

Digital Ethnography of Douban's Car Group: Polymedia Ecosystems, Offline-Online Interplay, and Conviviality Community Construction

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses digital ethnography to explore social dynamics in Douban's Car Group, a 120,000-member user-driven e-commerce community characterized by autonomous governance. Focusing on polymedia ecosystems, offline-online interplay, and convivial community construction, the research combines immersive observation and semi-structured interviews to analyze group buying practices. Findings show members leverage platforms like Taobao, JD, and Idlefish to integrate e-commerce promotions and coupons, bypassing merchant involvement. Transactions, whether online or offline, adhere to strict group rules to ensure trust, with roles of initiators and participants fluid. Exclusivity—via bans on external promotion and resistance to commercial intrusion—strengthens group identity, fostered through shared symbols and conviviality. The paper highlights how autonomy sustains order and solidarity, offering insights into virtual collectives' cultural role in China's digital landscape.

KEYWORDS

Digital Ethnography; Douban; Polymedia; Offline-Online Interplay; Conviviality Community

1 Introduction: Research Context and Digital Community Dynamics

The emergence of the Internet has had an unprecedented impact on human lifestyle and consumption patterns, and the maturation of digital technology and the widespread availability of the Internet have led to huge changes in the business environment. The nature of the value proposition that businesses today provide to their clients has been transformed by e-commerce. A new e-commerce business model has emerged as a result of the convergence of content websites and social networks^[1]. In China, with the trend of socialization of e-commerce, many e-commerce communities have emerged over time, such as the Weibo KOL (Key Opinion Leader) group buying model, social media QQ and WeChat shopping guide groups, team buying groups, etc. There are also communities attached to APPs, such as the Redbook App, the fashionable community of the Poizon APP, etc. Today, e-commerce communities have infiltrated all aspects of e-commerce sales. But unlike these merchants- or corporate-dominated e-commerce communities, Douban's e-commerce attributes are not as prominent, but the shopping groups formed by users on their own initiative maintain a generally orderly, honest, and free shopping atmosphere.

Douban is known as "China's best web 2.0 website", a community website that started from books and videos, and Douban's rating has become an important factor in measuring the quality of movies and books. Another important part of Douban is the "Douban Group". As a kind of online community, Douban group is a platform for sharing information based on common interests, with topics covering all aspects of life, work, entertainment, and emotions, thus Douban is kind of like a combination of IMDB and Reddit. At present, Douban has set up nearly 600,000 groups, including the "Douban Elephant Group" to talk about entertainment gossip, the "Did you have coffee today" group to gather coffee lovers, and the "Social Death" group to share their embarrassing events. Based on group numbers and daily group activity volume, "Just waiting for you to get in the car" (abbreviated as "Car group") is the most active group since 2020 with 120,000 group members. The group follows the principles of openness and fairness to provide a free, transparent, honest, and convenient trading platform for group members, who can post and reply to posts to communicate their shopping experience, share discount information, sell unused items and initiate group purchases, and the Car group has become the largest shopping group on Douban.

One of its main activities is group buying, which is also an important source of Car group vitality. "Team purchase" and "online collaborative purchase" are other names for group buying^[2]. Online group buying is when a specified number of customers band together online for the goal of purchasing a specific product at a discounted price. It's a business model^[3]. Customer-initiated transactions, merchant-initiated transactions, and transactions started by unaffiliated third parties made up the bulk of the online group purchase process. Unlike Groupon, LivingSocial and other sites where transactions are initiated by merchants or independent third parties, group buying in Car group can only be initiated by customers and the involvement of merchants or third parties is strictly prohibited. According to Tsvetovat and Sycara, the group buying process generally consists of five stages: negotiation, leader election/voting, coalition formation, payment collection, and execution/distribution stage^[4]. The special feature of the group buying in Car group is that the initiator does not have the stage of negotiation, i.e. "ask for a discount price from a seller"^[3]. The low or discounted prices of the group are generally formed by the group members through the research of various e-commerce platform promotions

and the combined use of various coupons. The members spent some time collecting coupons from hidden corners by using different media platforms and combining them flexibly. And coupons often require bulk purchases to be used, so group buying campaigns are initiated by Car group members.

