

Chinese LGBTQ+ Online Social Movements: A Comparative Study Between the Collective Identity Framings in the #IAmGay and #IAmLes Protests

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Collective identity framing is the process by which activists identify protagonists, antagonists, and audiences, three identity fields in social movements. Connective action facilitated by information communication technologies decentralizes social movement organization and drastically changes framing processes. Drawing on those theories, this research explores how collective identities are framed in Chinese LGBTQ+ online movements by comparing the collective identity framings in the #IAmGay and #IAmLes protests. It is discovered that in the #IAmGay protest, the collective identity was framed as inclusive, whereas in the #IAmLes protest, the collective identity was framed as conflictual because of lesbians' intersectional identity both as homosexuals and as women. Furthermore, this research also offers implications on the "entanglement of identity fields" in connective action and future exploration of Chinese LGBTQ+ activism.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ activism, online social movements, collective identity, framing, connective action, China

Collective identity, as an analytical concept, has been widely used to study contemporary social movements. Activists frame collective identity by identifying protagonists, antagonists, and audiences (Hunt, Benford, & Snow, 1994). The prevalent use of information communication technologies (ICTs) has also shaped movement organization structures and framing processes in social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The discussion of collective identity in LGBTQ+ movements often focuses on its inclusiveness/exclusiveness (Bernstein, 1997; Gamson, 1997; Ghaziani, 2011).

Because of social media, the visibility of Chinese LGBTQ+ people has significantly increased (Yang, 2019). A growing number of LGBTQ+ collective actions have emerged online. Chinese LGBTQ+ activism has been studied from many perspectives, such as cultural activism (Bao, 2020; Shaw & Zhang, 2018), political economy (Hildebrandt, 2018; Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017), legislation (Chia, 2019), and digital empowerment (Yang, 2019). However, it has been rarely studied from the perspective of social movement studies. Drawing on collective identity framing theory and its development in connective action, this research explores how

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collective identities are framed in Chinese LGBTQ+ online movements through a comparative study between the #IAmGay (#我是同性恋#) and #IAmLes (#我是Les#) protests.

The two protests were similar in many ways. For instance, both were launched against social media platform censorship. The two hashtags also share the same form. However, this research shows that in the #IAmGay protest led by gay men, participants framed the collective identity to be inclusive; whereas in the #IAmLes protest led by lesbians, participants simultaneously deployed two approaches of framing—inclusive framing and feminist framing—and caused the collective identity to be conflictual. Therefore, the finding suggests that when Chinese gay men often emphasize inclusiveness in their activism, Chinese lesbians are more likely to conduct activism based on their intersectional identities as both homosexuals and women.

Furthermore, the conflict between the two approaches of framing in the #IAmLes protest emerged mainly because of the roles to which gay men were imputed. When the inclusive framing imputed a protagonist role to gay men, the feminist framing imputed an antagonist role to them. This shows the likely “entanglement of identities fields” in increasingly decentralized digital collective action. Namely, the constituents of collective identity, which Hunt, Benford, and Snow (1994) see as identity fields, are more likely to entangle in connective action, especially in ones that focus on intersectionality and inclusiveness.

#IAmGay and #IAmLes

On April 13, 2018, Weibo, one of the largest social networking sites in China, announced censorship of illegal content on its platform, treating homosexual-themed content, mainly gay-themed content, as a censorial target. This decision immediately infuriated gay users and other users who supported gay rights on Weibo. Following the usage by Zhudingzhen (竹顶针), an online gay celebrity, many individuals used the hashtag #IAmGay to protest Weibo. After the three-day online protest, Weibo yielded to the pressure to terminate the censorship operation.

#IAmGay is the common translation used in most English news reports (e.g., Kuo, 2018). However, it should be noted that in the original Chinese hashtag, “同性恋” means “homosexual,” rather than specifically “gay man” or “queer” in general. Hence, the “gay” in #IAmGay refers to “homosexual,” including both gay men and lesbians. Such a choice of term had its significance, as did the “les” in #IAmLes. This will be discussed in my analysis.

Precisely one year after the #IAmGay protest, on April 13, 2019, Weibo banned #Les, a hashtag that was popular among lesbian users. However, this time, Weibo did not make an official announcement as it did a year before for the #IAmGay protest. Chinese lesbian users thus launched an online protest using the hashtag #IAmLes to protest Weibo. The #IAmLes protest, however, did not defeat the censorship and gradually ended because of decreasing participation.

Collective Identity Framing in Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Connective Action

To understand Chinese LGBTQ+ online social movements from a collective identity perspective, it is essential to acknowledge that the situation is multidimensional. Not only is a theoretical framework of

gay, lesbian, and queer collective identities framing required, but the impact of digitally networked social movements as connective action should also be taken into consideration.

