

The Impact of Social Media on Chinese Youth Identity and LGBTQ+ Social Perception

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid advancement of information technology, social media has become a crucial platform for shaping youth identity in China, particularly in terms of gender and sexual identity. This literature review explores how emerging social media platforms, especially some newly development platforms such as TikTok, Douyin, Kuaishou, and Xiaohongshu, influence Chinese youth's understanding of their identities and shape the social perception and visibility of the LGBTQ+ community. These platforms not only provide LGBTQ+ individuals with a space for self-expression and community building but also significantly impact youth perceptions of diverse gender and sexual identities through recommendation algorithms, information flow mechanisms, and regulatory policies. This study aims to systematically examine the influence of social media on youth identity formation and LGBTQ+ social perception while analyzing how platforms balance increased LGBTQ+ community visibility with censorship, commercialization, and societal values. And this review consider that future research should focus on optimizing social media algorithms to ensure fair promotion of LGBTQ+ content while preventing the reinforcement of identity stereotypes and the entertainment-driven trivialization of LGBTQ+ topics.

KEYWORDS

social media; LGBTQ+; self-identity; China; youth; algorithmic visibility; gender representation

1 Research Background

In recent years, with the continuous evolution of information technology, China's social media landscape has faced significant changes. The rise of new platforms, particularly short-video apps such as TikTok and Douyin, has introduced personalized recommendation algorithms and decentralized content distribution models, making them key spaces for shaping youth culture and identity^[1]. In this context, young people increasingly engage with content produced by marginalized communities, especially the LGBTQ+ community. They use these platforms for self-expression and identity exploration, highlighting the profound impact of social media on gender and sexual identity formation^[2]. These platforms not only provide LGBTQ+ individuals with a stage to present themselves but also contribute to the formation of their social identity and public image^[3]. Meanwhile, the content recommendation mechanisms and regulatory frameworks of these platforms may subtly shape youth perceptions of gender and sexual orientation^[4].

This study aims to examine how social media, particularly short-video platforms, influence identity formation among Chinese youth, with a specific focus on gender and sexual identity. It will analyze how these platforms provide LGBTQ+ individuals with spaces for self-expression and how such spaces contribute to shaping their social perception and group representation^[5]. The primary objective of this review is to clarify the impact of social media on youth gender and sexual identity and explore how platforms facilitate LGBTQ+ individuals in overcoming traditional social media barriers to gain higher social recognition and visibility^[6].

Additionally, this review will discuss the negative effects of social media platforms, particularly in algorithmic recommendations, content regulation, and the reinforcement of LGBTQ+ stereotypes. This review focuses primarily on the interaction between Chinese youth and emerging social media platforms, especially regarding gender and sexual identity. Due to the diversity and complexity of social media content, this research will be based on existing theoretical frameworks rather than attempting to comprehensively cover all user groups and platform influences^[7].

2 Various Social Platforms: Communication and Socialization Characteristics

2.1 The Role of Social Media in Youth Socialization

Social media platforms play an increasingly significant role in the socialization process of youth, influencing not only their identity formation but also their understanding of social groups and cultural values^[3]. The immense influence and unique social functions of these platforms provide new spaces for both youth and marginalized communities. Early LGBTQ+ users primarily explored identity formation through online forums (e.g., Douban Groups) and dating apps (e.g., Jack'd and Feizan)^[5]. However, in recent years, those platforms have offered more open spaces for user self-expression. These emerging social media platforms, with their high interactivity and personalized recommendations, have significantly influenced content consumption and self-expression patterns^[6]. Their impact stems not only from advanced

algorithmic technology but also from their emphasis on decentralized content distribution, providing youth—especially minority groups—with alternative socialization spaces^[7]. However, this highly personalized social experience also presents challenges, such as algorithm-driven filter bubbles, the psychological effects of social feedback mechanisms, and the shaping of group identity. This section reviews existing research on the social interaction characteristics of Chinese youth on social media and how these platforms influence identity formation.

2.2 Algorithmic Influence on Content Consumption and Identity Formation

Recommendation algorithms not only allow users to access content aligned with their interests but also play a crucial role in shaping the types of information they encounter^[4]. As recommendation algorithms have become core features of these platforms, they generate personalized content feeds based on users' viewing history, engagement behaviors (such as likes, comments, and shares), and personal data (such as location and interests)^[6]. Bhandari & Bimo introduced the concept of the "algorithmized self," arguing that social media algorithms not only influence individual identity formation but also shape users' perceptions of themselves^[7]. Through continuous exposure to algorithmically curated content, users gradually integrate these narratives into their identity frameworks, affecting their social cognition and self-expression. Studies suggest that long-term exposure to specific types of content, such as gender representation or cultural identity, may guide youth toward internalizing these narratives as part of their own identity^[3,8]. Additionally, Han's research on social media's impact on youth subculture self-presentation suggests that short-video platforms serve as key tools for users to explore and construct their identities^[9].

