How Lesbian Internet Celebrities Establish and Maintain Connection With the Audience: An Analysis of the Lesbian Internet Celebrity-Audience Relationship on Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book)

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Abstract
This paper explores the connection between lesbian internet celebrities and their audiences. Under the circumstance of the burgeoning market on social media platforms in mainland China, I take Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book), a social media platform that is permeated by female users as a study target. In addition, I use Manxue, Maxxxx, and Quanjiaofu as lesbian internet celebrities' examples. I examined whether previous studies shed light on the internet celebrity-audience relationship still suits lesbian internet celebrity-audience relationships. Considering that in the context of mainland China, homosexuals such as lesbians are not welcomed by mainstream media and undergo serious censorship when posting content on social media. This study invited 26 female users who identified themselves as lesbians or bisexuals to participate in online and offline interviews. Former studies centered on T-style (Tomboy style) fandom enlightened the direction of this study. Although the appearance of lesbian internet celebrities is evaluated by the audience when they make decisions if they will start to follow or not, the essential part which prolongs the connectedness between them and the lesbian internet celebrity is the genuine attitude they believe they are receiving from the internet celebrity. Similar life backgrounds such as being a sexual minority or outrageous performance might have a chance to win the glances of users when they scroll the screen. According to the interview results, sincere life sharing and self-disclose storytelling bring the two sides closer and cultivate intimacy and affinity which help to strengthen the bond between lesbian internet celebrities and audiences.

Keywords: Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book), social media, lesbian internet celebrities, audience, mainland China

1. Introduction
Due to the strict censorship which is regulated by the Chinese government, it is rare to find mainstream celebrities in the traditional media industry reveal evident homosexual desire or come out in public social space in China. To secure a ‘red’ status (in Chinese means ‘hong’, which represents high-level popularity) in mainstream media, celebrities should obey the regulation. Besides, celebrities in the traditional or mainstream media industry also experience self-censorship from media practitioners (Zhao, 2020, p.467). The media practitioners cautiously avoid stepping into sensitive issues and seek profitable businesses. Thus, few celebrities in China dare to challenge regulations and censorship in the mainstream media industry.

However, currently deprive the queer culture of mainland China is difficult in China. The booming growth of queer online media is observed in China (Engebretsen et al., 2015). Engebretsen et al. (2015) evaluated the internet as a crucial tool to conduct queer activities. Meanwhile, homosexual internet celebrities have become more visible on public social media platforms. Although manipulation and censorship also exist online, as the survey of Wang (2020) demonstrated that the distribution of sexuality performances is not allowed in online space in China. If the homosexual internet celebrity obeys the rules and is careful on social media, lesbian or gay gain online fame can talk about their queer life, share opinions and experience.

Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book), a Chinese social media platform in which 80% of users are women (Chan, 2019). Since on Chinese social media such as Bilibili, the audience also pays attention to swanky gay internet celebrities. On a relatively feminine platform, lesbian internet celebrities become more active and visible on Xiaohongshu compared with other social media platforms in China.

This study focuses on the connectedness between lesbian internet celebrities and the audience on Xiaohongshu.
It attempts to examine whether previous findings which pay attention to internet celebrities could also suit the lesbian internet celebrity-audience relationship and how do the two groups of people establish and perpetuate connection with each other.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Chinese Internet Celebrities

Internet celebrity is interpreted as Wanghong in Chinese, which is the abbreviation of ‘wangluo hongren’, which means someone is popular online (Zhang & De Seta, 2018, p.58). These internet celebrities are not commodities in the mainstream or traditional media industry (Abidin, 2018). It is ordinary people who gain fame online and receive large quantities of interaction from the audience. Nevertheless, Abidin (2018) reminded that not every ordinary people could become famous online.

Previous research has shed light on the commercial value of internet celebrities. However, in an early stage, netizens treat performance or share private life on the internet as hobbies in amateur life. These people can barely make a strong wave and generate notable financial income through live-streaming and social media posts (Abidin, 2018, p.11). Although the commercial potential of internet celebrities was proved by social media marketing especially during covid-19, live commerce hosted by both celebrities and internet celebrities indicated itself non-stopable and prevailing power (Chang & Woo, 2019, p.374). Indeed, to earn money, a stable bond and connectedness with fans are radical for internet celebrities to perpetuate commercial value.

