

“#IAmGay# What About You?”: Storytelling, Discursive Politics, and the Affective Dimension of Social Media Activism against Censorship in China

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This article investigates the hashtag activism through which Chinese social media users have countered censorship of homosexual content. Based on a close examination of 798 original posts on Weibo tagged #IAmGay#, I found that the personalized stories circulated with the posts served as the building blocks for discursive politics. Being linked through digital media, these isolated individual posts generated connective actions that together formed an alternative discourse about LGBTQ rights and free speech and challenged the government’s hegemonic censorship. I argue here for a critical and reflexive recognition of the affective dimension of communication that problematizes the ways in which users make their voices heard through hashtag activism.

Keywords: LGBTQ movement, hashtag activism, discursive politics, censorship, China

On the evening of Friday, April 13, 2018, the Chinese media conglomerate Sina announced that its microblogging site Weibo² was initiating a three-month cleanup campaign targeting content considered illegal, including pornography, violence, and topics relating to homosexuality. The announcement soon provoked a flood of online backlash from outraged Weibo users, who rallied behind the hashtag #IAmGay#.³ In particular, Zhudingzhen, a vocal gay online celebrity, tweeted “#IAmGay# what about you?” at 8:42 on the night of the Sina announcement, a post that within 12 hours had attracted 14,034 retweets, 4,281 comments, and 23,472 likes. The hashtag sparked a public online forum for users to

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² Launched in 2009 by the Chinese Internet company Sina, Weibo is the dominant microblogging service in the country. Its comprehensive platform incorporates the major features of Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, allowing users build up networks for sharing and interacting with texts, photos, and videos. The term *to tweet*, though taken from the U.S. platform Twitter, is widely used in the context of Weibo as well.

³ Because of no space between Chinese characters, Weibo necessitates a double-hashtag format as #topic#. This study keeps the hashtag’s original format.

share their coming-out stories, advocate for LGBTQ⁴ rights, and condemn Sina’s censorship of homosexual content. Though short-lived, the topic page “I am gay” attracted an enormous amount of attention, generating more than 60 million reads and 60,000 tweets and retweets within 12 hours of its first posting.⁵ On April 15, the state-controlled *People’s Daily* posted a commentary on Weibo titled “Different Fireworks All Sparkle,” which acknowledged sexual diversity as an individual right and called for the elimination of discrimination based on gender and sexuality from Chinese society. This commentary did not, however, address either the ban or the protest directly; it was in fact an opinion piece about sexuality and the representation of homosexuality in Chinese textbooks. Users responded by retweeting the post along with the hashtag, which they interpreted as an official endorsement of their protest against Sina’s censorship of homosexual content. At midday on April 16, Sina reversed course, stating that the cleanup campaign no longer targeted homosexual content. Foreign media described the government’s apparent endorsement of gay rights and free expression of personal sexuality and the reversal of the ban as “a rare win after years of tightening repression on online speech” (Palmer, 2018, p. 2). Scholars, on the other hand, have explained these developments in terms of the Chinese state’s effort to finesse a kind of neoliberal governmentality in its approaches to rights movements by sexual minorities and to social media activism more generally (Bao, 2018a).

The aim of this article is to situate #IAmGay# in the context of new modes of digital activism, especially hashtag activism, against censorship in China. Hashtag activism is understood here as “discursive protest on social media united through a hashtagged word, phrase or sentence” (Yang, 2016, p. 13). Technology-powered social movements have garnered considerable visibility, notable examples being the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the Umbrella Movement. Digital media continue to play crucial roles in political mobilization and civic engagement in the context of hashtag activism worldwide. These movements have brought renewed attention to the power of social media and digital activism to shape public discourse, promote racial and gender awareness, and make visible the lived experience of individuals.

Although not directly connected with digital activism in other cultural contexts, #IAmGay# in China likewise addressed the power struggle among the LGBTQ community, commercial media, the state, and other stakeholders. Thus, the hashtag served as a platform for raising public awareness of LGBTQ issues, which is to say a counterspace where the voices of sexual minorities could be heard. However, while the LGBTQ community was an early adopter of technologies associated with the Internet in efforts to advance its activism, few studies have addressed the community’s use of hashtag activism to make “an

⁴ In this article, *LGBTQ* serves as an umbrella term to describe a spectrum of sexuality that is nonheteronormative and/or noncisgender.

⁵ On Weibo, a hashtag is associated with a specific section called *Huati*, literally meaning “topic.” Users can create various topic pages in this section, and the name of the page or topic is its hashtag. By tagging the topic, various posts by various users can be made to appear on the same page. The process is thus similar to Twitter’s hashtag page. When a topic page in the *Huati* section is deleted by Weibo, users can still post with the hashtag, but are no longer able to engage in conversations on a separate page. When the “I am gay” topic page was deleted in the mid-afternoon of April 14—less than a day after it was first posted—its readership numbered some 240 million.

indelible mark on the popular vernacular and mainstream discourse" (Portwood-Stacer & Berridge, 2014, p. 1090). #IAmGay# thus serves as an illuminating case study of the LGBTQ community's use of hashtags to resist heteronormativity. From this perspective, the #IAmGay# social media protest deserves consideration in the context of global efforts—in the streets and on social media—to combat discrimination, hate speech, and inequality and to advocate for free speech and human rights.

