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Conceptualising The Algorithmic Queerness In Digital Marketing Space

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Abstract

In 2021, the Chinese government advocated for the censorship of *Niang Pao* (sissy-pants) culture in the media. Scholars have discussed this censorship as a manifestation of hegemonic national power aimed at oppressing queer groups in order to maintain the country's heteronormative status. Against this backdrop of social and political pressure on the queer community in China, the digital market space of queer communities has inevitably been affected. Algorithms have faced criticism for their complicity in reinforcing oppression. Marketers and governments have sought to exert control by designing algorithms that eliminate queer content from digital spaces. However, despite the censorship, much algorithmically-recommended queer content continues to circulate and remains popular (e.g., many queer beauty influencers are highly popular on social media). So, how did this happen?

The chapter conceptualises the queerness of algorithms at (1) micro (individuals), (2) meso (algorithmic market) and (3) macro levels (government and hegemonic ideology) in disrupting powerful institutions censorship control. In doing so, we studied one of the most popular Chinese algorithmic platforms *Xiaohongshu* (RED), which has been described as an 'online oasis' for queer communities in China, with theoretical underpinnings from queer theory to understand algorithms as a nonhuman agent. The case illustrates that algorithms can be conceptualized as non-human resistant agents, even when they are not necessarily designed to be so. We hope the chapter opens the discussion for understanding algorithm as a resistant force in queer social movement.

1. Introduction

In 2021, the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) of China implemented a censorship on "Niang pao (sissy pants) and other abnormal aesthetics" in television programming, promoting a narrow view of "traditional Chinese aesthetics, revolutionary culture, and advanced socialist culture" (Wang and Bao, 2023, p. 2). The Cyberspace

Administration of China (CAC) have also stated a ban on the presence of homoerotic romance and homosexual relations in cyberspace (Zheng, 2023). Those acts of censorship reflect the ongoing marginalization of queer culture by the government. While traditional media is often subject to explicit and direct government censorship, it is important to acknowledge that the digital space is not exempt from control and regulation. In fact, dominant power institutions may employ more subtle forms of censorship (i.e., algorithmic manipulation) (Cobbe, 2021).

Given that algorithms have the capacity to shape social and cultural formations and have a direct impact on individuals' lives (Beer, 2009; Zuboff, 2019), the algorithmic manipulation has been criticised as an approach for hegemonic institutions to divert attention away from subversive content and maintain control over public discourse (Airoldi and Rokka, 2022; Beer, 2017). Many marketing researchers criticize algorithmic manipulation, where big-tech companies as the hegemonic power adopt algorithms to predict consumer behaviour while shaping consumer choices and preferences (Airoldi, 2021). Zuboff (2015, 2019) coined the term "surveillance capitalism" to describe this algorithmic manipulation employed by big technology companies. Despite previous studies putting big-tech institutions at the role of dominant power (Darmondy and Zwick, 2020), there is limited research delves into the role of national power, which also could be instrumental in enforcing algorithmic oppression and more challenging to confront with.

Hence, when faced with pressure from national authorities, algorithms have, in certain circumstances, been wielded as tools to create safe spaces for queer communities. Previous research has discussed about algorithmic agency in resist of manipulation (i.e., Klinger and Svensson). They agree on the fact that algorithms are reflecting desires, needs, and

possibilities, however, these are originated from humans rather than algorithms themselves (Willison, 2017). For instance, Chinese queer influencers substitute the term "notebook" for "same-sex love" in Chinese (identical pronunciation in Chinese), and algorithms play a crucial role in helping queer individuals disseminate such content on social media (Wang and Bao, 2022). These cases highlight human agency working through algorithm agency, but with an emphasis on the human as the main protagonist and subject versus the algorithm as tool-like object. As Bucher (2017, p. 42) claimed, 'while algorithms certainly do things to people, people also do things to algorithms.' The examples above emphasise the latter, building on the idea that algorithms 'are programmed and engineered by human actors and are thus an outcome of media logics' (Klinger and Svensson, 2018, p. 4654). Less shaped by human but more of the big data (Klinger and Svensson, 2018). This leaves little room for the possibility of algorithmic agency working above or beyond human intentionality.