2.2 Uses and Gratification Theory

The uses and gratification theory suggests that users positively participate in media usage and expect to satisfy particular needs (Chang & Woo, 2019, p.375). As mentioned before, information exchange and emotional interaction could be categorized as one need. Some audiences may seek aesthetic pleasure or anxiety relief. Although needs are dynamic and variable in digital platforms, the posts released by internet celebrities are diverse and keep up with trends on social media. Thus, to analyze how lesbian internet celebrities consistently connect with the audience, the uses and gratification theory gives a fundamental direction for this paper.

According to the research of Chang and Woo (2019), that the main purpose of following internet celebrities is to satisfy informational feedback and emotional echoes. For example, as a member of the queer community, homosexual followers experience conflicts with families and misunderstandings in real life. Receiving a sense of belongings and comfort from internet celebrities supports their emotional demands. Meanwhile, Abidin (2019) narrated that homosexual internet celebrities tell coming-out stories to cultivate solid trust and with the audience. Coming-out stories not just provide instructive suggestions and inspirations for the homosexual audience who also tries to come out to families, but consolidate the emotional bond between the audience and the internet celebrity.

2.3 Parasocial Relations

Formerly, Abidin (2018) raised the concept ‘parasocial relations’ to explain the celebrity-audience relationship. The intimacy formed in the celebrity-audience relationship is ‘second-order intimacy’ which is derived from media communication fueled by technology (Abidin, 2018, pp.8-9). Moreover, self-disclosure and private story discussions of internet celebrities connect the audience and internet celebrities psychologically (Wang, 2020, pp.548-564). When homosexual internet celebrities come out to the audience and expose self-privacy, the audience becomes simulate families or friends of the internet celebrity. The audience feels closer to the internet celebrity no matter they share similar living situations or not. Hence, even if the audience and the internet celebrity are not from a similar background, the intimate tie will be firmed through self-disclosure and exposure.

2.4 A T-style Fandom

Furthermore, the T-style fandom could also be introduced in the research. ‘T’ represents a relatively masculine and gender-neutral role in the lesbian community, which can also be regarded as a tomboy (Huxley et al., 2013, pp.205-219). For instance, the character Dallas in the movie Below Her Mouth. In the fieldwork, Kam (2014, pp.252-265) investigated the popularity of T-style in China. The passionate vote and worship for Li Yuchun, Zhou Bichang in 2005, two contestants in Supergirl (a singing contest) revealed the rise of T-style pop (Kam, 2014, pp.252-265). Zhao (2018) wrote that the number of final votes for Li Yuchun in the national competition was up to 3.6 million. The prominent commercial value of tomboy in reality TV shows demonstrates the power of gender-neutral culture (Zhao, 2018, pp.474-476). Meanwhile, Kam (2014, pp.252-265) pointed out that T-style women are adored and accepted by straight audiences especially straight female audiences. This situation might explain why T-style lesbian internet celebrities are welcomed by social media users in my research.
2.5 The Video of Affinity

The notion of ‘video of affinity’ amplified the function of connection in the online communication world. Nardi (2005) said that videos on social media platforms such as YouTube create affinity with the audience purposely. A further explanation from Lange (2009) noted that these videos were produced to make the audience posit that they are the intended target audience and trigger their similar resonance when they watch the video. The videos are not necessarily to be interesting or aesthetically presented, Lange (2009) emphasized. That is to say, outstanding shooting technique or exceptional talent are not elementary components of the video. The most crucial part is to make the audience feel connected. Video creators should hint to the audience that ‘I design this video for people like you. Likewise, although users on social media platforms could get access to these videos, there is no need to target every user through video (Lindgren, 2017, pp.148-149). For example, some lesbian internet celebrities record their worries about marriage on social media, they may target lesbian couples who also feel the same anxiety.

On Xiaohongshu, a social media platform full of beauty and fashion vloggers and bloggers, the lesbian internet celebrity have an attractive appearance have more advantage in maintaining connectedness with the audiences than others who have the mediocre appearance.