2 Methodological Framework: Ethnographic Inquiry and Data Collection

As an important part of the Internet environment, online communities have become virtual spaces where people interact with each other. Members who participate in group buying are categorized as transactional virtual communities, and since virtual communities do not exist in physical space, the focus of maintaining them is on members' sense of identification and trust with the community^[5]. While the Car group is formed spontaneously by users, the official Douban platform does not interfere with the establishment of the group's internal rules, in the case of the platform neither intervenes in the group's transactions nor provides the corresponding protection, the group works steadily in "autonomy" and generally maintains an orderly and honest shopping atmosphere. Therefore, this study selects a typical and representative online community, the Douban Car group, as a fieldsite to explore the social interaction of the online shopping community and better understand the process of construction of collective cognition. Hence the research questions of this project are:

- How do the group members participate in group buying within the Car group?
- How do the group members develop a sense of group identity and work collectively to maintain group order?

There is no lack of thinking, exploring, and experimenting with digital technologies and online environments in the academic world^[6], and ethnography as a research method in anthropology has been applied to study virtual online communities. This method emphasizes the "embedded, embodied and everyday Internet", to catch and showcase those parts of the Internet that have become invisible, and to observe the uniqueness of situations where the Internet returns to the cultural foreground^[7]. Thus this approach is applicable to this study to observe and understand how people interact socially and identify with values in cyberspace by revisiting online group buying which is an activity integrated into the lives of the majority. This research is a combination of ethnographic methods including an unobtrusive approach and semi-structured interviews.

I created my Douban account in late 2014 and joined the Car Group in mid-2020 and have been active in the group along with other group members. Thus I have a relatively in-depth knowledge of Car Group, which also facilitates my use of the unobtrusive method as it is an embodied ethnographic experience in itself, and the experience of navigating the scenery online is a great asset for growing ethnographic understanding^[7]. I used this method to thoroughly read the group rules and observe the interaction of the group members, such as the changes in posts from the start of the group buying to the completion, as well as some posts about transaction strife and its resolution. By using this method, I have become familiar with its own language and cultural symbols, as well as a specific set of interactions that belong only to the Car group members. By doing this, the limitations of the interview can be remedied, such as the fact that it is difficult to discuss some details in retrospect during the interview and the responder may have difficulty giving honest or truthful answers about their actions^[7]. Of course, such data is lacking in structure, but as Hine states, the unobtrusive part usually requires an unstructured observation process instead of a more centralized data collection, which is featured by a focus on the feeling of experiencing the scene itself.

The flexibility that comes with qualitative research is often accompanied by the subjectivity of the researcher, which is one of the criticisms of qualitative methods. Over-interpretation may distort the participants' intentions and ultimately affect the results of the research. Thus one-on-one interviews provide insight into the experiences and understandings of specific informants^[7]. I selected one administrator and three group members, totaling four people, as my interviewees. Because of the geographical location, I was unable to conduct face-to-face interviews, moreover, compared to video interviews, both I and the interviewees preferred text and voice interviews, as it was a more relaxed and non-awkward atmosphere for complete strangers to chat. And I didn't feel that the quality dropped as a result. As Hine states, any choice of interview mode needs to make the interviewee feel comfortable and convenient, and able to have a free and open interaction. I used a semi-structured approach based on O'Reilly's guide to interviewing informants, focusing on their feelings and experiences with the Car group, events that impressed them, and so on. As O'Reilly warns, "ethnographic interviews have proven to be collaborative instead of interrogative, guided instead of structured, flexible, and often informal"^[8].

In general, this essay adopts a digital ethnography approach, taking the Car Group as a research fieldsite, and through immersive observation and semi-structured interviews with the group, exploring the interaction between individuals and groups in online communities, analyzing how the group members, who are "unsupervised" and "virtually present", participate in group purchases in an orderly and honest manner, and form a high sense of collective identity and responsibility for maintaining group order together.

3 Research Findings and Thematic Analysis

3.1 Polymedia Ecosystems: Navigating Multi-Platform Group Buying Practices

The Car Group's group buying is a process of integrating and switching between multiple media and platforms, showing how group members can use new media as an available communication environment, instead of as an ever-proliferating but the fragmented catalog of technology. This is defined by Madianou and Miller as a polymedia, 'an emerging environment of communication opportunities that functions as an "integrated structure" in which each individual medium is defined in the context of all other media in related terms' ^[9]. I will elaborate on how group buying in Car groups is navigated in the polymedia environment, based on the five process stages that group buying generally has, summarized by Tsvetovat and Sycara ^[4].