To the authors' knowledge, there is a lack of specific research that acknowledges the possibilities of algorithms operating beyond humans or as non-human agents to circulate queer content. Some researchers have denied this possibility (Klinger and Svensson, 2018) while others have touched upon this possibility, such as Wang (2022), who discussed how algorithms recommend queer romantic content to heterosexual users. It has been documented that many transgender beauty influencers on the RED platform (an algorithmically-driven content platform) generate and share beauty-related content while conveying a political message about transgender communities (Shu, 2023). This example suggests that algorithms may be replacing politicized language that seeks to stigmatize and repress the queer community in China, but also that queer possibilities are generated and circulated without waiting for human actors. In other words, all these unintentional chances and circumstances unconsciously structure a system (Coffin, 2022), a system in which algorithms circulate

content differently from what they were originally designed for. However, this potentiality has been rarely discussed, let alone theorized. Therefore, in this chapter, we explore a possibility where algorithms are forming a new queer system that goes beyond the intentions of both the algorithm designers and other humans (e.g. platform users and consumers).

The present study seeks to build upon prior studies by focusing on the role of algorithms in mediating human agencies without requiring or waiting for human intentionality. Algorithms have already been thought of as a protector for queer communities, as "they help recognize the scattered gay male users and to provide them with access to various gay communities" (Zhao, 2023 p. 6). Shu (2023) portrays algorithmic platform as an "online oasis" for the transgender community in China. Recognizing the concerns outlined in the previous paragraph, one may follow Wang (2022) in acknowledging how, in highly regulated marketplaces like China, queer communities are faced with choices between partial gains or total loss. Algorithms may not be perfect, but even a partial gain may be highly valuable for communities under pressure and persecution. More academic research that appreciates such nuances and compromises would be highly valuable; this chapter hopes to galvanize such research.

Therefore, our theoretical point of departure is not to deny that algorithms can become complicit with censorship and powerful authorities; however, we also acknowledge that algorithms, under certain contexts, can be socially conscious and part of a knowledge apparatus (Beer, 2017). What is needed is research that considers algorithmic functions (and ostensible 'malfunctions' from the designer's point of view) within the broader context-of-context (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). To draw on the quote at the beginning of this chapter (Sender, 2018), there exists a space between algorithms and culture, and algorithms cannot

predict what a drag queen wears when they are shopping in the countryside (Sender, 2018). This chapter further explores this "space" between algorithm and other under discussed actors, adopting a flat ontological perspective to understand algorithm as a non-human agent that emerges alongside other agencies, with effects that can only be fully determined within specific contexts. Theoretically, we collapse the micro, meso, and macro into a multiscale network of interactions (Callon and Latour 1981), but also recognize how different scales emerge in everyday thought and practice and therefore prove useful heuristic devices for folk actors and flat oncologists alike (Canniford and Shankar 2016). Thus, this chapter conceptualizes the algorithmic queer system at multiple levels: the individual level (micro), the algorithmic market level (meso), government (macro), and ideological levels (macro). However, by holding these scales as effects of interactions rather than pre-existing natural facts, this chapter emphasis how the Chinese algorithmic market is the complex and dynamic combination of as individuals, algorithms, market actors, government agencies, consumption ideologies, and much else besides.

In the following sections, we first discuss how heteronormativity operates from the macro to micro level in the algorithmic market system. Next, we draw on several cases (e.g., the metaverse) to unpack the intersected context of algorithmic market as meso level actors. At last, we draw on a few algorithmic resistant cases to conceptualize how algorithms operate as non-human agents, unconsciously connecting collectives and structuring a new system that could resist hegemonic power.

2.From Macro to Micro: How Ideology Operates Through Algorithmic Market

According to Foucault (1979), hegemony suggests a power relation ideology. Ideology is referred to as ideas and ideals (Schmitt, Brakus, and Biraglia 2022). In the ideological system, individuals cannot escape from ideology (Schmitt et al., 2022), and algorithmic market has no exception to escape from different ideologies and the embedded power relations.

