

# ***The Construction of LGBT+ Group's Images on Douyin Based on Symbolic Interaction Theory***

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**Abstract:** It is estimated that there are more than 30 million sexual minorities in China as of 2011, yet most of them choose to hide their identities. However, in recent years, the emergence of a variety of new media and the emancipation of ideas make sexual minorities gradually visible, ranging from popular TV series about homosexuality to many homosexual couples' exposure on social media. In general, the public shows a positive attitude toward them. In this context, this study observes 15 of the most well-known LGBT+ bloggers on Douyin, the most popular short video social platform in China, and conducts a detailed analysis of their videos. It is found that LGBT+ groups have carried out different ways of presentation and interaction on the basis of symbol construction, including creating unique languages, labels, and musical symbols and displaying them in front of the audience with more diverse images. These also make them integrate into the public and get more encouragement from non-sexual minorities. The findings of this study will provide a reference for the creation and dissemination of marginalized groups' symbols in the future, especially in China.

**Keywords:** symbolic interaction theory, LGBT+ Group, Douyin

## **1. Introduction**

The messages of gender inequality and visual culture are implicit in many Hollywood films, which are becoming very popular with the audience. LGBT+ is primarily a generalization and categorization of specific types of people based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and sexual expression [1]. Typically, "sexual minorities" refer to groups whose gender identity or sexual orientation is different from that of the mainstream population. Today, the term often refers to groups of people including non-heterosexual individuals such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or skeptic, aka rainbow communities [2].

Since the 21<sup>st</sup> century, due to social changes, people's perceptions and social consensus have begun to change. Sexual minorities have been in the public eye, and more and more scholars around the world have paid attention to this topic. Johnson and Wang argue that the LGBT+ community is always blamed and not understood in China [3]. This accusation is mainly manifested through structural aspects, including the lack of relevant policies and laws introduced by the government and the active resistance of social and political organizations. When it comes to public expression, negative attitudes are the mainstream and further lead to discrimination and even abuse in society. As of 2011, it was

estimated that there were more than 30 million sexual minorities in China, most of whom chose to conceal their identities [1].

However, in recent years, China has shown a positive development trend in terms of social development and inclusiveness, and at the legal and policy levels, measures conducive to the protection of LGBT+ rights are gradually being formulated [4]. With the emergence of more and more social media, with the emphasis on human rights and the improvement of protection measures, people's acceptance and understanding of the LGBT+ group will become an integral part that cannot be underestimated [5-7]. Especially the openness and comprehensiveness of new media not only provide a platform for the LGBT+ group to self-recognize but also create the possibility for mainstream society to understand this group comprehensively.

Due to the relevant prohibition of Chinese law, the bloggers of the LGBT+ group cannot directly show relevant content about their self-identity, but most of them are good at quickly adapting to new media and actively interacting with the audience. They create more interesting symbols that conform to the group characteristics and platform characteristics to form a more positive personal image in the social network space.

Based on the symbolic interaction theory, this study discusses how the LGBT+ group can form a unique symbol system by adapting popular symbols and creating new meaning-rich symbols and how this group can engage the audience in symbolic interaction in a more popular way and ultimately build a diverse group image among sexual and non-sexual minorities.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Research on the Performance of the LGBT+ Group on Social Media**

Very little research has been done on the LGBT+ group in China, especially their performance on social media while more foreign scholars have noticed that LGBT + group has a hard time disclosing identity on social media. Even if LGBT+ persons abstain from expressing their identities on personal platforms, their online contacts can reflect their identities [8,9]. Thus, LGBT+ users of some social platforms mostly choose not to engage in LGBT+ group, such as on Facebook. Remaining silent can also prevent individuals from encountering other LGBT+ members online, even if their connection favors the formation and strengthening of identity [10,11]. Some may choose to do so by displaying insulting symbols of LGBT+, and an indication of identity that can only be identified by a friendly audience [12]. Greena and others also found that on YouTube, LGBT+ young users choose to share their lives anonymously, making it harder for bullies to find and insult them [13]. In contrast, Instagram is more open and LGBT+ users can post selfies on the platform and fully show their own appearance, but it also restricts some text content and encourages more “standardized expression” [14]. LGBT+ group loses its right to show more cultural content, and the influence of the group's discourse decreases. To sum up, the expression of the LGBT+ group on social media is diversified.