Negotiation: As mentioned earlier, the group buying of the Car group does not have a stage of negotiation between the initiator and the merchant. The low or discounted price of the Car group is generally formed by the group members through the research of various e-commerce platform promotions and the combined use of various coupons. And the shopping platform can only be Taobao, JD, Amazon, and other large well-known Chinese and foreign e-commerce platforms, because smaller platforms may be involved by individual merchants.

Leader election/voting: The initiators are not also elected by vote, it is up to the group members to volunteer. The identities of initiators and participants are not fixed either. In other words, I can be the initiator of this group buying today and a participant of another group buying tomorrow. Generally speaking, because the initiator needs to spend more time and energy, and can not earn benefits from it or receive compensation, so busy group members such as office workers usually do not choose to initiate group buying. However, there are still many group members here who are willing to be initiators:

"Because I'm a freelancer, I have a lot of free time at home. I love to drive (initiate group buying). It may sound strange, but I enjoy acting as an organizer, and sending items successfully to participants gives me a sense of accomplishment and pleasure." (Interviewee A)

Coalition formation: The initiator buys in bulk via Taobao, JD, and other major e-commerce platforms, and then posts in the Car group according to a fixed format. General chat and discussion are not encouraged in Car group, for the sake of orderly trading here are some fairly clear posting templates. The group members who want to participate comment under the post, usually with a short text, like "Me", "I could", "I want!". Generally, it is on a first-come, first-served basis to get a spot in the group buying. The title of the post is edited from "Driving" to "Parking", which means that a coalition has been formed.

Payment collection: In order to avoid transaction risks, all money in the group cannot be transferred directly through personal accounts but must be paid for through a third-party platform, Idlefish, China's largest idle trading platform. After the group buying is formed, the initiator posts the item on Idlefish and sends the link to the participant via the Douban chat window. After the participant pays, the money is at this point on Idlefish as a kind of third-party temporary custody.

Execution/distribution stage: Items purchased in bulk on the e-commerce platform are first sent to the initiator's home, who then packages each item individually and sends it to the participants. The shipping cost for this step is borne by the participant and is usually 8-12RMB. Therefore, participants often use CaiBird - China's largest delivery service platform- to get shipping coupons and discounts. The initiator will also use this platform to send the delivery and update the logistics information. When the participants receive the items, in the absence of damage and other problems, they need to confirm receipt within 48h in Idlefish. This group buying will be successfully concluded when all participants have confirmed receipt.

From start to finish, the Car group's group buying used multiple media and platforms such as Douban, Taobao, JD, Idlefish, and CaiBao, showing the way users used the differences between media to meet their needs ^[10]. Ethnography reveals the subtle ways in which Car group members navigate social and other media environments and is the most appropriate way to capture the relational dynamics that underlie social media practices in polymedia.

3.2 Hybrid Transaction Spaces: Interplay Between Online and Offline Spaces

The expression of varied cultural places through social networks gives place, belonging, and identity a new dimension. Numerous interactions on social media are not only virtual and intermediated but also actual encounters that creatively combine communities' offline and online places ^[11]. Most of the transactions of Car group happen online, but there are also offline transactions due to the special nature of some items. For example, food items with a short shelf life such as seafood, very heavy items that will require higher shipping costs such as dog food, cat shelves, or items that cost only 10-20 RMB and therefore are not worth paying to ship for such as toothpaste.

"I had an experience of offline trading, I based on the group's sharing and only spent 30rmb to buy about 3000g of toast That's really too much hahaha because the bread shelf life is very short and my family doesn't like to eat. In order not to waste, I posted in Car group to find a member in the same city to split. When I posted, I mentioned that this can only be picked up in my city. After all, no one would pay 10RMB shipping for 15RMB of toast" (Interviewee B)

Offline transactions must still follow the process of Car group, after forming a coalition through the post, participants still need to pay through Idlefish, and offline cash transactions are not advocated. Usually, the offline transaction will take place at a subway station, and after the initiator hands the item to the participant, the participant still needs to confirm receipt at Idlefish. As Hine says, it's usually "only meant to be a brief interaction"^[7].