Butler (1990) suggested heteronormativity as a hegemonic ideology that reveals an unequal power relation between heterosexuality and nonheterosexuality. Queering, as an intellectual-political force, allows us to re-imagine these power relationships (Ahmed, 2006). In this section, we conceptualize how hegemonic ideology permeates the algorithmic market. We also follow the social theory stream from previous queer theorists (e.g., Butler, 1999) to emphasize the importance of constructing a new system that blurs the lines between power and powerlessness.

Algorithmic censorship aligns with the hegemonic nature of heteronormativity, where it defined as the control of information and ideas circulated within a society by a censor (Green and Karolides, 1990). In its relation to the hegemonic ideology, censorship is implemented by those in positions of power (e.g., governments, institutions, and regulatory bodies). These entities may seek to maintain control over communication channels (e.g., media, social media) to shape public discourse and eventually censorship is adopted as an approach to reinforce dominant ideologies (Cobbe, 2021). From a Foucauldian perspective, the control of discourse means the control of knowledge which means the control of what is / is not understood to exist, to be desirable, to be normal, etc... thus subjects internalise these, and this reproduces power. Therefore, it is easy to acknowledge that the heteronormativity and censorship are interconnected through the presence of unequal power dynamics and the reinforcement of a hegemonic ideology, where censorship, as a meso mediator, relies on

institutions of power to regulate communication channels and manipulate public discourse at the individual level (Cobbe, 2021).

In the context of censorship of Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans*, and other nonheteronormative (LGBT+) content in China (Coffin et al., 2019), censorship is employed as a means to suppress and control non-heteronormative identities and desires (Wang and Bao, 2023). The censorship practices within the country reflect and uphold heteronormative norms by actively suppressing or restricting content that deviates from the dominant institutions (Zheng, 2023). However, algorithmic censorship not only flows among identity, governmentality, or marketplace, it encompasses the oppression of counter-hegemonic/powerless ideologies at macro level. Are (2020) conducted a study of how Instagram's algorithm censors the voices of women and vulnerable users to maintain the system's user structure and preserve the heteronormativity status quo. This case revealed how dominant institutions enforce hegemonic ideological standards at the macro level without users' awareness, individuals then become habituated to oppression by hegemonic ideology within the system. Therefore, from macro level, structuring a new system that ontologically counters heteronormative ideology becomes a way to break free from the habituation to hegemonic oppression.

Numerous cultural and media studies have criticised the censorship in Chinese marketplace, and they have all tapped into the role of the market (Wang, 2022; Wang and Bao, 2023, Zheng, 2022). They have all suggested concerns over the marketplace celebrating the growing queer market in China while acknowledging the positive developments of queer visibility, and this celebration may inadvertently overlook the persistent problems and challenges that exist within this context (Wang and Bao, 2023). Those critiques share the same vein with the importance of considering the macro context, however, it is crucial to note

that critiquing capitalism often fail to fully consider the power of consumption and how consumption is constituted within neoliberal (but also other) political economies (Fitchett and Cronin, 2022), or even boarder context-of-context (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011) where beyond human existence?

Similarly, research that is overly focused on criticising algorithmic marketing tends to overlook the interplay of macro, meso, and micro contexts, for instance by failing to fully consider the central role of consumer collectives in the algorithmic articulation of marginalised identities (Airoldi and Rokka, 2022). Instead of critically examining the power of consumption for the liberation of LGBT+ and other marginalised groups, these perspectives may neglect to address the complexities and contradictions that arise from the intersection of consumption, censorship, and hegemonic power structures (i.e., national power in this chapter). However, should it be assumed that the role of algorithms in this mix is not simply to support one side of the power struggle (e.g., governments or vast conglomerates), simply acting as an inert tool? Or, might the boundaries of powerful/powerless, human/nonhuman, intentional/unintentional be queered by considering how algorithms act seemingly of their own accord to create online spaces and streams of content that favour the marginalized, oppressed, stigmatized, even unidentified? Most theories of ideology focus on human actors, with more-than-human actors like governments or discourses ultimately being understood as produced by or proxies of human ideas, ideals, and desires (Schmitt, et al., 2022). It is a small but significant step to consider nonhumans, even those created by humans such as algorithms, as actors whose capabilities and consequences may go beyond human ideas, ideals, and desires, acting in ways that are unintended and unanticipated. Consumer research has been informed by a range of assemblage approaches (Canniford and Bajde, 2015), all of which share an understanding of