Collective Identity Framing

Since the collective identity concept was first used in social movement studies, there has not been a consensus on the definition of it (Flesher Fominaya, 2010). In this research, I draw on Melucci's (1989) definition of collective identity, because the definition, when comprehensively theorizing collective identity to explain the formation of a collective actor, also emphasizes two essential elements of collective identity: relationship ("we" and "others") and context (opportunities and constraints). These two elements provide analytical means by which online LGBTQ+ movements in China can be studied. Collective identity, as Melucci (1989) defines, is "an interactive and shared definition produced by several interacting individuals who are concerned with the orientations of their action as well as the field of opportunities and constraints in which their action takes place" (p. 34).

Framing in social movements refers to the active meaning construction by which social movement organizations (SMOs) or activists progress their action (Benford & Snow, 2000). Therefore, collective identity framing, as Hunt et al. (1994) suggest, is the process of SMOs' or activists' identification of protagonists, antagonists, and audiences, three identity fields of socially constructed actor clusters, "by situating or placing [them] in time and space and by attributing characteristics to them that suggest specifiable relationships and lines of action" (p. 185). The three identity fields "overlap and hang together" and "expand and contract across time" (Hunt et al., 1994, p. 186), as SMOs or activists construct different meanings according to their changing contexts. Collective identity framing is critical to social movements because explicitly identified protagonists, antagonists, and audiences help in not only recruiting participants but also in challenging the injustice (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). In traditional social movements, collective identity framing relies heavily on SMOs (McClelland-Cohen & Endacott, 2020), as in a leader position, they are the primary actors who are responsible for constructing and maintaining meanings (Morris & Staggenborg, 2004).

Connective Action

Because of the increasing use of ICTs, some digitally networked social movements appear to be decentralized and fragmented, constituted by individualized content sharing on social media (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The concept of connective action is used by Bennett and Segerberg (2012) to depict such a phenomenon that social movements can be organized without a central and established SMO. ICTs and social media facilitate the "choreography of assembly," in which influential participants become soft movement leaders (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 5).

However, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argue that "[c]onnective action networks are far more individualized and technologically organized sets of processes that result in action without the requirement of collective identity framing" (p. 750), mistakenly diminishing the importance of collective identity in digitally networked social movements (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015). It is important to consider that even Bennett and Segerberg (2012) themselves do not treat collective action and connective action as diametrically opposite to each other. In their SMO categorization, there is a third category, "the organizationally enabled network" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 756). To better understand this type of SMO, Caraway (2016) refers to it as

"the hybrid network model" (p. 910), as it shares some characteristics of both collective action and connection action: the SMO is loosely organized, while established organizations take a backseat position. Scholars (e.g., Grömping & Sinpeng, 2018; Lim, 2013) have shown that the hybrid network model is increasingly common in digitally networked social movements. Therefore, it certainly would be unreasonable to say that collective identity framing is insignificant if a social movement shares characteristics of connective action. Further, even though the prominence of a formal SMO greatly declines and participants' engagement through ICTs is individualized in connective action, the concept of collective identity is still useful to understand the coherence and solidarity between participants, because "personal networks are not substitute of but complementary to collective identity" (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015, p. 867). In other words, both established organizations and participant crowds can contribute to collective identity frames. The recognition of "we" and "others" is not discarded by individual participants but complicated by digitally networked organizations.

Collective identity framing can be either "intended or not" and framed collective identities can "range from collaborative to conflictual" (Hunt et al., 1994, p. 185). The phenomenon of connective action has shaped collective identity framing drastically. When a formal SMO is absent from leading collective identity framing, collective identity frames are constructed as a result of networked crowd agency, sometimes through interaction and negotiation (Gerbaudo, 2015; Treré, 2015). This is unlike in collective action and the hybrid network model where collective identity frames are constructed by both established organizations and participant crowds although to different degrees. Those crowds seem to be horizontally organized, but hierarchy may still exist because of soft leadership that is constructed (Gerbaudo, 2012). Even though they do not often offer instructions for action, influential participants' emotions and opinions can potentially lead collective identity framing.

Furthermore, as participation is individualized, collective identity frames in connective action are often characterized by their "inclusivity, multiplicity and malleability" (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015, p. 868). However, it is also suggested that collective identities framed via ICTs can be volatile (Gerbaudo, 2015), unclear (Stephansen, 2017), fragmented and tension-laden (McClelland-Cohen & Endacott, 2020), causing conflicts within a movement that underscores inclusive and direct participation (Kavada, 2015).