"We don't make small talk. Conversations are just like "Here you are", and "Thank you", we will only have conversations in the Douban chat window

Adding other social media accounts is not allowed, and I certainly don't think it's necessary, we don't even have to know each other's names. Those are enough." (Interviewee B)

3.3 Exclusivity and Conviviality: Identity, Belonging, and Collective Governance

Today, the Car group has developed strong exclusivity. On the one hand, the group members have a common focus and based on this, they carry out a lot of sharing communication and trading behavior. Repeated practices of communication and social engagement create and reproduce a sense of place, allowing for new forms of meaning and belonging that transcends geography and allow for community building based on contact with people who share the same interests and expressions^[12]. Long-term interactions have led them to share similar characteristics and to develop specific group symbols. Members outside the group often do not understand its true connotation, and the continued use of such symbols for communication and interaction among group members further deepens the members' identity and sense of belonging to the collectivity.

On the other hand, the group members were worried that the entry of merchants would damage the group's ecology and affect their own experience in the group, so they strongly opposed the group members' "promotion" on other platforms than Douban. In the group, it has become a common default invisible group rule not to promote outside the group. "Don't mention Car groups outside okay?" "Is there a discount for taking about Car group outside?" Similar posts appear in the group from time to time.

"I remember that around the end of 2020, the WeChat magazine of Beijing University Student Union published an article about Car Group, which caused a lot of controversy in our group... The article was a leak of the secret code and answer, and more importantly, the article would increase the exposure of the group, and the group might be flooded with various strangers as a result, affecting the ecology of the group. Ultimately, over everyone's objections, the incident ended with the magazine deleting the article and apologizing." (Interviewee C)

In addition, Vista, Valley Rain, and other microblogging also posted tweets about the Douban shopping group phenomenon, which were all denounced by the group members. In the process of collective xenophobic actions, the group not only strengthened its members' collective identity and deepened their sense of xenophobia, but also achieved a high degree of group solidarity.

Douban groups provide a low-cost space for different users to interact with each other, where we can find something fundamental about communities in the online era - a joint focus^[13]. Douban users may initially choose to join the Car group because of their pursuit of discount information or getting the best deal, but in a long time of communication, the emotional ties between group members also become tighter due to the material rewards of visualization and form a closer emotional connection at the level of identity and goals. This phenomenon, which is called "Conviviality" by Varis and Blommaert, "is structural, i.e. a sharing at one level of meaningful interaction by means of a joint feature, which in superficial but real ways translates a number of individuals into a focused collective"^[13]. Members of the group call each other "sisters" and "the Car group is the family of all sisters" has become the consensus of the group. As Polson stated, participants may feel a sense of place and location attachment to the online world if the virtual environment provides a meaningful experience^[12]. In addition to the daily transactions, the group members also regularly initiate "shipping only" activities, i.e., they send their idle items for the cost of shipping only. Giveaways such as refrigerators and sofas have also become a spectacle within the group. The conviviality within Car group experiences emphasizes collective social relationships and collaboration instead of individualism. When people collaborate and engage in communication, "they construct and rely on the crust, reciprocity, and the construction of shared narratives"^[14].

4 Conclusion and reflection

The Car Group's group buying is a process that integrates and switches between multiple media and platforms, demonstrating how the group members navigate through the polymedia environment. But group buying is not the only activity, group members connected emotionally around the joint focus of "the best deal", by posting and sharing, exchanging comments, and trading orderly, resulting in collective conviviality. Strict access mechanisms and group rules create a shield for orderly transactions, and in an atmosphere of "autonomy" and mutual supervision of group members, the ecology of the group is maintained. The use of group symbols and multiple xenophobic collective actions showed the exclusivity of the group while strengthening the collective identity of the group members and allowing the group to achieve a high level of group solidarity.

Through ethnography, with its unique perspective that combines a broad view and microscopic concern for detail, this research reveals the ways in which people interact benignly in virtual communities^[10]. However, these are only preliminary findings and limitations still exist in this research. The geographical limitations of this research did not allow for the use of autoethnography, a method that is well suited to this study and can be a strong tool for examining the ambiguities and uncertainties associated with Internet use as well as the dependent and flexible connections between online and offline sites, rather than simply requiring separate retrospective narratives from other participants^[7]. With more time and opportunity to incorporate more methods such as the media go-along method, I would like to dig deeper into the more interesting aspects under the interactive sociality of online shopping groups to understand “what they mean and how they shape our contemporary notions of subjectivity, personhood, and sociality”^[15].

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