agency (the ability to act in particular ways) as something that emerges through inter-actions between entities, human or otherwise. This means that human actions are constrained, enabled, and redirected by other humans but also nonhumans, while nonhuman actions are shaped by humans but also other nonhumans (Campbell and McHugh 2016). Yet, while many consumer researchers are now willing to accept the basic premise that human action is embedded in a more-than-human network, few go so far as to accept the implication that human experience and choice is shaped primarily by the coalescence of unconscious nonhuman elements which outnumber human populations by an incomprehensible ratio (Coffin, 2021). The present chapter does not go so far as the latter position, but it does assert the possibility (and productiveness) of considering nonhuman agency on its own terms, rather than simply as a tool awaiting human action or a series of affordances that can nudge humanity but little else.

Therefore, when discussing sexuality consumption, it is essential to recognize its close relationship with everyday life and avoid treating it as a taboo or a restrictive ideology. It becomes crucial to adopt a critical lens that moves beyond a solely celebratory or marketplace-oriented perspective. Instead, such a lens should aim to examine the multifaceted nature of censorship, exploring its complexities and contradictions within the broader context of hegemonic power structures. By adopting this comprehensive approach, we can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and potential pathways for addressing censorship and empowering powerless communities.

In this section, we discuss how algorithmic censorship is embedded within the hegemonic ideological system and propose envisioning a system that exists beyond the human ideological context. In the following sections, we differentiate algorithms from censorship

through its agency, and everchanging digital market space (e.g., metaverse). Then, we draw on queer theory to discuss how queering provides an intellectual rationale for reimagining the algorithmic agency, manifesting a queer system beyond human experiences. In doing so, we gain practical insights form presenting a discussion of the algorithmic platform, Xiaohongshu (RED), to explore how algorithms have transformed the platform into an online oasis for the queer community in China.

3. Meso Level: The Algorithmic Marketplace

In marketplace, algorithms sometime work hand in hand with censorships. At the core of automated censorship lies the algorithm, which enables the widespread dissemination of embedded ideologies (Cobbe, 2021). We conceptualise censorship as a dominant meso-level actor in the system. As Akaka et al. (2021) define the meso-level as the cultural production system that connects individual behaviour with macro systems and ideologies (i.e. government, corporations and heteronormative ideology in this chapter), meso-level actors bridging the gap between individual actors and broader societal institutions/ideologies. In the government dominated system, censorship functions as a meso-level mediator of the hegemonic ideologies within the marketplace.

Similarly, just as we cannot escape ideology and the market (Schmitt et al., 2022), in the digital space, it is difficult for individuals to escape the ideologies that are embedded within algorithms. As Diakopoulos (2013, p. 2) argues, "we are living in a world where algorithms adjudicate more and more consequential decisions in our lives, and algorithms driven by vast troves of data are the new power brokers in society". Algorithms in the marketplace, driven by a dominant ideology, can “deepen, flatten, or reproduce social inequalities" in order to

maintain the power and status quo of institutions." (Pellandini-Simanyi, 2023, p. 5). In the marketplace, contemporary marketing has been commonly targeting consumers as objects of algorithms. That way, marketers adopt algorithms to segment consumer groups through targeting and personalised advertising, as algorithms have the power to insert commercial priorities into the everyday communications of consumers (Cobbe, 2021). Algorithms operate as a "technological unconscious" (Beer, 2009), a force that diminishes consumers' agency and contributes to the "techno-social reproduction" of social structures (Airoldi, 2022). This can be seen in the amplification of cultural biases regarding gender, class, and race (Noble, 2018; Benjamin, 2019). Algorithms are gaining momentum in marketing in spite of the lack of specific research about them (Akter et al., 2022). Overall, algorithms contribute to facilitating customer's choice and selection (Reuters, 2022) and are having a massive impact on decision making (Akter et al., 2022). In the realm of social media marketing, platforms employ recommendation algorithms that heavily prioritize capitalist ideologies and profit-driven goals (Cobbe, 2021). Furthermore, these recommendation algorithms exhibit a high degree of gender bias or display bias against non-heteronormative groups (Cobbe, 2021). More importantly, the opaque nature of algorithmic operations (Airoldi and Rokka, 2022) often makes it difficult for users to understand how their content is curated and presented, thereby perpetuating existing power dynamics and reinforcing dominant and hegemonic ideologies. Despite the platform's surveillance, the governmentality through algorithmic marketplace is the underlying concerns but a few marketing studies have extensively discussed the role of algorithm-driven marketing in governmentality, subjectivity formation, and capitalist accumulation (Airoldi and Rokka, 2022; Pellandini-Simányi, 2023). However, there is even less research on its impact on shaping gender and sexuality politics and its role in reinforcing hegemonic heteronormative ideology.