In this article, I examine closely 798 original posts that circulated in the first 15 hours of the online protest over Sina's announcement of the ban on homosexual content on Weibo. I hone my analysis critically using the grounded theory approach and argue that the #IAmGay# activism has not only increased the visibility of the LGBTQ community and reinforced its solidarity with other social groups, but also has fueled the imagination of grassroots activism against censorship. I begin the discussion with an overview of research into digital activism worldwide to provide some context for LGBTQ activism in China.

Digitally Mediated Social Movements and Hashtag Activism

Digital media have been heralded for their capacity to provide and expand alternative space to counter dominant discourses, to enable the immediate and inexpensive dissemination and exchange of information, and to mobilize and connect individuals both online and offline—which explains the importance of these media for activists. Online forums, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and instant messaging services have thus been crucial to movements such as those mentioned in terms of leveling the playing field, constructing counterpublics, challenging power relationships, increasing democratic participation, and reappropriating social spaces and groups. These media also pose critical questions with regard to the strategies, organization, and efficacy of insurgency and counterinsurgency efforts, the political evanescence of digital media, and gaps in the distribution of resources that are leading to new forms of the digital divide (Gerbaudo, 2012; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Lee, 2015).

In recent years, hashtags have become omnipresent and durable symbols for many technology-powered social movements. Shared terms, stories, concerns, and actions associated with, for example, #BlackLivesMatter, #Ferguson, #GamerGate, and #MeToo, have been invoked, circulated, and intensified on social media and taken to the streets, thereby making clear the advantages in terms of attention, community, and interventions offered by hashtag activism (Mortensen, 2016; Rodino-Colocino, 2014). Mainstream media outlets often contribute to the visibility of hashtags by packaging them as a new form of public opinion and collective action.

Hashtag activism has a specific cause in relation to feminist and antiracist projects. As Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016) have observed, alarming amounts of violence and hostility toward women have characterized online spaces, forms of oppression that "are not only about gender, but are also often racist, with women of color as particular targets" and that create a kind of "networked misogyny" (p. 171). On the one hand, the convergence of feminism and hashtag activism thus serves to confront the White, male-dominated cyberspace, workplace, and everyday environment that reinforces unequal power relations and brutal masculinist, sexist, and racist notions (Williams, 2015). From this perspective, "hashtag activism is

the latest iteration of a long history feminist conversation-expansion tactics that politicize personal experiences with all forms of patriarchy, including media" (Clark, 2014, p. 1109).

On the other hand, hashtag activism relies heavily on text-based interactions conducted through social media that do not necessarily escalate into street demonstrations (Clark, 2016). The promise of the hashtag nonetheless lies in the possibility of decentralizing activism, of uncoupling it from formal organizations, to give almost anyone who wishes to do so the opportunities to communicate with others on controversial issues through blogs, tweets, and so on. At its most visible, then, hashtag feminism provides this alternative space for nonorganizational feminist activism and for feminists of color to flourish and reclaim the terrain of feminism from the White organizational activists who have long dominated the movement. Simply put, hashtag feminism makes the intersectionality of feminist projects more visible and vocal (Eagle, 2015).

Furthermore, online discourse has the potential to become a "mode of activism" (Shaw, 2012a, p. 373) that fosters and promotes new language, new grammar, and new interpretations through which individuals and institutions evaluate social circumstances and devise their responses. This is the essence of discursive activism: the use of text and narrative to problematize mainstream discourse and create real-world impacts. This mode of activism is more at home in the sociolinguistic tradition of feminist activism, which has documented sexist language and devised alternatives founded on the assumption that language and society are co-constitutive (Pauwels, 2003).

Discursive activism can go beyond personal expressions in the form of isolated and dispersed stories to inspire collective action by linking the ideas of individuals through digital networks. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have suggested considering these personal stories "personal action frames" that serve as the building blocks of a contentious politics, which can lead in turn to a large-scale "connective action," a form of activism that unfolds within the context of a digital network rather than that of organizations. The sharing of personal stories through digital networks has proved effective in enacting an affectively informed public, suggesting a potential mechanism in the construction of collective action by means of a discursive discourse embedded in each fleeting hashtagged post and tweet.

Despite the great potential, though, technologies and online spaces are by nature neither entirely emancipatory nor oppressive for the various activists who use them. Digital activism should be examined within specific cultural contexts. In any case, relatively little research has addressed the digital activism initiated by the LGBTQ community in China to advance the rights of its members, though to be sure, some scholars have documented the potential of these media for the community and its use of various technologies (see Engebretsen, Schroeder, & Bao, 2015). The present study builds on this work to explore social media users' deployment of hashtags to create a temporary counterdiscourse against censorship and to leverage cyberspace as a locus of free speech. Historically, marginalized groups in China, such as rural-to-urban workers, have benefitted from access to new media and digital technologies for purposes of advocacy, activism, and civic engagement (Wallis, 2015; Yin, 2018). Young activists in China have also used media as a key political resource in attempting to advance a feminist agenda (Li & Li, 2017). These technologies, however, can be limiting as well as liberating for such groups, as state surveillance and censorship have grown alongside various forms of civic action and contentious politics in China. The

#IAmGay# hashtag is unique in its embodiment of the precarious politics of media activism in China, highlighting as it does the historical contingency of ongoing struggles to address the country's gender and sexuality issues.