### **2.2. Research on the Application of Symbolic Interaction Theory in Short Video**

In recent years, Chinese scholars' research on Douyin focuses on the value of symbolic interaction theory for short video transmission. They think that each user can be seen as an individual viewer in front of a cell phone screen, but his symbolically meaningful behavior on Douyin is incorporated into a social network [15]. In the virtual social environment created by Douyin, users respond to a video's content in a form that is manifested by engaging with the screen. Some scholars have noticed that the meaning of an interactive act is received and understood by another party, and even a new round of responses is made, which completes an interaction process [16]. This interaction is a combination of reality and fiction. The behavior with a specific meaning sent by a user is virtual, but the meaning

represented by the sending and receiving behavior is real, and the connection formed between users is real and concrete.

On Douyin, the interactive behavior between users based on emotional factors is also based on special cultural symbols. Sections of different themes, video hashtags, likes, comments, and shares among users all have different meanings, which are the manifestation of their inner emotions and specific cultural symbols. Some scholars believe that when users' behaviors are given certain "social attributes", meaningful "social behavior symbols" are created and will be transmitted on Douyin [15]. The term "ritual" is introduced in Goffman's performance theory, and group interaction on Douyin can be said to be a ritual in which users create and use many symbols with emotions when they post and watch short videos [17].

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Semiotic Interaction Theory

Symbolic interaction theory is a sociological and social psychological theory that advocates the study of human group life from the daily natural environment of individuals with whom people interact. It was founded by American Sociologist G. H. Mead and formally proposed by his student Blumer in 1937 [17,18]. "Symbols" refer to things that have symbolic meaning to a certain extent. Semiotic interaction theory believes that the influence of things on individual social behavior not lies in the secular content and function contained in the things themselves but in the symbolic meaning relative to the individual. Moreover, the symbolic meaning of the things comes from the interaction between the individual and others. This interaction includes language, culture, system. When the individual deals with the things he encounters, he will always use and modify the meaning of things through his own interpretation.

Goffman, one of the leading exponents of symbolic interactionism, compared the terminology of drama theory to everyday behavior in his semiotic book *Self-Presentation of Daily Life* [19]. He believed that daily communication, life, and interaction among human beings are like the performance of drama. Each person is either an independent individual performer or a member of a "drama class" in a specific scene or on different stages, according to his own need and generally accepted norms. Based on "roles", people interact with each other through "performance" and "impression management".

Sociologist Cavill, on the other hand, argued that the ultimate realization of a perfect "self" must include all "others", by either experiencing the lives of all "others" or conquering all "others" [20]. Given the impossibility of this goal in reality, he identified the field of self-actualization as language, and the means of self-actualization as reading and writing, that is, the "self" can be perfected through language and words.

To sum up, Douyin audiences often recognize themselves through the words and language in some dramatic stories

#### 3.2. Case Studies

This paper selects the accounts who publicly indicate that they belong to the LGBT+ group on the Douyin platform. It further collects sample data and analyzes the symbols of the sample video content through content analysis. It finally explores the images and characteristics of the creators of the LGBT+ group on Douyin.

As China's first content entrepreneurship service platform, the "New List" index has become an influential basis for measuring the value of China's mobile Internet content. The "New List" index refers to the launch of massive data, in-depth user feedback, and expert advice to measure the dissemination ability of new media, including but not limited to pictures, texts, and short videos. This

index reflects the popularity and development trend of the main body of new media. The Douyin ranking is to measure the performance of accounts on the Douyin platform. Five criterion including the number of followers, the increase of followers, the number of shares, the number of comments and the number of likes are used. The number of followers measures the popularity performance, and the remaining four indicators measure the performance of the work.

Therefore, this study finally selected 15 related accounts with the highest number of fans and the new list index at more than 600.

## 4. Symbol Creation Logic and Application on Douyin by LGBT+ Group

### 4.1. Symbol Creation

Douyin provides LGBT+ group with a diversified "performance" stage, and the boundary between the online "virtual self" and the offline "real self" is gradually broken by the time-space characteristics of social networks [21].