However, recommendation algorithms can create filter bubbles, where social media directs users toward content that aligns with their existing preferences, thereby limiting their exposure to diverse perspectives^[10-11]. Youth are particularly susceptible to this effect, as their identity formation relies heavily on external social feedback. Algorithms further reinforce pre-existing cognitive frameworks, influencing their social perceptions and self-expression^[12]. Zhang's study found that TikTok users' content consumption habits can lead to addictive behaviors, exacerbating the formation of filter bubbles. This reinforces users' existing beliefs, making it harder for them to encounter opposing viewpoints, ultimately contributing to cognitive rigidity^[13].

2.3 Decentralized Content Distribution and Identity Construction

Beyond personalized recommendations, decentralized content distribution also plays a crucial role in shaping youth identity. Unlike traditional one-way information flows, short-video platforms rely on user interaction and social networks to drive content dissemination, making information exchange more diverse^[7]. On these platforms, users are not only consumers of content but also active producers and distributors^[1]. This shift from traditional media structures to decentralized, user-driven content flows allows youth to engage in interaction, showcase their individuality, and develop their social identity. Liao's study on the #IAmGay campaign on social media found that social media platforms not only provide opportunities for LGBTQ+ identity recognition but also promote broader social acceptance^[14].

For LGBTQ+ youth, this networked social environment serves as a safe space for exploring and expressing identity^[15]. These platforms offer youth the ability to interact with like-minded individuals, gain social recognition, and strengthen their self-awareness.

3 The Impact of Social Media on Chinese Youth Identity and Recognition

3.1 Social Media and Individual Identity Formation

For Chinese youth, social media has become their primary platform for communication, extending beyond traditional social interactions and deeply influencing their identity formation and self-awareness^[3]. The internet plays a crucial role in shaping the identity development of LGBTQ+ youth, as social media provides them with new spaces to explore their sexual orientation and sense of belonging^[18]. Unlike traditional social environments, social media offers highly personalized information spaces for youth. Studies have shown that social media has become a key channel for LGBTQ+ individuals in China to express their culture and share community experiences^[19].

As discussed earlier, the algorithmic functions of emerging social media platforms have a significant impact on users. Personalized recommendation algorithms, which push content based on users' interests and behaviors, influence how young people perceive gender identity and sexual orientation to a certain extent^[6]. According to the "Algorithmic Crystal" theory, personalized recommendations not only reflect users' interests but also continuously introduce related content, gradually integrating it into their identity framework^[6]. Research suggests that the way LGBTQ+ youth establish their identity on social media is closely linked to their level of engagement with online communities and the type of content they interact with^[20]. If young users are consistently exposed to LGBTQ+ content, they are more likely to develop a greater

acceptance of diverse gender expressions and may even re-evaluate their own gender identity^[6]. Zhu, Ma, & Sannusi's study found that identity construction on TikTok has a dual impact: on the one hand, it helps young users find communities that align with their interests and identities, strengthening their sense of belonging; on the other hand, it may limit them to a single narrative framework^[8]. For instance, some young users who frequently engage with LGBTQ+ content may become more inclined to recognize gender fluidity as part of their identity.

3.2 Social Media and Group Belonging

Beyond individual identity formation, social media also plays an essential role in shaping how youth perceive social roles and group belonging^[17]. In traditional social structures, young people typically develop self-awareness through institutions such as family and school. However, in the era of social media, this process has gradually shifted toward online communities^[1]. Platforms facilitate identity construction by offering social tags and group markers, which help young users form unique cultural spaces. LGBTQ+ youth often signal their identity through clothing, language, and memes, using social media to find communities that share their experiences^[15]. The construction of such group spaces enhances young people's understanding of their personal and sexual identity, reinforcing their sense of self. Furthermore, youth can actively participate in public discussions about LGBTQ+ rights on social media, strengthening their social identity^[16].

Additionally, social media's anonymity provides a "safe testing ground" where young people can explore different identities with minimal risk. Some youth who may be reluctant to openly discuss their sexual orientation or gender identity in real life can use social media to engage in anonymous discussions, consume LGBTQ+ content, and utilize subtle social tags to navigate identity exploration^[17]. However, this process also exposes them to the psychological effects of social feedback.

Social media platforms also influence youth self-perception by fulfilling their psychological and social needs. Short-video platforms are not just spaces for self-presentation; they also provide instant feedback mechanisms, which help young people gain social recognition and emotional support. Zhang's 2022 study found that youth identity recognition on social media is highly dependent on external validation^[13]. When using these platforms, young users often rely on likes, comments, and social interactions to confirm their social roles. This feedback mechanism not only fulfills their need for social connection but also shapes their early self-perception.

For LGBTQ+ youth, this feedback is even more crucial, especially when gender and sexual orientation remain uncertain or evolving. The recognition and validation they receive from online communities significantly contribute to their psychological development. Dugua's research indicates that social approval on social media is closely linked to mental health, with users receiving positive feedback typically exhibiting higher self-esteem^[11]. However, Zhang's study also highlights the negative psychological consequences of excessive reliance on social media, including increased anxiety and depression^[13]. For LGBTQ+ youth, discriminatory comments and social exclusion remain persistent challenges in the digital space, adding to their psychological stress as a marginalized group^[11].