The LGBTQ Movement and Censorship in China

The LGBTQ community began to become visible in China in the early 1990s, especially in larger cities (Engebretsen, 2014). Homosexuality remained a criminal offense—classified as a form of hooliganism—in the country until 1997, and it was only removed from the official list of mental disorders in 2001. Nonetheless, the government has been quite cautious and conservative regarding LGBTQ issues, as reflected in its media policies and restrictions on the dissemination of homosexual-related content (Mountford, 2010). Thus, homosexuality is regularly grouped with pornography—as was the case with the Sina ban—“sexual abnormality,” and “vulgarisms” as “unhealthy” behaviors that require “correction” and should not be mentioned in the media, and it is almost impossible to license a publication in China that focuses on LGBTQ issues (Jia & Zhou, 2015).

In large part because of existing and ever-increasing limitations on its visibility and ability to garner publicity, the LGBTQ movement in China has also been cautious, relying on vigorous nongovernmental organizations to connect with transnational movements. The Chinese movement has been monitored by the government and sometimes hindered by local political concerns (Hildebrandt, 2012). Sexual minorities in the country have accordingly employed and created media as critical political resources for connecting with one another and in general building a community, raising social awareness, and articulating demands for tolerance and support. Social media in this respect have followed the lead of earlier telephone hotlines that provided assistance and comfort (Cao & Cao, 2009), and digital video and documentary filmmaking that have also carved out alternative space for LGBTQ discourse in the public consciousness (Shaw & Zhang, 2017). Thus, online forums, blogs, and social networking services have continued to facilitate communication, to expand social connections, and to increase the visibility of individuals and the community (Cao & Lu, 2014).

While it is widely acknowledged that digital media have provided new opportunities and alternative space for the LGBTQ movement, the optimism regarding the use of these media to counter censorship must confront the reality of communications in China, where free speech in cyberspace is circumscribed by political limitations, state control, market forces, and transnational consumer culture (Bao, 2018b). With publication under strict state control, a small amount of gay-related content is distributed free of charge in the form of educational resources relating to health, HIV/AIDS in particular (Mountford, 2010)—a situation that, again, connects popular perceptions of homosexuality with pathology, promiscuity, prostitution, and immorality (Zheng, 2015). Media misrepresentations regarding sexual minorities are constantly fermenting in Chinese cyberspace, where the complex of state surveillance, commercialization, and self-censorship “ensures the misrepresentation of same-sex identity, but also produces as much homogeneity as diversity” (Ho, 2009, p. 99).

The current study was designed to help fill a gap in the literature by exploring the role of the #IAmGay# hashtag activism in countering social media censorship. In this article, I use “IAmGay” to

translate the Chinese hashtag *wo shi tongxinglian* (我是同性恋). The various terms used in Chinese and/or English—*tongzhi*, “gay,” “homosexual,” “queer,” and so on—signify various forms of identity, both sexual and linguistic, and are caught up in the discursive politics relating to how various groups choose to describe various activities. The terminological and translational challenges must be acknowledged, because any single term used to describe the participants in this protest will signify different inclusive/exclusive politics and specific discursive formation of the hashtag activism. That said, rather than seeing #IAmGay# as an identity-based form of activism with which various groups identify (or do not identify), it is more fruitful to understand “gay” in this hashtag as a subject position that one can potentially occupy. In other words, “gay” in #IAmGay# does not contain any meaning or identification apart from that which Weibo users actively articulate.

Such a conception of “gayness” in the context of the protest against the Sina ban is critical in three respects. First, it recognizes the heterogeneity, fragmentation, and disjunctive experiences that characterize same-sex desires in China, while reflecting in these experiences a perceived commonality of certain cultural and social codes—for example, the notion that an individual identifying as homosexual likely opposes a patriarchal system that emphasizes heteronormative family and lineage (Martin, 2015). Second, this conception suggests that sexuality and gender identity, rather than being fixed, preordained, and a mode of being, are better understood as a becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) or a performativity (Butler, 2009)—one practiced in this case in the form of temporary hashtagging and articulation. Third, as a mode of becoming and temporality, it has the potential to mobilize and radicalize sexual politics to serve desired purposes—in this case, to counter the ban on homosexual content in social media—while inciting little to no contentious identity politics among participants who are diverse in their own articulation of heterosexual, gay, lesbian, transgender, queer, cisgender, and other identities. As demonstrated later in this study, only some of the Weibo users who actively participated in the protest disclosed their sexuality and preferred identities; through tagging and storytelling, however, they became “gay” in relation to their collective fight for diversity in gender and sexuality.

Data and Method

I used the advanced search function embedded in Weibo to search #IAmGay# within the time period between 6:55 p.m. on April 13, 2018, when Sina initiated the cleanup campaign, and 9:18 a.m. on April 14. The protest extended beyond the period during which data were collected; indeed, users continued to use the hashtag even after Sina reversed its decision regarding homosexual content. I amassed this sample, which includes 798 posts, at the beginning of this episode of hashtag activism out of concern that the posts might be deleted en masse at any point, following my intuition to keep whatever I could search and save.

As it happened, the posts with the #IAmGay# hashtag were not entirely eliminated, so I was able to double-check those that I had collected after Sina reversed course. I found that a quarter of the posts were missing, owing either to censorship by Sina or to users’ self-censorship, and that most of the missing posts contained either intemperate language or coming-out stories, as discussed in detail next. From a methodological perspective, this finding indicates that my data are particularly valuable, in that they retain most of the original posts that Weibo users tweeted and shared in the heat of the moment as

they gave vent to their anger and passion without fearing the potential consequences of being responsible for their words.