Hence, it is worth noting that algorithms unlike censorship, have the potential to be fluid and adaptable. Consumption is driven by consumers' changing ideas and ideals but also in response to an increasingly accelerating techno capitalism that is no longer held back (or held in) by social institutions as these are dissolved by neoliberal governments (Bauman, 2000, 2005; see also Zuboff, 2019). Consumption is more dematerialized, elusive, and fluid, focusing less on physical possessions, but it is also more instrumental, less communal, and more market-mediated (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020). Airoldi and Rokka (2022) emphasize that the growing trend of "liquefied" consumption on social media platforms not only affects consumer behaviour but also has an impact on their identities and existing social power relations. Substantively, this liquidity in consumption undermines stability, security, and value for consumers, leading to a more fluid and unstable sense of identity. Drawing on this perspective, we can acknowledge that dominant and privileged institutions may no longer provide solid reference points for their goals set by algorithms. Moreover, the liquid metaphor dovetails well with the queer discourse on fluid identities, but it also highlights the dissolution of non-heterosexual spaces and social groups in an era of app-based dating and self-branding (Coffin et al. 2019). Such forces are certainly influencing the Chinese context as it becomes increasingly integrated into global capitalism, yet the Communist governmental structure and enduring (albeit evolving) influence of social institutions like the family suggest that the liquid perspective may be both useful and limited. Thinking through liquidity in the counterexample of Chinese social media may help to highlight the theoretical boundary conditions of both.

Moreover, in addition to governmentality, the extending marketing system, also inspires us to manifest algorithm’s political purpose via market, such as the more nascent world of the metaverse. The metaverse is a “a collective, persistent network of shared virtual

environments that enable people to interact with each other in a manner comparable to real-life interactions" (Park and Lim, 2023, p. X) and embodies six common dimensions– it is digitally mediated, spatial, immersive, shared/social, interoperable and operates in real-time (Hadi et al., 2023). As a consequence, the metaverse is signalled as a place to foster interaction and community creation facilitated by its immersive nature (Hadi et at., 2023, Yoo et al., 2023) being considered as an inclusive and accessible digital space (Hadi et al., 2023).

Applied to the metaverse, algorithms are a collection of rules that uses AI, web3 and blockchain technology to evaluate user behaviour and offer individualised recommendations and, overall, improve the user experience in a decentralised environment (MetaVI, 2023). It allows the creation of customised virtual assets built on data tracking, management, measurement, optimization and analysis across metaverse worlds (Kováčová et al., 2022). However, they also have the potential to reinforce current biases (MetaVI, 2023). Historical and social biases embedded in the datasets used to produce algorithms can intensify discriminations against historically disadvantaged populations including people of different social status or sexual orientation (Akter et al., 2023). These contextual biases can be categorised into cultural biases (i.e., cultures, subcultures, culturally-tailored products/services), social biases (i.e., social groups, social roles) and personal biases (i.e., gender, age) (ibid). In doing so, devastating, asymmetric and oppressive impacts of algorithmic bias can cause discrimination against individuals or customer groups (Akter et al., 2022). On a practice level, companies that manipulate contextual factors or use flawed algorithms will contribute to inequality and social injustice (ibid).