Gay, Lesbian and Queer Collective Identities Framing

How, then, are collective identities framed in LGBTQ+ movements? In a wide sense of social movement studies, scholars have shown that both inclusive and exclusive collective identities can benefit and hinder the progress of collective action (e.g., Saunders, 2008; Tarrow, 2011; Terriquez, 2015). Similarly, as "queer" is "an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual-identifications" (Jagose, 1996, p. 1), gay and lesbian collective identities are, on one level, more exclusive than a queer collective identity. Whether a movement is based on a gay/lesbian or queer collective identity and how clearly the differences between categories are pronounced can make a significant strategical difference (Bernstein, 1997).

Therefore, Gamson (1995) argues that there is a "queer dilemma": in both gay/lesbian movements that have clear and fixed identity category boundaries and queer movements that have abstract and fluid identity category boundaries, activists always face political and cultural opportunities and constraints. Although clear identity boundaries in gay/lesbian movements can help to make explicit meanings of identity fields and goals, they also reinforce categories of sexual minorities. The reinforcement of category boundary

confronts the queer liberation of gender and sexual minorities and can create new problems such as lowering the visibility of lesbian activists under patriarchy. On the other hand, blurred identity boundaries in queer movements can help include people who do not conform to the heterosexual norms and disrupt the binary division of man/woman and homosexual/heterosexual. Yet, they simplify internal differences among activists, causing potential conflicts between identity groups.

However, Gamson's (1995) illustration is based on the predigital time of LGBTQ+ movements when formal SMOs were still a crucial part of movement structure. In LGBTQ+ connective action facilitated by ICTs, collective identity framing appears to be more inclusive and fluid on the identification of protagonist. As participation is individualized and diversified, rigid gender and sexual identity category boundaries become less important in the formation of a collective "we" (Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2015). Rather than centering around one category of sexual or gender identity, the protagonist is framed often toward a more inclusive field. This has been shown in more recent studies on digital LGBTQ+ activism and, more broadly, LGBTQ+ identity construction through ICTs. For instance, analyzing the online network of #girlslkeus, Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles (2018) find that the network was highly intersectional and consisted of transgender women of color and working class. Schmitz, Coley, Thomas, and Ramirez (2022) discover that queer Latinx activist websites promote intersectional social justice in the United States. Some other studies, for example, Foeken and Roberts (2019) and Herrera (2018), have also shown that LGBTQ+ identity categories are increasingly deconstructed on social media.

The Chinese Context

The repeated importance of understanding the context of collective identity necessitates a depiction of the environment of Chinese LGBTQ+ online movements. Chinese indigenous LGBTQ+ identities, such as lala (lesbian), tongzhi (comrade, which can mean "gay" or "queer" depending on the context), and ku'er (queer), emerged after China implemented the "reform and open up" ("改革开放") policy in 1979 (Bao, 2020). The emergence of those identities signified Chinese LGBTQ+ people's claim of political subjectivity (Bao, 2018; Kam, 2012), building the political foundation for LGBTQ+ activism in China. From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, Chinese LGBTQ+ activism had a seemingly progressive period. Homosexuality and bisexuality were decriminalized in 1997 and depathologized in 2001 (Wu, 2003). Subsequently, there was a small climactic wave of organizational grassroots activism focused on issues of HIV/AIDS, which was heavily controlled by the Chinese government through fund distribution (Cao & Lu, 2014; Hildebrandt, 2018). Since the late 2000s, social media have provided new opportunities for discursive activism in China (Yang, 2008). Chinese LGBTQ+ activists have largely adopted social media as their primary space for political advocacy. Studies have shown that social media "empower Chinese sexual minorities to promote information publicity and increase public visibility" (Yang, 2019, p. 662), "challenging public perception of sexual diversity" (Shaw & Zhang, 2018, p. 276).

However, the Chinese state's control over gender and sexual minorities has been increasingly severe in the recent decade (Chia, 2019). Censorship is evidently one of the most powerful tools that the state employs to lower the visibility of LGBTQ+ people. Nonheterosexual behaviors and relationships are banned from mainstream media because they are seen as "abnormal, unhealthy" (Shaw & Zhang, 2018), or "obscene" (McLelland, 2015). LGBTQ+ content in the online space also suffers from censorship (Yang, 2019). When mass LGBTQ+ events, such as pride parades, are censored and forced to cancel, many grassroots LGBTQ+ organizations gain public visibility by alternative means like nonconfrontational

community events in semipublic and online spaces (Engebretsen, 2015; Shaw & Zhang, 2018). It is important to note, however, that because of the political context in China, such nonconfrontational activism is essential. As Engebretsen (2015) argues, Western queer ideology often links public visibility with mass events, confrontation, and "speaking loudly," but it does not translate into the Chinese context.