As mentioned, this study was informed by the grounded theory approach, which has proved particularly effective in media studies as a means of analyzing and understanding empirical text and audiovisual data that take the form of narratives (Figueroa, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 2009). The bulk of the work, beyond amassing the sample, involved performing a textual analysis of the posts, which was done with the help of the qualitative research software NVivo. The following major coding categories emerged from the content: (1) personal statements and identification regarding the hashtag; (2) coming-out stories; (3) criticism of Sina's ban; (4) commentary on the relationship between sexual orientation and human rights; (5) reflection on homosexuality and diversity; and (6) tweets calling attention to the hashtag and expressing solidarity with it. These coding categories were identified as the counterframes for interpreting the online protest and the discursive practice used to communicate them, based on which I identified emerging themes and developed the analytical framework for the study. Nearly all the posts were written in Chinese, the few exceptions, such as "Love is love" and "Love wins," being slogans borrowed from global LGBTQ equality campaigns. The data analysis was conducted in Chinese; all translations are mine. Apart from the aforementioned celebrity user Zhudingzhen, the Weibo users referred to in this study are identified by pseudonyms.

The account of #IAmGay# hashtag activism that follows focuses on three main themes that I identified through the textual analysis: (1) storytelling as a strong narrative form of discursive activism, (2) personal stories aggregated in networked communication that enabled collectivity based on difference, and (3) the affective dimension of hashtag activism that invoked a politics of listening.

"What About You?": Storytelling in Hashtag Activism

The #IAmGay# hashtag first and foremost served as a rallying cry for the LGBTQ community as it sought to make its voice heard and to indict the censorship. As the user Zhudingzhen asserted in another post after introducing the hashtag,

At this very tough time, those who have the ability to come out of the closet should do so. It is the time, not for fulfilling abstract and distant ideals, but to let the people around you know that we gays are not invisible beings; we are living souls. #IAmGay#.

Like many hashtags that have fueled activism, such as #MuslimsAreNotTerrorist and #IAmNotAfraidToSayIt, #IAmGay# is a complete sentence, itself a forceful narrative that enacts identification. The hashtag thus acts as a prompt to be appropriated readily for personalized storytelling, providing a frame and focus for users to express their diverse experiences and to claim a voice. Moreover, unlike routine hashtags on social media, this one combined a crisis or conflict (the ban on homosexual content on Weibo) with a distinctive breaching moment (the call by a gay celebrity Zhudingzhen for action going viral), which made it critical and indeed imperative to distribute. In these respects, the hashtag not only encouraged users' participation and interactions but also propelled a contentious and collective outcry.

Many subsequent posts have answered the question "What about you?" by indicating the manner in which various users identified with the hashtag. The following are some representative examples:

#IAmGay# I am normal, not deviant. (oxygenB)

#IAmGay# I am too pretty to not be gay. (daom)

#IAmGay# Born this way. I cannot and will not change. You shall never silence me.
(BBLACKBLAKE)

The vast majority of sampled posts followed this format, adding an affirmative statement to the hashtag in the form of a first-person narrative. The ritualistic repetition of the hashtag provided, again, an easily customizable frame for users to articulate their ideas and stories. By hashtagging the same sentence, these stories were easily searched, collected, shared, and associated in a temporary order. In this way, #IAmGay# networked hundreds of highly personalized indications about who users were and what they thought of themselves with an enormous volume of defiant statements and critiques of the ban on homosexual content.

Other users depicted more nuanced struggles relating to their identities by sharing stories in which they reflected on their experiences through identification with the hashtag. These stories were deeply personal, highly specific, and usually very emotional, creating multifaceted images of the community that countered the oversimplification typical of the mainstream discourse.

#IAmGay# Me too. . . . I am an ostrich, hooked by my own lies and deceiving others as well. I pretend to be objective and rational, yet inside me is a coward! Seeing people so brave makes me cry. . . . I am really scared. I am scared to death, fuck! (killshort)

#IAmGay# I do not break the law; I do not commit a crime. I work hard, love my life, contribute what I can to society. I love to make friends with people identified with different genders and sexualities. I love my parents and my family. I am a decent, moral human being. I am normal, a biological male. I like men. I am gay. (Elwin)

Compared with Twitter, which has a limit of 280 characters per tweet, each Weibo post allows up to 2,000 Chinese characters. Moreover, many Chinese characters are complex, rich in substance, and possess subtle undertones. Thus, while having certain drawbacks, the Chinese writing system has the advantage of packing a great deal of meaning into a single character, giving users who tweet with the #IAmGay# hashtag great flexibility to customize the space to fit their individual narrative, sometimes lending a terse vividness to their story.

#IAmGay# I am gay, and I have known it since I was young. When I came out, my parents were furious to kick me out. I was 20 years old back then, just breaking up with the one I loved. My parents still could not accept who I am. But one day mom told me something that makes me want to keep going. She said, "Life is long . . . we are not the ones with whom you will spend your whole life. We just wish you less suffering, less

difficulties—the road you choose is thorny. You will be black and blue. You should be clear about that.” Now I am perfectly sure that . . . I will keep going on, with pride to live every day. (tofuflower)

The preceding post illustrates the generational conflict between the user and the user’s parents, which is rendered more poignant through the mention of lost love, suffering, and the determination to find one’s own way. There were numerous such stories during the protest. On the one hand, this kind of individual narration highlights the “personal is political” ethos (Hanisch, 1970) that was a rallying cry of second-wave feminists who drew attention to the connection between personal experience and larger social structure. On the other hand, these personal stories together contribute to knowledge production and contentious politics in crucial ways, enabling reflection and insights, as will be discussed further next.