4 Queer Identity on China Social Media: LGBTQ+ Representation and Visibility

4.1 The Role of Social Media in LGBTQ+ Visibility

From another perspective, the transformation of social media platforms has had a profound impact on the LGBTQ+ community. In contemporary China, the rise of social media has provided LGBTQ+ individuals with unprecedented spaces for self-expression. Short-video platforms, in particular, have become relatively open arenas for LGBTQ+ individuals and communities, allowing them to share personal experiences, build connections, and promote discussions on gender diversity. However, identity expression on these platforms is still constrained by complex sociocultural norms and regulatory mechanisms. This does not mean that LGBTQ+ individuals can avoid censorship pressure on social media entirely. The visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals on Chinese social media is influenced by multiple factors, including platform policies, the acceptance of mainstream culture, and users' self-presentation strategies^[21].

To maintain their visibility, LGBTQ+ users must strategically adjust their content. Studies indicate that many queer content creators adopt "creative compliance" strategies, such as avoiding sensitive words, using metaphors or symbolic language, and modifying storytelling approaches to ensure their content can be disseminated on platforms^[2]. For instance, some LGBTQ+ influencers replace terms like "partner" with "friend" or "roommate" and use homophonic substitutions to express their views or identity, thereby bypassing platform automated censorship systems.

In addition to language-based avoidance strategies, humor and entertainment have become effective methods for LGBTQ+ individuals to increase their visibility on social media^[22]. On some platforms, LGBTQ+ content is increasingly integrated into mainstream pop culture (e.g., film and television references, KOL marketing) to enhance visibility^[23]. To improve their reach, LGBTQ+ users often have to adjust their content style to align with platform recommendation mechanisms, making their content more likely to be suggested to a broader audience. Some content creators use humor,

satire, or entertainment techniques to attract wider attention.

Zhou's research found that many LGBTQ+ creators employ exaggerated performance styles, ironic tones, and even mimic mainstream film and television dialogues to subtly convey their perspectives on gender identity and sexual orientation^[22]. Additionally, some LGBTQ+ content creators deliberately depoliticize or commercialize their content to appeal to the mainstream market, increasing their exposure and avoiding censorship risks^[24].

4.2 Algorithmic Selective Visibility and LGBTQ+ Content Suppression

Although social media provides new opportunities for LGBTQ+ identity expression, algorithmic selective visibility significantly influences the reach of LGBTQ+ content^[11]. Duguay points out that platform algorithms prioritize content that aligns with mainstream social values, while content related to marginalized communities, including LGBTQ+ individuals, may be deprioritized, restricted, or even removed^[11]. This mechanism leads to inconsistent LGBTQ+ visibility, particularly for discussions on transgender and non-binary identities, which are more likely to be flagged as "sensitive" or "violating community guidelines"^[25]. Huang's study suggests that LGBTQ+ expression on Chinese social media is subject to multiple constraints, including government regulations, platform censorship policies, and dominant societal values^[17]. The opaque nature of content moderation creates an unstable environment for LGBTQ+ users on social media. For example, some LGBTQ+ videos may gain high engagement quickly, but if platform algorithms are adjusted, they might suddenly be removed, or the creator's account could be suspended^[25]. Research also suggests that LGBTQ+ users may experience harassment, hate comments, or unfair censorship mechanisms, all of which can negatively impact their mental health^[26].

4.3 Regulatory Challenges and the Evolution of Online Censorship

Additionally, in the Chinese social media landscape, LGBTQ+ discussions often must avoid politically sensitive topics, such as legal rights and policy reforms, to stay within the boundaries of platform regulations^[16]. This situation creates uncertainty for LGBTQ+ identity expression, requiring users to continuously adjust their content strategies to adapt to shifting platform rules and societal expectations^[25]. While China's internet censorship mechanisms have become somewhat more flexible compared to earlier years, LGBTQ+ individuals still need to use various circumvention tactics to maintain their content's visibility. This constant adaptation not only influences how LGBTQ+ identities are authentically represented but also contributes to the entertainment-driven and symbolic commercialization of LGBTQ+ topics, where queer representation is consumed as a cultural commodity rather than fostering true understanding and acceptance^[11].

5 Conclusion

This literature review synthesizes recent studies to examine the impact of social media on Chinese youth identity and LGBTQ+ social perception, with a focus on recommendation algorithms, social interaction mechanisms, and platform regulations. The rise of short-video platforms has provided youth with new spaces for identity exploration, allowing them to engage more freely with diverse gender expressions and community cultures. However, this freedom remains constrained by platform censorship, algorithmic selective visibility, and dominant societal values. Although content regulation has become more lenient in recent years, LGBTQ+ visibility on social media is still influenced by complex factors, including commercialization and algorithmic gatekeeping. While social media offers a sense of anonymity and community support, it does not guarantee unrestricted self-expression, as LGBTQ+ content often requires strategic modifications to navigate censorship. Future research should explore whether the increased online visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals genuinely fosters societal diversity or merely reduces LGBTQ+ narratives to commodified cultural symbols.

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