In relation to consumer's sexuality identity, algorithms in metaverse marketplace have been found to reinforce heteronormativity as the metaverse intensifies many of the problems we face in the real world such as identity issues (McDowell, 2021). Wellner and Rothman (2019) explored the gender/sexuality bias ingrained in AI algorithms and advocated the need to address issues such as algorithmic bias, discrimination, accountability, transparency, and the concentration of power in the hands of tech companies. Hallinan and Striphas (2016) suggest that users heavily rely on algorithms to determine what to watch next, creating a closed commercial loop that reinforces past consumption patterns with each iteration. Over time, this normalization process further strengthens and perpetuates these patterns (Mackenzie, 2015). In this sense, consumer identities (i.e., gender and sexuality), as well as hierarchies, are embedded within consumption and have the potential to be operated as ideology in the digital spaces like metaverse. On the other side, the vision for the metaverse is one where a user's avatars will persist across different virtual worlds. Avatars are customised so virtual identities are as fluid as users want them to be which means an important opportunity for brands to offer options for users expressing their true, virtual selves (McDowell, 2021). But the reality is that brands have not fully taken that opportunity yet and, even if it is evolving, there is a lack of diversity in the avatar representation (McDowell, 2022). From the case of metaverse, the current marketplace starts embracing the datafication of consumer identities. Algorithms outputting the datafication of consumer desires, needs and subjectivities (Trere and Bonini, 2022). Between the space of data and algorithms, there is a possibility, to structure a new queer system that forced by algorithms.

In addition to exploring the queer possibilities in the extending market spaces, many social science scholars seek to understand the interdisciplinary nature of algorithms to grasp their complex context (Kitchin, 2017). Critical algorithm studies have emerged as an

interdisciplinary field that investigates the social, cultural, and political implications of algorithms, examining how algorithms shape power dynamics, perpetuate biases, and influence individual behaviours and choices (Airoldi, 2022). This line of research adopts a critical perspective towards algorithms, aiming to understand and critique their role in society. By doing so, it seeks to foster a deeper understanding of the social implications of algorithms and explore possibilities for more equitable algorithmic systems (Airoldi and Rokka, 2022), or what we aimed to conceptualise in the current chapter, a queer algorithmic system.

4.Queering to Destabilising: The Disruption of the Hegemonic Communication Process

According to Arnould and Thompson (2018), hegemonic ideologies operate in the marketplace through repeated signification and are negotiated against by consumers' interpretive strategies. This emphasizes the significance of incorporating counter-hegemonic ideological meanings into the resistance of the recursive algorithmic communication process. When delving into the field of sexuality marketing research, it is crucial to incorporate interdisciplinary perspectives from social theories to understand the ideological work that goes beyond identities (Coffin et al., 2019), such as the queer theory adopted in this chapter. Queer theory emerged alongside the LGBT+ rights social movement in the 1980s and 1990s (Walters, 2005). Since then, numerous researchers have adopted queer theory as a theoretical approach to challenge hegemonic institutions.

In this chapter, we align with the spirit of queer theory to contemplate the (im)possibility of an alternative communication process from bottom to top, from individuals to hegemonic institutions/ideologies. Moreover, we conceptualize queer algorithms as non-human agents in

order to manifest a collective force for the creation of a new queer system. Our discussion is contextualized within the Chinese digital marketplace, encompassing the algorithmic marketplace, queer censorship, and government-involved neoliberal markets—an intersection that has rarely been studied (Cobb et al., 2005; Liu, 2010; Ross, 2005).

The adoption of queer theory in consumer research has been evident since Kates (1999) proposed the deconstruction of the subjectivity of gay men in advertising. This integration of queer theory studies offered a framework for challenging dominant norms about subjectivity in marketing research. The incorporation of queer theory allows marketing researchers to identify the under researched contexts. Such as Liu (2010) incorporating queer theory into the interplay between political economy and sexuality. This perspective not only highlights an alternative queer market context, but also strengthen the politically-led market expansion. Queering as a force that disrupted the political communication from national power. For example, Pezold and Tse (2023)'s study disclosed that gay consumers in Hong Kong intersect their sexuality identity and political ideology during fashion consumption, revealing how their clothing choices serve as a non-conventional form of subjectivity while also highlighting that their fashion decisions are, to some extent, impacted by politics.