Studies of hashtag activism have drawn attention to the limitations of viral forms of mobilization and civic action, noting that the brevity and ephemerality of stories on social media cater to short-lived interests (Woods, 2014). The temporality and spaciality of storytelling combined with tagging, however, enhance the capacity and creativity of these narratives. Thus, the vast majority of #IAmGay# posts offered personal stories, and many of them also questioned the ban and demanded an explanation for it:

#IAmGay# We are normal people. Why put homosexuality in the same category with pornography and bloody violence? (HOOH)

#IAmGay# What’s wrong of being gay??? . . . Foreign countries legalized same-sex marriage a long time ago. . . . Homosexuality is not mental illness. . . . Are you brainless? (bbq)

#IAmGay# We have been trying to let people hear our voices in the country. We just want to be heard; why is it so difficult? . . . I am Chinese, and also gay. (Malenhon)

#IAmGay# As a bisexual, I wonder when we can learn from Euro-America, Australia, and Taiwan. @WeiboManager, LGBT people on the mainland not only exist but also go beyond your imagination. Clean up? Daydreaming. (subedespaci)

These accounts, while using various reference points to challenge the censorship, collectively shifted the burden of asserting an individual’s sexual orientation away from the LGBTQ community to Sina, the authority that had imposed the ban. In this process of reacting to the categories created by the ban, narratives accumulated under the #IAmGay# hashtag as users forcefully exercised their rights as citizens (i.e., the right to free speech that exists on paper)—of which they were being deprived by an authority (i.e., Sina)—to interrogate that authority. These narratives served as a strong statement regarding the right that users supposedly enjoyed as they found themselves denigrated and attacked on account of their nonheterosexuality and ostensible abnormality. In sum, by juxtaposing the censorship being imposed in China with the legalization of and tolerant social attitude toward the LGBTQ community in many developed countries, Weibo users strategically equated gender and sexual diversity with the

country's sociocultural image on the global political stage, thereby foregrounding the community's push for respect and recognition as a measure of national strength and power.

The narrative form of these #IAmGay# stories enacted, according to Yang (2016), the narrative agency of hashtag activism. Adapting Campbell's (2005) notion of rhetorical agency, Yang has defined narrative agency in this respect as "the capacity to create stories on social media by using hashtags in a way that is collective and recognized by the public" (p. 14). The #IAmGay# stories consisted of numerous personal narratives and sentiments stretching across a vast array of posts, retweets, comments, and likes, and the interactions among the narratives further unfolded more stories and posts. The storytelling process unfettered a larger discourse, not simply in terms of coming out stories and defiance of censorship, but also in terms of bringing about an online protest event centered on this discourse as its mode of activism.

"I Am Not Gay, But I Support You": Collectivity Through Connective Action

While the enraged LGBTQ community flooded Weibo in an effort to counter the ban, users who identified as "not gay" joined with them in numerous posts expressing support:

Seeing the #IAmGay# tag. Though I am not LGBTQ, I feel for you. Everybody has the right to have a happy life, despite their sexual orientation. Queer as folk. (Silentjoy)

#IAmGay# Though I am not gay, I have your back. Love between same sex does no wrong. (blank)

#IAmGay# Though I am heterosexual, I want to use this tag to support *tongzhi*. I have many friends who belong to the LGBTQ community. I don't want to see the society, which they contribute to, rejecting them! (Esper)

The participation of this group of Weibo users in the hashtag movement amplified the message of defiance and resistance. They, like the members of the LGBTQ community, clearly felt that they had a stake in the censorship. Thus, some applied consequential thinking, being alert to the possibility that they themselves could likewise be silenced:

#IAmGay# I am not, but I support you because I don't know when they are coming after heterosexuals. (xufengnian)

#IAmGay# . . . when we realize that our freedom of procession, assembly, speech, and self-protection are all gone with the wind. (vanderah)

Others freely produced and consumed homosexual content despite not identifying themselves as "gay." One example are the so-called fujoshi, or funv (腐女), who enjoy literature and manga that feature romantic relationships between men (also known as boys love, or BL) and have been the driving force behind the growth in the commercial availability of homosexual content. The subculture of BL fandom in

China has been condemned by the mass media for promoting moral decay (Liu, 2009). While BL literature has struggled to find a place in mainstream entertainment, the government's assertion that "the antimainstream, rebellious nature of their [BL] practices" could be used by "antigovernmental and antisocial forces to threaten social stability" reflects the growing visibility of BL fandom (Yi, 2013, p. 3).⁶ During the Weibo protest, funv joined forces with the LGBTQ community, apparently out of sympathy and compassion resulting from personal experiences of negotiation with and resistance to the censorship of BL culture.

