internet users participate in online social networking also play a reshaping role for the online platform they are on. In the fashion and lifestyle community, which are closely related to women's lives, and in the sports circles, which are popular with men, two kinds of gender-based discourses are being produced, disseminated, fermented in the different online gender autonomous communities[1]. This paper will focus on Red and Hupu, two gender-focused apps reported by Qiangua Database with more than 90% female and male users, respectively, to analyze the formation of gender-based group subcultures, KOLs-led emotion-oriented consciousness transmission, and sexist right contends in online gender autonomous

regions in China's current community-based economy-oriented operating environment. In the era of social media, it is essential for the rise of feminism to fight for their discourse right and to speak up rationally. The awakening of women's self-awareness and the reduction of women being seen, fantasized, objectified, and consumed are not only essential parts of gender studies but also indispensable propositions of media studies, in which social media plays a crucial role. Also, the dilemma of cultural discrimination that feminism, as a non-traditional and imported culture, is currently encountering in China, as mentioned in this essay, is also worthy of attention and further exploration in future feminist studies in China.

2. Hupu: Community Dilemma Creates Anxious Straight Men

2.1. Construction of Straight Men Identity

The word “straight” in the phrase straight male refers to the opposite meaning of “bent”, which stands for homosexuality, has been commonly used on the Chinese Internet since 2014 to criticize male Internet users who are judgmental of women, macho, and overly conservative in their gender views[2]. This stereotypical image with strong negative connotations is mainly unacceptable to male netizens. However, the user base of Hupu does not shy away from this stigmatizing term but collectively calls themselves straight male and built a core cultural identity[3] around the term, which also brought them into a social dilemma[4] and gender right contends through this subculture.

The close integration of the term straight male with the user community is directly related to the similar background of the primary users of Hupu. The community was initially based on a vague group identity around sports hobbies, guided by commercial capital to become a solid social and cultural identity centered on straightness[4]. The founding of Hupu dates back to 2004 when Dr. Hang Cheng started a Chinese basketball forum called Hoop China to capitalize on the boom of Yao Ming's NBA debut in late 2003. The forum grew rapidly in the following years, becoming a comprehensive sports portal and attracting many sports fans. After the expansion, Hoop China actively opened various event forum sections and created a forum called Gambia Continent(later renamed as Hupu Walk Street) for users to discuss their daily lives and interests alongside the events. Since the user community is mainly young men aged 18-40 who love sports and the Internet, have plenty of hormones, plenty of free time, and a sense of social passion and responsibility, all these homogeneous hobbies and similar values make Hupu Forum as a community with a certain threshold of entry, the basis for forming a stable audience more quickly[4]. Therefore, in this discussion forum, the users of the Hupu community gradually developed a unique identity of the straight male.

While providing an incubator for straight men to share their common values, the forum has also created a social dilemma with a strong sense of anxiety for male users, thus evolving a paradoxical new type of masculinity[2]. Based on the highly consistent collective identity of straight men, the daily discussion forum in the Hupu App has helped Hupu to quickly evolve from a simple sports community to a platform for information exchange about users' lives. The tough and straight image of male users on Hupu is highly relevant to their real-life experiences. Unlike their aggressive nature towards other communities, the straight male of the Hupu community is often presented in a somewhat vulnerable way. This vulnerability demonstrates the general anxiety of the community and explains the formation of the aggressive straight male image[2]. Hupu's famous green culture[5], which refers to a series of storylines generated by members of the Hupu community based on anecdotal discussions of the relationship frustrations they faced, can be used as an example to describe this anxiety and the community dilemma. Green means cuckold, an exaggeration of being dumped by one's girlfriend or suspecting her of cheating. The Hupu users have shown particular concern for the forum's anecdotal stories of relationship frustration[5]. As long as the word green is searched in the daily topics discussion section, most posts are almost always more or less on the subject, and the