Building on the resistance and activism nature with queer theory, Pirani and Daskalopoulou (2022) drawon the concept of failure proposed by Kjeldgaard et al. (2021) to explore the idea of queer failure in marketing research. We draw on this point to conceptualise that queer failure can serve as an act of resistance as this approach allows for alternative, non-successful perspectives to be heard. For example, in order to avoid regulation, queer live-streamers in China employ acronyms/pseudonyms on social media platforms to encourage consumers to access foreign platforms that does not censor queer erotic content (i.e., Twitter) (Song,

2022a). This failure of censorship otherwise structured a queer subjectivity that exists outside of the China's social media system (i.e., Chinese queer communities to be active on Twitter in order to avoid censorship in China). However, there are limitations in these privatized consumption practices, which can "ambivalently confirm rather than contest state power" (Song, 2022).

Hence, in addition to the conceptualization of queer failure, queer phenomenology, viewed from a more beyond identity level, to explore the relations between body and space (Ahmed, 2006). Queer phenomenology, as articulated by Ahmed (2006), enriches the field by queering previous phenomenological studies, placing emphasis on the embodied and phenomenological aspects of queer existence. It also challenges linear and normative conceptions of time, embracing nonlinear and subversive understandings of existence (Ahmed, 2004). Unlike phenomenology, which exclusively focuses on human experiences, queer phenomenology offers an alternative perspective on the relationship between embodied experience and space. It provides a starting point for imagining queer agency as a form of resistance against existing spaces (Vitry, 2021). This act of disruption shares similarities with what Damody and Zwick (2020) describe as 'relevance' in confronting algorithmic surveillance. Algorithms often lead consumers to create a sense of relevance with big-tech institutions, which may appear as an illusion to marketers who believe that algorithms can manipulate consumers (Damody and Zwick, 2020). This sense of relevance fosters the aggregation of a community of seemingly powerless individuals but ultimately empowers them.

Hence, despite queer phenomenology providing a new philosophical perspective to reconsider the relationship between humans and algorithmic spaces, the emphasis on human

agency and experiences could limit our ability to imagine relationships involving nonhuman actors within the digital space (Coffin, 2022). In other words, it might lead to the neglect of the broader context of context (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011), which extends beyond human experiences and lacks phenomenological properties. In the following paragraph, we draw from a few cases to conceptualize the potential for algorithms to become a nonhuman collective force. They serve not only as a resistance force but also as generators of a queer system that transcends the human context and ontologically diminishes hegemonic ideology.

5.From Micro to Macro Level: The Role of Algorithm in Resisting Censorship

Here, we first conceptualize the censorship disruption process by identifying the changing actors and contexts between micro and meso-level engagement. This helps us to identify the unconscious chance and circumstances as a collective counter-hegemonic force (Coffin, 2022) in the algorithmic system (i.e., political resistance and social movements). We draw on a case of a Chinese algorithmic platform RED to discuss how queer individuals/communities engage with algorithms and censorship, unconsciously forming a collective force to structure a queer system. This algorithmic queer system exists beyond the realm of human experiences.

Several studies have delved into the dynamic among digital censorship, marketplace, and political resistance. Notable examples include Liao (2019), who conducted a study on successful hashtag activism #IAMGAY in China. This activism aimed to confront LGBT+ censorship deployed by the platform by showcasing the daily life narratives of different gay individuals. Wang and Bao (2023) explored how content creators use pseudonyms, acronyms, and hashtags to form vibrant queer communities and circumvent censorship. However, these different counter-actions seem to have temporarily disrupted the recursive

censoring process, in other words, these actions are focused on identity (micro) and platform/censorship (meso) level but without considering its connections with macro level institutions. Their success actions do not necessarily entail the complete dismantling of the hegemonic ideology at the macro level.

The neoliberal market of social media has normalized homosexuality to some extent through its commercialization of homosexual cultural assets, hence, these "assets remain contingent on the whims of the party-state under the party-state governability" (Liao 2019, p. 2315). While the celebration of queer culture may be legitimized by the party-state, it still promotes a dominant stance that emphasizes conformity, consumption, and conservative moral orders as prerequisites for normalizing LGBT+ culture (Bao, 2018). This aligns with what Russell (2019) terms "good queer citizens" as a liberation delusion, a good or bad value system that is created by macro institutions. Therefore, to disrupt the censoring process, it is important to realise, identify the existence of institutions at the macro level. Further, it is also important to be alert towards the visibility delusion created by macro level institutions, and do not let it led to the neglection of the existing oppressive issues.