#IAmGay# I've been a funv for six years or so. I used to believe the situation of *tongzhi* would become better and better. Can't believe what I see today. (xiaomilovemei)

#IAmGay# I am not but I am a funv. Please do not discriminate against homosexuality. (winterrhinoceros)

In fact, the active participation of "not gay" users has both increased the visibility of the hashtag protest and advanced the discursive politics of #IAmGay# activism. The power of storytelling and narratives in the context of social movements has been well documented, and increasing attention in this respect is being paid to digital discourse, which has proved to be political in its own right (Kaun, 2015; Selbin, 2010). Particularly informative is the work of Shaw (2012a), who has shed light on the ways in which online discourse, as an alternative to mainstream discourse, can catalyze collective action offline. Shaw investigated Australian feminists' use of various social media to invent a collection of women-centric rock musicians, who were downplayed by mainstream media. The feminist effort highlighted the systematic erasure of women from the music industry and enacted a counterpublic with the aim of altering the perceptions of mainstream discourse in an explicitly political manner.

In the #IAmGay# protest, Weibo users similarly created a counterpublic to challenge hegemonic discourse by focusing on precisely who had the power to speak and to be recognized. The viral diffusion of personal accounts and depictions of specific situations and sentiments directly and simultaneously promoted new language and grammar for continuous storytelling, devised new interpretations of the censorship and the hegemonic grip of heterosexuality on mainstream discourse, unveiled the role of power relations in individuals' struggles to claim their rights and to combat discrimination, and unleashed the agonistic affect to position the resistance.

These isolated personal accounts were connected through Weibo by retweeting, commenting, and liking, and even through their half-hearted deletion by Weibo, which heightened their visibility and harnessed the capacity of storytelling. By means of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), personal stories and various narratives serve as the building blocks of a large-scale collective constructed as a counterdiscourse. Hashtagging #IAmGay#, then, facilitated the personalization of politics so that

⁶ The recent arrest and sentencing of erotic writer Tian Yi to 10 years in prison for the illegal publication of a BL porn novel caused considerable controversy; see <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/2173814/outcry-chinese-erotic-writer-jailed-more-10-years-over-gay-sex>.

collectivity and solidarity emerged from connective differences as a central tenet of contemporary activism.

It is worth noting that connective action in discursive activism is not only enabled by the connection of individual narrations through the larger network but also disturbed by the affects that Weibo users share in forming communities, even when they identify themselves differently in relation to "gay." By "affects," I mean here the shared emotions and bodily dispositions that reorient perceptions of and reactions to an object of concern in advance of thoughts and language (Ahmed, 2004; Stewart, 2007); these emotions and dispositions are, in this case, the longing for freed speech, desire of sexuality, empathy for suffering, and fear of punishment. For one user, retrieving, deleting, and hiding formerly public claims of resistance constitute both an affective reaction to fear of punishment and a deviation in hashtag activism. For the other, voices of different participants are asymmetrically situated and grounded in structural conditions of the protest, which lend to selective empathies that highlight certain personal stories yet discredit others. From these aspects, a counterdiscourse enabled by the hashtag is hindered by the very potential that it generates.

"I Delete It Because It Might Affect Others": The Affective Dimension of Tagging #IAmGay#

I wore an eye mask on the street. . . . In 40 minutes, 38 people came and hugged me. We never expected that people would be friendly and open-minded. . . . Yet, tonight, we go back to the dark days. [video] (SuperMax)

The video embedded in the post was filmed during the Free Hug campaign in which the user known as SuperMax participated a few years ago. This nationwide campaign was organized by various nongovernmental organizations and volunteers, its intent being to promote social awareness, tolerance, and recognition of the LGBTQ community. In the video, SuperMax wore a white T-shirt with a rainbow over the phrase "I am gay. Would you hug me?" Once the post was made public, it garnered considerable attention from Weibo users, receiving 4,146 retweets, 671 comments, and 4,405 likes. Many users shared this post with accounts similar to SuperMax's to draw attention to the shift in social attitudes that was revealed both in the video and in the reaction to the ban.

Nonetheless, Weibo users soon discovered that the post had been deleted. As SuperMax explained a day later in another post, "I deleted the video because I am afraid that other people will be affected by my post." On the night that Sina rescinded the ban on homosexual content, she tweeted again to describe what had been shown in the deleted video. SuperMax's series of actions demonstrate how the yearning for a voice and the fear of being heard feed off each other. While the hashtag #IAmGay# offered a platform to share her story and potentially amplified her voice through aggregation, circulation, and interactions with other users, SuperMax felt strongly the roles that such emotions as fear, hatred, distress, and anger play in mediating individuals' posts and in social expectations relating to being heard. Such uneasy feelings and emotions have foregrounded, as discussed earlier, how affects anticipate experiences and thoughts: it is all too familiar for participants protesting restrictions on free speech to feel the threat of being silenced and punished by the authoritarian state. In like manner for members of the LGBTQ community, with its history of fighting for rights and recognition, the social stigmatization and devastation

experienced as a result of coming out to families, friends, and the public have spawned intense emotions and corporal fears regarding personal safety.

As I checked all the posts after Sina had reversed its position on homosexual content, I found that 25.56% ($n = 204$) of the original posts were no longer available. They may have been deleted by Sina or various users, or made visible only within a user's circle of followers. The missing posts, at the very least, testify to self-censorship, conditioned by the affective dimension of free speech and fear of being heard, that muted an array of voices. As user SNH48kent warned, "#IAmGay# Today, many people might come out of the closet owing to rage toward Sina the jerk. However, I think we should protect ourselves first, as Kevin Tsai said, before stepping out courageously."⁷ The social expectations associated with raising one's voice are characterized by hegemonic power relations, or, to borrow a phrase from Ahmed (2004), the "affective economics" that lead to differing affective investments in digital media and constrain the ability to articulate and listen. The missing posts tagged #IAmGay# demonstrate that, for some, the hashtag created only a brief moment of collective action through networked communication after which they withdrew back into the closet or some other form of safe space, erasing any indication that they had spoken in defiance of the hegemonic discourse owing to fear of unforeseen consequences of that speech.