majority of their particular interest are the posters' attributions around relationship frustration and the repliers' interactions with them, which present a picture of how community members perceive their crises. In these posts, after simply expressing negative feelings about the loss of a relationship, posters invariably turn to attempts at attributing the failure of their relationship[6]. Most of them fall back on community members' questions about their financial strength. For example, in a post titled "Guys, please wake me up! I went to pick up my girlfriend and saw her get into an Audi Q7 belonged to another male"[5], the poster attributed his breakup to his girlfriend's gold-digging nature. This attribution was shared by most of the respondents and illustrated the common anxiety of straight men. These men in the Hupu community believe that the main reason for their relationship frustration is not their problem but rather their unfavorable economic condition in the real world and women's gold-digging nature. At this point, the topic of straight men took a huge turn, as they stopped obsessing about showing off their muscles in the Hupu sports forum to build a rugged image and instead began to express the economic anxiety of the working class through relationship problems. This change of topic is not a coincidence due to relationship frustration, and there is indeed a causal relationship between straight men's economic anxiety and their emphasis on their tough image[2]. It could even be argued that this image emerged after straight men realized that personal financial strength had become an essential foundation of contemporary masculinity[2]. The relationship between the two is closely related to the current situation of straight masculinity, and it needs to be understood in the context of the historical changes in the social environment.

2.2. Business Operation behind Straight Man Image

Besides, the image of straight men and the degree of gender confrontation it has led to is also directly related to the commercial operation of Hupu. For commercial reasons, the tournament organizers and the website want their audiences to have relatively stable and identifiable characteristics. The fixed audience tag helps to form a culture and increase the stickiness of the audience on the one hand and facilitates targeted advertising for businesses on the other[3]. In addition, for a community-based website like Hupu, the user community is a significant potential growth point[3]. Suppose the audience's identity can go beyond the narrow sports area and involve more everyday topics so the site can incubate pan-entertainment content outside of sports[6]. In that case, the community often has more excellent marketing value. Thus, with the demand for profit, the two forces are trying to combine their social concerns to make the Hupu community a more aggregated network of identities. The daily discussion area in the Hupu forum allows users to go beyond their sports hobbies and into pan-entertainment topics, thus infiltrating the online identity of the community into their real life. The forum's timely nature of information exchange also gives the Hupu platform a convenience that broadcasters do not have - timely and frequent feedback from both sides of the information exchange. Hupu has also hosted events such as the Basketball Roadrunner King. Such events not only raise the site's profile but also further strengthen the cultural identity of the user base. Offline events featuring civilian tournaments can emphasize a grassroots spirit that quickly connects with forum users' sports hobbies and the working-class identity they often emphasize in their daily chats and can quickly become a critical community consensus[4]. The forum also has a knack for capturing the hot topics in the daily chats of its members and combining them with the hard-edged vulgarity that users admire[5]. This is how the forum's famous Hupu Goddess Contest grew in size. Initially, the contest was just a social game in which female movie stars were listed and discussed in an impolite way. However, with the official promotion of Hupu, the event was seen as a trendsetter for straight male aesthetics and gradually commercialized. Eventually, through the guidance of these strategies, the hotspot kept spreading and fermenting in various forums of Hupu. This game was once regarded as a trendsetter for straight men's aesthetics and gradually became commercialized. The original fan identity, limited to sports, gradually expanded into a more significant and stable online identity. It