3. Method

Inspired by the study of gay man live streaming conducted by Wang (2020), this study conducts online and offline interviews about the research topic. Interviewees are followers of Maxxxx and Quanjiaofu (a lesbian internet celebrity couple) on Xiaohongshu and questions related to the research topic were discussed during the interview. The article combines the interview and the content posted by Maxxxx and Quanjiaofu to analyze how could lesbian internet celebrities establish and perpetuate connectedness with the audience. Meanwhile, the case study introduces another lesbian internet celebrity Manxue, attempts to find the validity of emotional bond in the connection of lesbian internet celebrity and the audience.

The interviewees were selected randomly and the total sample number is 26. 15 of them are self-identified straight women, the other 11 are self-identified lesbian or bisexual women.

4. Findings and Discussion

The distribution of samples in the research shows that the audience comes from different background probably follow lesbian internet celebrities. The followers are not purely constituted by sexual and gender minorities. Lesbian internet celebrities establish a connection with any potential audience.

With the comment of ‘You are my ideal girlfriend’, I asked the girl who left the comment to join my interview. It turned out she is a straight girl and she said she just appreciated the handsome appearance of Maxxxx but never think about having a girlfriend. The reason why she followed Maxxxx is similar to the reason she follows the other good-looking male internet celebrity, simply for their nice face and body. According to the statistic, 73% of straight girls in the investigation expressed that they are fascinated by the attractive T-style of Maxxxx. In the videos and photos Maxxxx posted on Xiaohongshu, she has both an exquisite and masculine face and a skinny body. She does not have apparent physiological characteristics as a female. Comments below her selfie post said ‘how could a person look so handsome is a girl’ and ‘love you sis’, ‘you are the most handsome T I have ever seen’. In a nutshell, this group of the audience is crazy about the appearance of Maxxxx and her T-style.

Aside from the fascination of charming faces, 6 straight girls manifested curiosity about a tomboy and queer life. The audience said other than Maxxxx, they also subscribe to other lesbian internet celebrities on Xiaohongshu. Most of them have few friends who are homosexual. Meanwhile, some of them said they did not search for lesbian internet celebrities on purpose on social media. They were casual viewing posts on the homepage and the backstage algorithm recommended Maxxxx to them. Out of curiosity, they follow some famous homosexual users on Xiaohongshu. Talking about queer topics is common among this audience and their friends, they explained. Sometimes they repost to Wechat friends or discuss posts of Maxxxx and exchange opinions. The audience prefers to know more about the reality of queer life, the appearance of T-style attracted them at the first glance, but if all the original posts of Maxxxx are about appearance, they may get bored and lose interest. It will be possible that they remove Maxxxx from their follow list and cut the connection.

To those lesbian or bisexual audiences, they show a greater preference for practical information and experience and expect the lesbian internet celebrity could supply concerning content. Almost 80% of the queer audience do not care about the aesthetic fact of the lesbian internet celebrity. Although they said that they were surprised by the appearance of Maxxxx at the beginning but they also follow other lesbian internet celebrities who have ordinary looks.

Two of the interviewees are T role in the lesbian relationship. Instead of drowning in the charming appearance of...
Maxxxx, they tend to appreciate the fashion taste of Maxxx. These two girls proposed that since Maxxxx is the same role as they perform in the lesbian community, they believe they can refer to the fashion wear and hairstyle to apply to personal style. For example, the audience wrote that they want to know how to perm the same hairstyle Maxxxx had in the picture. After a few days, Maxxxx recorded how she finished the hairstyle herself and explain the process in detail. For the T role audience, they feel satisfied when they find they could borrow some ideas from the lesbian influencer who has the same attribute.

Q & A (question and answer) titled videos of Maxxxx received a high rate of clicks from the audience. Both straight followers and queer audiences like to watch Q & A videos. As mentioned above, lesbian internet celebrities share the coming-out experience with the audience on social media. When asked by the audience whether they have told their parents about sexual orientation or how they manage the romantic relationship between two girls, the lesbian internet celebrity usually upload feedbacks for the questions.

On the one hand, the audience gets feasible advice and beneficial experience from the lesbian internet celebrity, their knowledge gap is filled by the lesbian couple as well. On the other hand, the interaction is realized during the Q & A session. By observing the comment region of the post, only a few comments will be replied to. Also, none of the interviewees said they had sent a private message to Maxxxx. They explained that seeing from the situation of comment, they predict there will be few changes that Maxxxx will rely on their private message personally. The one-to-one interaction is not necessary to them. Hence, the one-to-one interaction is not a decisive factor that contributes to the connection in lesbian internet celebrity-audience relationships. For internet celebrities, send feedback to every comment and private message will make them feel exhausted.