Shaw (2012b) has argued that discursive discourse necessarily involves consideration of giving voice and listening, the latter being less studied but nevertheless constitutive of the very basis of agonistic politics in digital activism. Citing Mouffe (2005), Shaw challenged the consensus-based democratic theories of the public sphere in the context of the networked feminist bloggers in Australia mentioned earlier—for, though marginalized from mainstream political discussion, these users were engaging in discursive activism and participating in political struggles in their efforts to denaturalize hegemonic discourses. While the ideal of the public sphere is at home with the push for inclusion in online political communication, Shaw (2012b) nonetheless demonstrated that such inclusion can, paradoxically, lead to exclusionary practices and thinking, so that the "possibility of affording equal respect to all parties in a discussion is constituted by power relations and the discursive expectations of particular groups" (p. 46).

SuperMax attributed her decision to change her post to the desire to protect others who appeared in her video, and such a concern seems reasonable. Her act of replacing the video with personal storytelling is in this respect critically self-reflexive, for it acknowledged that power relations and hegemonic discourses constitute the hashtag's affordances to equal voice and listening. That is to say, the self-critical and open attitude manifested in SuperMax's willingness to address her simultaneous demand for a voice and fear of being heard engages in a politics of difference that places listening at its core.

Many researchers have reported on efforts to provide various users with voices and representation in the media, and an increasing body of scholarship has identified listening as a crucial part of these efforts (Burgess, 2006; Crawford, 2009). In the case of #IAmGay# activism, the various voices involved received attention in a hierarchical manner. Indeed, when the sum of the retweets, comments,

⁷ Kevin Tsai, a Taiwanese writer and TV personality, is a vocal gay celebrity with broad recognition among Chinese audiences as the host of the variety show *Kangxi Lai Le*.

and likes for each post is viewed as a proxy for its visibility and for the attention that it receives (Figure 1), the situation appears quite alarming.

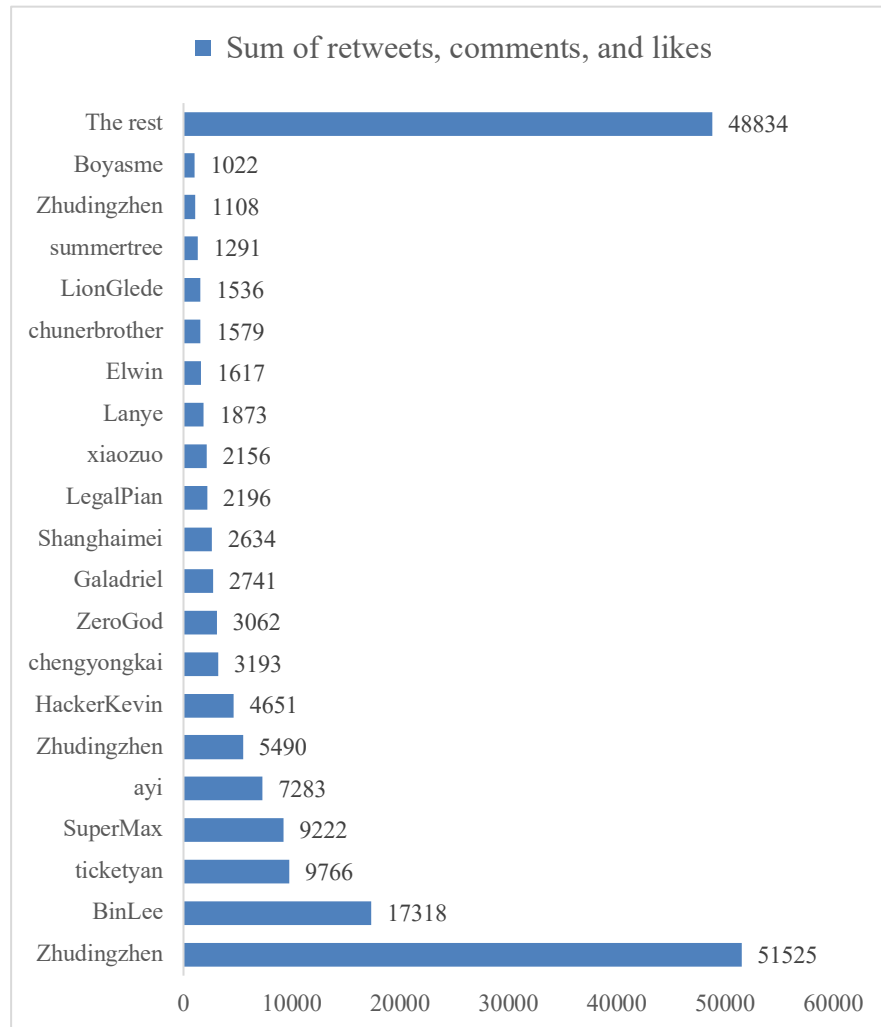


Figure 1. The 20 posts with the greatest number of retweets, comments, and likes at 9:26 a.m. on April 14, 2018.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the celebrity Zhudingzhen's call for public participation in the hashtag activism was the most popular post when the data were collected, and two of his other posts were also among the 20 most popular at that time. The sum of the tweets, retweets, comments, and likes of the top 20 posts comprised almost three quarters of the total for all posts. Put differently, the top 2.5% of

hashtag activists garnered the attention of 72.88% of the Weibo audience, to which they presented a dramatic image of inequality and exclusion amid the fight for equality and inclusion.⁸