highlights and glues together two elements: the cult of toughness in sports, the deliberate expression of masculinity, and even the objectification of women in their daily conversation[5]. This approach is similar to the passive-avoidance approach used by straight men in the face of classic relationship setbacks mentioned in the previous section: the spread of failed relationships in a highly concentrated male community reinforces gender polarization, which leads male users to reject their expectations of love and directly relegate it to sexual desire. This expression is a kind of pompous banter in which posters and responders perform themselves as misogynists to demonstrate their rejection of the opposite sex and then go to extremes to try to recover the confidence lost in relationship frustration by objectifying women[4]. However, as this group value orientation continues to fester, its reach and strength expand, causing community members to get into trouble. Events such as the Hupu Goddess Contest have attracted attention to the site. However, they have also led to attacks on the forum users from some female online communities, who see the pastime of the Hupu community as the secret psychosexuality of straight men and sharply criticize the Hupu community[6]. The emotional confrontation resulted in two outcomes: on the one hand, members of the Hupu community were involved in much online cursing, and on the other hand, straight male identity developed rapidly in the conflict and became the core cultural identity of the community. In order to maintain the commonly accepted straight masculinity, the straight men of Hupu started to participate in online confrontation continuously, establishing the heterogeneous masculinity and the female fan base that consumes it as the imaginary enemies of the community, creating an apparent gender confrontation[2]. Based on the collective identity subculture formed by the forum's highly similar user groups and the platform's business operation strategy, the original stereotypical definition of straight men in the Hupu app has developed a richer meaning in the community's various practices and has gradually become emerging masculinity worthy of deeper investigation. However, the social dilemma arising from the contradictory and radical ideas that collide with the economic logic in the real world also brings a strong sense of anxiety to straight men, and in such a male-based autonomous region, it intensifies gender polarization and gives rise to external gender confrontation.

3. Red: All Things Happens Based on SHEs

3.1. Feminism Awakening in Life Sharing

Red APP is considered a fashion lifestyle-sharing community that currently attracts more than 200 million predominantly young female users. On Red, users engage in both productive and consuming behaviors. Red users act as producers in a participatory culture, acting as experience officers to share their creative successes, as consumers to observe others' lives and support their sharing, and as socializers to communicate and interact with users with different production skills. This lifestyle interaction builds a participatory media culture style characterized by a low participation threshold, audience transformation into users, and active content production by users[7]. It allows female user groups to easily and quickly express themselves and co-produce their collective identity, while some of the distorted information in this participatory culture platform also forces them to find a balance between compromise and anger in this radical community atmosphere.

The female user group of Red is driven by their natural curiosity, willingness to share and communicate, and massive consumption potential, which has led to the continuous optimization and restructuring of Red's business model and operation mechanism, and thus Red has built a community-based participatory culture group mainly for women[8]. To the users of Red, Red can provide excellent and inexpensive products to meet their pursuit of higher quality of life and a sharing platform for them to share and exchange. This kind of communication is not only the circulation of commodity information but also the manifestation and reconstruction of the collective wisdom of community users[7]. Affiliations[8] are one of the critical forms of participatory culture, i.e., formal

and informal membership in online communities centered on various forms of media. With the slogan "marking lifestyles,[9]" Red builds a participatory culture community where users share their real-life experiences. It is a community that provides a strong incentive for creative expression and active participation, where not every member has to contribute, but all must believe they are free to contribute when they are ready. The barrier to participation in this community is relatively low, and participation is flexible; a photo, a song, a short video, or even a like can be used as participation content. Users' dependence on the platform is only a symptom, but the essence is that users empower themselves and earn pleasure and reputation by actively participating. In contrast to the elite production-oriented culture industry model, the right to participate in culture is distributed to each user and is no longer limited to the choice of "to watch or not to watch" or "to watch this or that."

Red App, an autonomous women's online gender community with an overwhelming female presence, has also sparked the emergence of a business model called the she-economy[10]. She-economy, also known as the women's economy, refers to the fact that as women's economic and social status improves, they have more substantial spending power and are effective in driving economic activity, so there is also a unique economic circle and economic phenomenon formed around women's financial management and consumption[10]. According to data from Qiangua Data on July 21, 2021, Red currently has 450 million registered users, 100 million monthly active users, and nearly 300 million notes posted in 2020, generating 10 billion notes exposure per day. Such a high frequency and a large amount of CTR(Click Through Rate) and exposure can bring massive revenue to the platform, brands, and individuals, so a large amount of capital is also promoting the formation of the collective identity of Red platform users to improve user stickiness and place more targeted advertising to obtain more significant revenue.