In order to integrate into the mainstream vision, the types of videos posted by LGBT+ bloggers are basically the same as others. In this study, four accounts in the sample mainly show different talents, while the remaining 11 accounts mainly record daily life. Four of the 11 daily life bloggers also focus on imitation sitcoms. In general, most of them tend to choose rhythmic and narrative music to convey positive emotions and energy in a more humorous way. Bloggers under the age of 40 use "makeup" and "clothing matching" to make their personal images more attractive. These characteristics fully demonstrate that they are actively seeking ways to integrate into the mainstream.

Systematic thinking in semiotics provides guidance for systematic thinking in communication research. From the perspective of semiotics syntax, the embodiment of the LGBT+ group on Douyin mainly includes label symbols, language symbols, image symbols, and music symbols.

### 4.2. Symbol System

#### 4.2.1. Hashtags

Hashtags can help classify the videos on Douyin. Creators can add tags in the video introduction and mark the content with free format hashtags, which is conducive to the organization's identification and dissemination of content [22]. A search of videos posted by the LGBT+ group reveals that due to restrictions on the dissemination of information related to the LGBT+ community under Chinese law, terms related to "gay" and "bisexual" are explicitly prohibited from appearing on the platform. Therefore, they tend to choose more covert but group-specific expressions such as "rainbow". In general, the LGBT+ community uses the term "tong xun lu" (address book) to express their identity, because the initials in Chinese pinyin for "tong xun lu" (txl) are the same as "tong xing lian" (txl, homosexual). Moreover, in face of discrimination against sexual minorities, they mostly choose Jolin Tsai's song *Rose Teen* which encourages minority groups to give voice to the group.

In 2021, the hashtag #les was banned from the Douyin platform, so the lesbian group began using the abbreviation #le to represent their identity. Interestingly, the source of the hashtag #le is none other than Chen Le, one of the subjects of this research, who is a well-known lesbian Douyin content creator with a stable "new list index" of over 700 every week. She is followed by the lesbian group due to her exaggerated dramatic interpretations. In her series of episodes, she claims to be the leader of the T (tomboy). Therefore, after the hashtag #les became invalid, the lesbian group began to use #le to identify themselves. Similarly, #gay and the related terms were also banned from being hashtags on Douyin, so #0 and #1 also became new hashtags for the gay community's expressions.

Furthermore, the LGBT+ group usually adds some mainstream aesthetic hashtags to attract people. For example, lesbian creators like to use the hashtag "#handsome guy who is 180cm tall" to attract

girls who would be interested in this hashtag, while gay creators use the hashtag “#beautiful” to attract guys who are interested in beautiful girls.

#### 4.2.2. Language Symbols

Language symbols are the main ideographic symbols in addition to the visual symbols of short videos. The language people use is a social fact that assumes the existence of others and precedes the existence of any individual [23]. One type of linguistic sign used in short videos is the communication within the short video text. For example, Chen Le's short sitcom shows two characters conversing in a video. The other is a creator's narrative, and the language is divided into dialogue, narration, and monologue to enrich the form of self-expression. Dialogue is mainly used to explain an event. For instance, a blogger will describe something funny or harsh about himself or his friends, and the audience will watch and listen from a third-party perspective. Some use the audience as the narrative object, assuming the existence of the audience and the time lag between transmission and reception, but still showing a sense of communication. In the case of a creator named Lan Shici, she starts her video by saying "La Zi Men", meaning “people from the lesbian community”, to bring the audience closer to her. It is a particularized social relationship designation.

#### 4.2.3. Image Symbols

On the Douyin platform, image display, life record, and opinion sharing of LGBT+ users have become the norm [24]. Among them, there are successful entrepreneurs, idols, and artists sought after by fans, unique fashionistas, multi-talented artists, outstanding models, as well as ordinary working-class and students. The vivid images promote the "de-stigmatization" of the LGBT+ group, reshaping the social image of this group and changing the single perception of it in mainstream society. Chen Jiawei, who has revealed his gay identity, often appears in videos in elegant ancient Chinese costumes. He always shows ancient Chinese heroes and well-known male protagonists in novels when he wears traditional Chinese costumes. His beautiful appearance and gorgeous clothes attract many people's praise. The study also found that a lot of gays tend to appear in traditional Chinese costumes, and this gentle and dignified image gradually makes some people who like traditional culture give more respect to the LGBT+ group.