Concerning that frequent personal interaction is unreliable, the affinity the lesbian internet celebrity conveyed in videos and the intimacy construction perform centralized power to establish and maintain the connection. The videos perform more effectively and function as a communicative channel for the internet celebrity to interact and feel each other. For instance, 18 interviewees feel closer to Maxxxx when she expresses emotion and reflects personal private life. The audience said it makes them feel distant when the post they review is all about the fancy internet celebrity life of Maxxxx. As to the audience, the real person should have worries and troubles, and as lesbians, they are likely to be confronted with extra problems. Otherwise, when watching videos about Maxxxx and Quanjiaofu’s romantic story, they could sense the romantic atmosphere and bless the lesbian couple. An interviewee complains that she is in an awful conflict with her contemporary girlfriend. The videos which documented the romantic moments of Maxxxx and Quanjiaofu comfort her and encourages her to believe in the relationship and devote more effort to the management of her problems with her girlfriend. The above demands of the audience proved that they both expect positive and problematic sides of the lesbian internet celebrity. Therefore, to connect with the audience constantly, effective work should be invested in the video content based on the framework of the video of affinity. As Lindgren (2017) vividly depicted in the book, the video speaks for the creator and strength the bond. Furthermore, compared with other video blogs, Q & A videos need fewer techniques, and content weighs more significant. Regarding the aesthetic level of videos, the interviewees said they think the video posted by Maxxxx presented a professional taste of beauty and fashion. The truth is the internet celebrities such as Maxxxx they have specialized team assist them to regulate their social media accounts. Thus, the aesthetic presentation of these videos is guaranteed to some extent.

Manxue, another lesbian internet celebrity, posts funny or even hilarious short videos on Tik Tok. 16 interviewees said they know Manxue on Tik Tok and 6 of them followed her. Manxue also acts T-style on social media. Different from Maxxxx, the audience does not think Manxue has an attractive appearance, they laughed when I mentioned Manxue during the interview. Likewise, a lesbian interviewee thought that the videos of Manxue cannot represent the average and real lesbian life. To the interviewee, Manxue is a funny internet celebrity but provides little useful information. 6 followers of Manxue said the tricks Manxue performed in videos are too hilarious and unreliable. Although the performance of Manxue is not fancy or surrealistic, the interviewees said they cannot feel genuine communitve attitudes and emotions from the videos. For them, nothing practical and mentally nutritional is delivered when they watch Manxue’s videos. When the audience subscribes to the internet celebrity, the social media platform often presents the latest work of the internet celebrity on the followers’ homepage. In this case, the interviewees claimed that they will watch the new post of Manxue if the platform automatically shows. If it is not necessary, they barely check Manxue’s homepage consciously. Instead, they are willing to go to the homepage of Maxxxx to see there are some new posts. It can tell from the contrast that the audience has more temptation in enjoying sincere self-disclosure but not single funny videos. In a word, if the tie between the lesbian internet celebrity and audience is nurtured by intimacy and affinity, the connection tends to develop stronger.
5. Conclusion
To conclude, the feedbacks of the 26 interviewees explained why they establish a connection with the lesbian internet celebrity based on the framework of uses and gratification theory. In the digital age, interaction can be various and it is unessential to be the instant and one-to-one response. Interact with the audience through feeding the information they show interest in is a practical tactic to maintain the relationship. To reach further connectedness, the lesbian internet celebrity-audience relationship needs the support of intimacy and video content with affinity. Moreover, it was proved that aesthetics does not play a crucial part in the relationship even on a platform full of beauty and fashion internet celebrities. A charming appearance, similar gender, and minority background, or exaggerated performance solely trigger the willingness of the audience to pay attention to the lesbian internet celebrity. However, the audience should be informed by the posts that they are treated with the genuine attitude of the internet celebrity.

6. Limitations
Although interviewees all provide subtle thoughts and experiences they had with lesbian internet celebrities, this qualitative research lacks enough samples to strengthen credibility. Another problematic issue is all those audiences investigated were female. It is likely that some male audiences also have an interest in lesbian internet celebrities and they may give other insights and inspirations to the study.

References

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