In recent years, the huge female market on the Red platform has given rise to many female opinion leaders. They are located in various industries, spreading their opinions and influencing their followers. Their product expertise, charisma, and opinion output have cultivated stronger fan loyalty. Analyzing the original text of user-generated notes, we can see that empathy is the main path of interaction between Red bloggers and their followers[8]. The theme of love is regarded by many female KOLs as a the password of high CTR and is used as the theme of their graphic and video creation to gain more traffic and followers, these female KOLs are therefore called emotion bloggers[11]. These female emotion bloggers informally coach viewers to put themselves in their shoes and understand their emotions, ultimately influencing their perceptions, emotions, and actions and creating some interpersonal connection. Emotions, as the most resonant link in a community, promote the differentiation and polarization of members' thoughts in different directions in different online gender communities.

3.2. Gender Awareness Transmission Led by KOLs

Simone Beauvoir wrote in her book *Le Deuxième Sexe* that "from childhood, whether a little girl wants to realize herself as a woman or wants to overcome the limitations of womanhood, to accomplish and escape this, she depends on men. This statement shows the dependence of women on male power as a subordinate position. The aforementioned Hupu Goddess Contest, organized by male KOLs in Hupu, represents a male perspective on the objectification of women. In this contest, these male users on Hupu unconsciously categorize women as inferior and selective entertainment. In this central male perspective, men are the ones who look at and define women, while women become the defined others, which then lead to the dominant position of men and the disadvantaged position of women become very different opposites[12].

On the contrary, most feminist female emotional bloggers on Red hold the exact opposite of this attitude but with a more radical attitude to deny the potential for men to bring emotional value to women and instead attribute women's emotional fulfillment to their complete separation from men.

They believe that the oppression of women stems from a patriarchal society in which men define women as sexual objects and seek to possess them, legitimizing this possession through various ideologies[13]. They constantly emphasize in the videos they create that women should liberate themselves from this most widespread, profound, and severe oppression, and propose two ways of female liberation: one way is negative, women must escape the space controlled by men, i.e., separatism; the other way is affirmative, women should build a feminine space and create a feminine culture. This way is to completely liberate women from male control, to live apart from men, and create an independent space of women's own, an independent space that can provide women with all the help and needs they need. These theories have led to many articles on the Little Red Book platform, such as "You can live well alone without men" and "Men are all trash, women should discard them in time and create their own world." Although these articles have to a certain extent liberated women's minds and encouraged them to be self-reliant, they have undoubtedly created gender antagonism and tension between men and women.

4. Sexist Right Contend: Emotion-Oriented Gender Awareness Transmission

The users of Hupu and Red have developed a gender-specific consciousness with their collective identity in their online community and the catalyze of the platform's business strategy to achieve their economic goals. Whether it is the straight male communication space developed by male users on Hupu to vent their frustrations in real economic life and relationships, or the independent female space established by female users on Red with the collective identity of extreme rejection of men, it is the expression of gender polarization caused by the emotional language of different gender groups in their respective gender autonomous regions, which is reinforced by the effect of oriented communication and effects like Echo Chamber[14]. When these gender consciousnesses, which are initially spread in a single gender autonomous zone, collide in the real world, for example, when users of the opposite sex evaluate and react to the same public event, they intensify gender conflicts and gender power struggles.

With the development of social media platforms, women's groups have been able to express their views on a more open and equal platform, and their voices have been empowered. In traditional social mass media, content is edited solely by dedicated media professionals pursuing mass production and sales. With autonomous women's online communities like Red, where content can be selected or edited by users, new models of content production such as UGC (User Generated Content) have emerged[7]. Unlike the development of women's rights in the traditional media environment, the development of women's rights based on the characteristics of social media has taken on a new character with more proactive and efficient autonomous advocacy[11]. Platforms like Red provide more channels and more convenient ways for women to voice their rights. Women can gain social attention and public support for women's rights by exposing their injustice to society on the platform, thus forming a public opinion to urge the relevant departments to deal with the wrongdoers and subsequent legislation. This is a way to protect women's rights by using the power of all parties in society.