With the display of more and more individual images in the LGBT+ group, the media image symbols of the LGBT+ group have gradually changed. Words like "abnormal" and "mental illness" have been changed to neutral and compliment comments such as "good-looking", "fashion", "humor", and "straight-A student". The LGBT+ group has shown more image symbols on the Douyin platform, making the marginalized group gradually break out of its hidden state and become known to the public. They shape the diverse social image of the group in a real way and promote dialogue and understanding between mainstream society and the LGBT+ group.

#### 4.2.4. Music Notation

Music notation is a very important part of the popularity of short videos. Some music can become part of the creators' identity, and they repeat it in the videos they publish. They reinforce memory through the repetition of music and become a specific symbol to distinguish others [25]. Most LGBT+ creators usually intercept Douyin's popular songs and reuse them in multiple videos to enhance the symbolism of their videos and expand the spread. Lesbian blogger Liu Dana, is a cover singer. She will share her songs on Douyin and thus attract a large number of fans. She will repeatedly sing some songs about the LGBT+ group and share her love story with fans, so many non-sexual minority audiences have become her fans.



Music symbols represent the creators' character and taste to some extent, and different age audiences have different music preferences. Therefore, with the target audience in mind, creators can choose more suitable music. LGBT+ creators are conscious of the use of music symbols, and they often use songs related to films about sexual minorities and songs that encourage sexual minorities.

Music symbols have the role of rendering the atmosphere and showing the narrative twist or climax. LGBT+ creators know how to use musical symbols. Internet music full of rhythm can add dynamics and fun to the videos; music with connotation is suitable for creating a sense of video atmosphere and arousing the audience's emotional resonance. Zihai Sisters records the daily life of a heterosexual girl and a gay boy. The boy made a song about the close friendship with the girl, which was widely spread on Douyin and even on the Douyin hit single chart, which caused many heterosexual audiences to start sharing their daily life with friends in the LGBT+ group. Music has become a bridge for the public to understand and accept the LGBT+ group.

### 4.3. Symbol Application

#### 4.3.1. Textual Mimicry and Symbolic Appropriation

Indicating the topics and the techniques used in video creation can stimulate other users to engage in the practice of symbolic mimicry. The popularity of a video represents symbolic identity and enhances a creator's willingness to participate. Creators in LGBT+ group participate in text creation on various topics by imitating others' videos, which all have similar symbols in the same category. Symbol appropriation presupposes recognition of symbolic meaning. Head creators have more symbolic appeal, which is why the word "le" is used instead of "les" to refer to lesbians. Moreover, the recognition of such symbols is not within the LGBT+ group any more. For example, the use of the #RoseTeen hashtag is no longer confined to sexual minorities but is more representative of any minority groups, like those who are bullied.

In a symbolic parody, the low threshold of participation and ease of operation also result in lower interest and limited user access to symbolic parody, which requires further creativity to achieve a greater range of symbolic communication. Quality work achieves transcendence of the meta-symbol and gains greater recognition, which in turn promotes symbolic parody. For example, Manxue posted many small videos of her daily life. Her humorous words and unique outfits attracted non-LGBT+ members with 10 million fan bloggers on Douyin to imitate her videos and dress themselves up as girls with oily hair and suits. The self-deprecating and optimistic words were spread and reprocessed by other top stream bloggers who imitated Manxue's way of speaking. This making Manxue quickly become popular.

#### 4.3.2. Cross-platform Content Flow

The cross-platform distribution of short videos is mainly through re-posting. Creators publish the same content on different platforms to gain a larger audience. Many bloggers in the LGBT+ group create accounts on different media platforms, forming a personal creation and dissemination matrix with high dissemination coverage. They will rework the video content according to the characteristics of the platform to attract different groups of fans. For example, Benny (Dong Zichu), who was originally a beauty blogger on the video platform Bilibili, started sharing his daily life more after creating his personal account on Douyin.

In addition to the creators' own content migration, fan groups can also spontaneously share videos of interest and repost them to different platforms, some of which are popular on other platforms and attract users to search across platforms after they become popular.