Confrontational LGBTQ+ activism is rare in China. All forms of collective confrontational activism are seen as a dissenting voice from the ideas of social stability and unity (Tu & Lee, 2014; Yang, 2014) that are promoted by the Chinese government (Chan, 2007). Therefore, they are heavily censored online and prevented from happening (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). A notable case of such a type of activism is Qiubai's lawsuit against the Ministry of Education because of homophobic textbooks (see Chen, 2020; Yang, 2019). The case studies in this research, the #IamGay and #IamLes protests, are precisely this type of LGBTQ+ activism. The two protests fought against online censorship and raised public visibility in collective and confrontational ways. The existing literature on this type of LGBTQ+ activism in China is limited. Therefore, this research is contributing to filling this gap.

Methods

To compare the collective identities between the #IamGay and #IamLes protests, this research adopted methods of digital ethnography and interview. Thanks to the fact that Weibo, like most social network sites, forms a "networked public" that affords to record and archive searchable online practices (boyd, 2010), I was able to access data on both the #IamGay and #IamLes protests. However, because of the time gap between those two protests and this research, during which censorship and users' self-censorship may have occurred, I was not able to fully restore data on both protests. Such a flaw in this research should be acknowledged.

First, for digital ethnography, I selected the main periods of both protests for observation.² The main period of the #IamGay protest was April 13–16, 2018 (see Figure 1 for the numbers of original posts and reposts on each day). This can be easily identified, as the protest was launched on April 13 and ended on April 16 because of its success in forcing Weibo to lift the censorship. However, as the #IamLes protest did not achieve its goal of lifting the ban of the hashtag #Les, it did not have a definite end. Instead, it ended gradually with decreasing participation. Therefore, based on the level of participation indicated by the numbers of original posts and reposts containing #IamLes on each day in April 2019 (see Figure 2), I identified the first 10 days, April 13–22, 2019, as its main period for observation. My observation of both protests focused on the actions taken by the participants to reveal how collective identities were actively framed. I read through all the posts and interactions including comments and reposts of influential posts (typically engaged around and more than 1,000 times). I took ethnographic notes and screenshots while reading the posts and interactions, which form my observation data.

² There is an ethical debate about whether posts in online space, particularly on social media, should be seen as public and can be used in research without informed consent. Fuchs (2018) argues that posts aiming to gain public visibility, especially those that use hashtags, are public, which means that researchers do not need informed consent to study them. This argument fits particularly the nature of this research. Therefore, posts in both the #IamGay and #IamLes protests are treated as public.

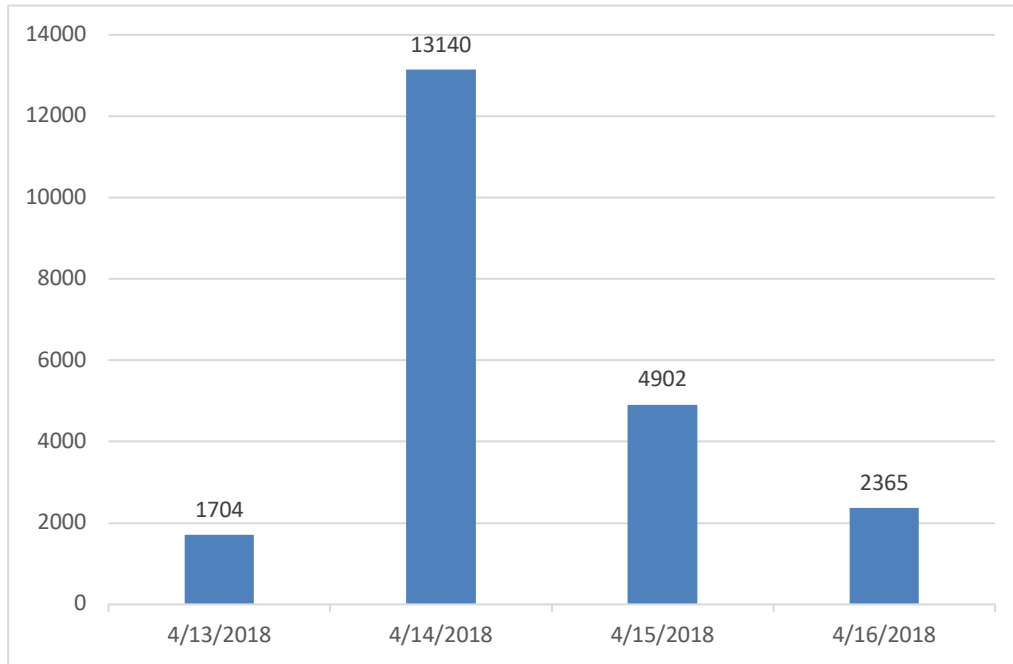


Figure 1. Numbers of original posts and reposts containing the hashtag #IAmGay April 13–16, 2018, on Weibo (accessed on March 1, 2019).