In the era of new media, the emergence of women's platforms such as Red has helped women to counter the lack of empathy and the traditional gender stereotypes and the public's so-called unconscious focus on portraying the faults and moral problems of victimized women, thus helping women to help women assert their legal rights in an autonomous, convenient and efficient manner. While, at the same time, the gender consciousness from two different autonomous gender communities, Red and Hupu, has been disseminated, intensified, and polarized in a series of emotionally oriented ways in the highly closed gender community and then colliding in reality, thus exacerbating gender confrontation and power struggle to some extent.

5. Cultural Discrimination: Chinese Dilemma Faced by Feminism

Red and Hupu, as two typical autonomous gender zones, provide male and female users, respectively, with the freedom to express themselves, find similarities, gain a sense of belonging and support, and build a collective identity in a gender-specific subculture based on a high degree of gender identity, but also allow users to promote the formation of gender polarization in a single-gender social atmosphere, thus to a certain extent exacerbating the possibility of gender antagonism and gender power struggle. However, the gender polarization caused by these kinds of gender-based Apps is not the only reason to cause the sexist power contends. Socialist feminism in China views the combination of production, reproduction, sexuality, and children as constituting the mechanisms of gender exploitation and oppression in a patriarchal society. Although Chinese women's economic status, political rights, and cultural roles have gradually emerged after a century of struggle, traditional patriarchal ideologies persist regarding power relations in the domestic and private spheres[15]. Under thousands of years of traditional patriarchy, men and women have developed a dynamic balance of male and female dominance[16]. This cultural discrimination, which has existed for thousands of years, is deeply rooted, and the gender inequality deep-seated in the long-standing culture of male superiority and female inferiority is unable to accept the gender equality demanded by feminism, which gives rise to the anti-feminist cry, such as the definition of "women fist" created by Hupu male users. In addition, feminism is, after all, an imported concept, and the lack of localized theoretical development and research has led to the ambiguous spread of feminism in China, further causing the public to have a biased perception of feminism[17]. Since the introduction of feminist ideas into China, apart from the translation and introduction of classical theories, there have been some thinkers and educated young people who have propagated them in the context of national conditions, but there is still a lack of theoretical works created in the context of local conditions and social conditions. People's understanding of feminism is also limited to literature and sociology, but they cannot systematically recognize feminism in the context of China's national conditions[17]. This has led some people to see only concepts and forms but misinterpret the real purpose of feminism and blindly believe that feminism is about violent resistance and deprivation of men's rights, and thus anti-feminism[18]. Thus, gender polarization in the autonomous gender zone on the Internet is only part of the reason for the hindrance and stigmatization of feminist development in contemporary society. If feminism is truly developed, disseminated, and popularized in China, it is crucial for feminists and scholars to address the lack of localized feminist theories in China and to reconcile the long-standing traditional ideas of a patriarchal society with the future.

6. Conclusion

This paper takes Hupu and Red as two examples to show the two sides of gender consciousness dissemination, promoting the awakening of feminist consciousness, which helped the rise of feminism but also intensified the gender right contends through analyzing the subculture construction, emotion-oriented gender consciousness dissemination, and gender polarization in gender-based communities in different online gender autonomous regions. However, the existing studies and data on KOLs' gender-awareness propaganda in different online gender autonomous zones cannot be fully objective because KOLs in Red and Hupu are involved in gender-awareness propaganda and sports, lifestyle, beauty, and fashion. Therefore, their data cannot show their achievements in gender awareness only. To help the further rise of feminism in China, based on the cultural discrimination dilemma that feminism encounters in China, feminism as a non-traditional and imported culture should also be taken seriously and further studied in the future. Red's autonomous women's platform and the corresponding development of the "she-economy" have brought women's identity, while its subculture has also brought about an orgy of consumerism under the mask of capitalism and an

intensified struggle for gender rights. The intersection of social media, consumerism, and feminism can promote women's gender consciousness, but these autonomous online gender platforms also polarize men's and women's gender perceptions by overemphasizing gender identity and creating gender topics. The number of cases used by relevant apps involved in this paper is limited. In the future, relevant research on gender awareness and social media can be sampled, and such quantitative research will be of great help to the research results.

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