Moreover, the platform affordance and its relationship with algorithms should not be neglected either (Airoldi and Rokka, 2022). We further argue that it is equally important to recognize the roles that platforms play at the micro, meso, and macro levels, in other words, to consider the various contexts and institutional systems between algorithms and platforms. For instance, a platform can act as a hegemonic actor at macro level to conduct capitalist surveillance (Zuboff, 2015), meanwhile it can also function as a meso mediator, connecting individuals with macro institutions so it is crucial to consider the changing role that the platform plays in the holistic micro, meso, macro system. Previous studies have often

discussed algorithms as complicit with platforms, given that algorithms are designed by the platform. Nevertheless, platforms and algorithms do not always work hand in hand; for instance, gay users have adopted algorithmic hashtags to confront platform censorship (Liao, 2019). Hence, platform and algorithm could confront hegemony together. For instance, Shu (2023) investigated platform RED (Xiaohongshu). In an interview with a transgender beauty influencer, Shu revealed the influencer's initial surprise when her content passed censorship and subsequently went viral on the platform. Interestingly, the same content, when she posted on non-algorithmic content-centric platforms, had been banned as 'inappropriate'. Shu's study attributes the acceptance of queer content on RED not only to its predominantly younger user base but also to its recommendation algorithm. RED's algorithm automatically generates hashtags based on users' content, facilitating connections among like-minded individuals. As of the date of Shu's article, the transgender influencer mentioned could earn 500 yuan ($73) from each promotional post, and the algorithm played a crucial role in securing job opportunities. Another popular algorithmic platform, Douyin (TikTok), has also become a vital platform for disseminating queer content. As revealed in Wang's (2022) research, despite censorship, algorithms could identify the rainbow emoji symbolizing queerness and recommend content to interested users.

We conducted an experiment on RED, posting content directly using the term 'same-sex-love rights' along with a video clip from Lady Gaga's concert advocating for queer rights. Interestingly, this content could not be found through the platform’s search engine. However, the post garnered over 12K likes on the platform due to the platform’s algorithmic mechanism. Many individuals expressed their desires for liberation in the comments section, such as 'hoping to hold hands under the light without hiding,' which received numerous likes from other users. These examples suggest that despite content censorship, algorithms can

circulate queer content to users, demonstrating their agency in engaging with censorship. More importantly, algorithms are replacing the political languages of queer communities where they lack the freedom to express (Wang, 2022).

Therefore, this chapter did not suggest that every algorithm designed by the platform has the agency to confront hegemonic institutions. Instead, we emphasize the importance of understanding the context of the algorithmic market. What role do algorithms play as mediators connecting queer communities? What is the impact of macro-level institutions in either perpetuating heteronormative ideology or creating more space for queer communities? These actors are constantly changing, highlighting the need to follow the principles of queer theory, acknowledging the fluidity among micro, meso, and macro actors, and ensuring that temporary liberations do not mask existing problems.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have conceptualized non-human agency and queerness within algorithms. By employing queer theory, we are able to challenge the underlying relations within the algorithmic system, the boundaries between human/nonhuman, consciousness and unconsciousness; queering the failure to conceptualise the meaning of powerful and powerless.

This chapter emphasize the importance of identifying the evolving dynamics and roles within the algorithmic marketplace at the micro, meso, and macro levels of the system. In comparison to previous research in sexuality marketing, we emphasize the role of government in the neoliberal market, with a specific focus on China's rarely discussed algorithmic context. Inspired by the context, this chapter illustrates the emergence of a queer

space where algorithms unconsciously shape a new queer system that transcends the human context.

In conclusion, while from queer phenomenology we acknowledge the impact of human experiences on algorithmic operations, we also draw on other queer theories (i.e., Butler, 1999) to not only recognize the existence of a space between algorithms and culture (Sender, 2018), but moreover, to manifest a presence the queer system that structured by queer algorithms, a queer system that blurs the boundaries between the power and the powerless, the human and the non-human, the conscious and the unconscious.

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