Phipps (2016) warned that highlighting certain kinds of personal experiences—in particular those that prioritize the rhetoric of the powerful and privileged even when it is marshaled in the service of the marginalized—may inhibit the formation of connections across differences and exert a polarizing effect by creating the kind of selective empathies described earlier. Similarly, without critical and reflexive recognition of the affective investment made by social media users, digital activism may backfire and fail to advance discursive politics. Hashtag activism should, accordingly, engage in the politics of listening, heeding the ethical imperative of “listening across differences” (Dreher, 2009) to overcome the barriers to equality imposed by discursive expectations, to defy hegemonic power, and to actualize the potential of the activism.

Concluding Remarks: Digital Activism and the LGBTQ Movement in Postsocialist China

This study has investigated the #IAmGay# online protest on Weibo against the platform’s proposed ban on homosexual content. The hashtag offers powerful testimony to the sheer number of stories that are shared virally within the LGBTQ community and also circulate far beyond it. Through an analysis of 798 original #IAmGay# posts, I demonstrated that users rallied behind the hashtag and enacted discursive activism through storytelling that involved deeply personal and highly specific narratives. These narratives exposed the ban’s flaws and contradictions, carved out alternative space for the exercise of free speech in the face of censorship, and invented a counterdiscourse in the pursuit of positive change. The various stories, with respect to their brevity and chronological order, served as personal action frames, being flexibly linked into digital networks so that what began as isolated personal expressions could give rise to a sense of community and solidarity in carrying out connective actions. Many users tagging #IAmGay# demanded both a voice and to be heard, and in their posts, I was able to observe simultaneously critical reflection regarding who was allowed to speak and what was listened to, differing amounts of attention being paid to various stories, and the retreat of users from their personal expression and posting. All these observations associate the affective dimension of this effort with discursive activism, a context in which the politics of listening should be constantly exercised so as to counter exclusionary practices and thinking.

The #IAmGay# protest eventually faded after Sina rescinded the ban, though Weibo users continue to enjoy the visibility that it brought to the LGBTQ community. There is, however, reason for caution in celebrating the community’s “rare win” in the broader context of the struggle for LGBTQ rights and free speech in China. It is far too early to speak of having turned the corner with regard to censorship in the

⁸ While monitoring the protest, I also kept an eye on changes in the number of retweets, comments, and likes over time. In general, as the protest proceeded, each post received increasing attention, as indicated by a growing number of shares and likes. This increase was, however, uneven, with the more popular posts receiving relatively greater attention. Thus, for example, by May 2, the post of Zhudingzhen’s that topped the list in terms of popularity had received a total of 139,311 retweets, comments, and likes; this was in contrast to the 163 received by the user known as daom, who was ranked 152nd, with 74 original retweets, comments, and likes by the time of data collection.

country; there remains the multifaceted negotiation for power among members of the LGBTQ community, Weibo users at large, Sina, the mainstream media, market forces that seek to commercialize homosexual cultural assets, domestic and international political agendas, and Chinese party-state ideologies. The success represented by Sina's bowing to pressure from vocal activists, then, is no guarantee that LGBTQ rights will advance in China or that governmental control of speech will relax. On the contrary, driven by the market, the party-state in postsocialist China tends to appropriate visible aspects of LGBTQ culture and blend them with ideologies and entertainment that it considers benign in an effort to commercialize and normalize homosexuality. Any product of the government-endorsed LGBTQ cultures thus remains contingent on the whims of the party-state. As Bao (2018a) has forcefully asserted, "We should equally be critically cautious of the normalizing pull of homosexuality in an increasingly neoliberal society legitimized by the Party-state, with imperatives for conformity, consumption, and conservative moral orders" (p. 17).

In exploring the #IAmGay# protest against the ban on homosexual content on Weibo, I engaged actively with previous scholarship on digital activism and LGBTQ movements. My examination of the heated hashtag activism surrounding the Weibo ban helps fill a gap in the literature regarding the intersection of technology-powered social movements with LGBTQ advocacy in China. Important aspects of the phenomenon of hashtag activism of course remain to be explored. Thus, for example, the visual dimension of communication on Weibo and other social media platforms, such as through photos and videos (which was largely beyond the scope of this study), serves as a vital tool for storytelling and is an essential part of digital activism (Neumayer & Rossi, 2018). Also deserving of further investigation is how and to what extent discursive politics online can make an impact in the context of street protests, especially in an authoritarian country such as China, which has increasingly restricted public demonstrations. In terms of official channels, the role of the commentaries posted by the *People's Daily* merits critical analysis; for while Weibo users in this case used a post by the government's press mouthpiece as an endorsement for the #IAmGay# protest, careful attention needs to be given to the manner in which such statements further the interests of various stakeholders. It is, in any case, clear that hashtag activism has great potential to catalyze change in Chinese society if it is not impeded or coopted by hegemonic forces.

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