Short videos have strong cross-platform communication power, especially funny and positive short videos. Controversial short videos with bright narrative plots are more popular among viewers.

Short videos are also platforms where “content is king”. Unlike the strong migratory nature of the text medium, cross-platform transmission requires a certain threshold, and only some platforms that support short video uploads can achieve cross-platform distribution. Some of the videos posted by LGBT+ bloggers have also become popular content and have established a good group image by spreading across platforms and attracting external and non-group audiences to watch them.

The daily life videos posted by He Xiansheng and his boyfriend on Douyin were widely circulated on other well-known Chinese social media. Their fans started a “super topic” on Weibo, which is a circle formed by people who share common interests on Weibo. Fans regard them as their own stars and copy their live videos to Weibo, helping He Xiansheng's videos flow across platforms.

## **5. Group Image Construction through Symbols**

### **5.1. Symbol Creation**

As a social platform that integrates entertainment and social interaction, Douyin provides an emotionally contagious environment for users. In this environment, when a user posts video content that arouses the desire of the viewers, the viewers will have an “alternative experience”. It is these emotional needs of users, such as social interaction and self-presentation, that lead to the transmission of emotions among users. The combination of the two has given rise to the formation of thematic communities with homogeneous content collections on Douyin.

On Douyin, the interaction between users based on emotional factors is also based on special cultural symbols. In fact, videos with more dramatic symbols and intense emotions will more easily build bridges between users.

The various symbols created and displayed by the LGBT+ community are observed and accepted by the viewers on Douyin. In order to interact with the creators, the viewers create a large number of pictures and text symbols in the comments and live interactions, such as posting some creators' emoticons. The symbols are conveyed and enriched by the interaction of different users, and this connection can generate a shared identity. Therefore, more and more LGBT+ users will express themselves in some humorous and self-deprecating language and through behavior symbols, share emotions and experience through the symbols, and finally complete the interactive behavior with a “ritual sense”.

### **5.2. Community Formation through Interaction Experience**

The interaction experience is gained from interpersonal interactions. In contrast to displaying short videos, Douyin supports users to collect, share, and comment. A tribe is a collective of similar clans, but in the online era, a tribe has become an open, virtual, and real association that supports equal communication among users. Users assembled on Douyin can be seen as a tribe, interacting in the virtual environment provided by Douyin to form specific topics and interactive behaviors. Within this virtual tribe, there are many thematic areas with different contents, which are also called thematic communities. In each thematic community, users have a high degree of autonomy and interact with each other in a multidimensional and decentralized way. Either an overall LGBT+ community or a thematic community, it is all based on users' interests. Users choose the thematic areas they are interested in, and all interactions in the community are based on the principle of similar and consistent topics.

Obviously, the text symbols represented by Hashtags on Douyin provide a port for homogeneous content, and LGBT+ groups can watch more relevant content through the topic entrance of related tags, and even quickly publish videos with related content. This interactive experience makes more LGBT+ users find people with the same identity quickly, and related Hashtags have gradually become synonymous with LGBT+ related communities.

## 6. Conclusion

Through a case study of 15 LGBT+ bloggers' accounts on Douyin, it is found that the LGBT+ group mainly creates symbols and interacts with others in different sections of the platform. They use meaningful labels to locate their identities, show humorous and funny speech styles, and use popular and rhythmic music to create unique individual images. These symbols are not only used within the group but also voluntarily imitated and disseminated by many non-LGBT+ users with over 1 million bloggers. The audience has accepted a more diversified LGBT+ group image. As a country in transition, China has huge opportunities in the future to eliminate stereotypes and negative images of LGBT+ members, develop gender equality, and promote social progress. In fact, many brands have begun to find popular LGBT+ bloggers to promote their products, and bloggers break the stereotype in the process. However, in this study, almost all transgender users did not use obvious symbols to identify themselves, and people only knew that they were transgender through the explanation and video comments. As a result, this article cannot analyse the creation and dissemination of identity-related symbols, which shows that discrimination against transgender still exists and is serious. How to make the more marginalized groups in LGBT+ community come into the public eye and be accepted by the public is still a topic that needs to be discussed in the future. In addition, this study does not look into the psychological state of the bloggers when they create symbols, so future research can conduct interviews to obtain more comprehensive information.

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