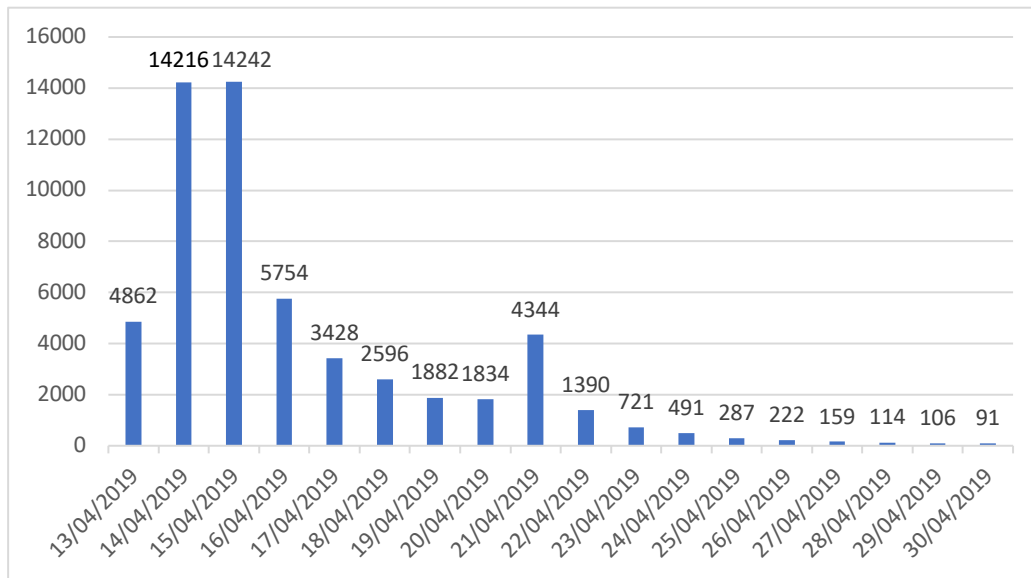


Figure 2. Numbers of original posts and reposts containing the hashtag #IAmLes in April 2019 on Weibo (accessed on March 26, 2020).

During the observation, I noticed some common themes in the posts in both protests. Many participants simply expressed their support, sympathy, and hope, or celebrated LGBTQ+ identities like in typical pride parades, without necessarily contributing to framing the collective identities. The number of those who contributed to framing the collective identities was relatively smaller. Among those participants, more of them contributed to framing protagonists than antagonists.

Then, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with anonymized participants who engaged in both protests (n = 13) to examine how differently participants felt in those two protests and how those two protests mirrored gender and sexual minorities' social lives in China. The interview participants included six lesbian women, three gay men, two bisexual women, and two heterosexual women (see Table 1).

Table 1. Interview Participants' Gender and Sexual Identities.

Pseudonyms	Gender identity	Sexual identity
Interviewee.1	Woman	Lesbian
Interviewee.2	Woman	Lesbian
Interviewee.3	Woman	Lesbian
Interviewee.4	Woman	Lesbian
Interviewee.5	Woman	Lesbian
Interviewee.6	Woman	Lesbian
Interviewee.7	Man	Gay
Interviewee.8	Man	Gay
Interviewee.9	Man	Gay
Interviewee.10	Woman	Bisexual
Interviewee.11	Woman	Bisexual
Interviewee.12	Woman	Heterosexual
Interviewee.13	Woman	Heterosexual

The data collected from digital ethnography and interview were analyzed with the help of Nvivo. I designed three coding sheets and refined them throughout the analysis. They were used to respectively analyze the observation data of the #IamGay and #IamLes protests and the interview transcripts. The main categories of codes are the identity fields—protagonist, antagonist, and audience—and their corresponding framing processes. For interview data analysis, I also added another code category, "intergroup dynamics outside the protests."

#IamGay

The participants framed the collective identity in the #IamGay protest to be inclusive and anti-heterosexism focused. Both the protagonist and the antagonist roles had various constituents, and the audience was rather broad.

The protagonists in the #IamGay protest were evidently inclusive to people of all gender and sexual identities who supported gender and sexual equality in China. This was found in three dimensions. First, the protest started as aiming to include participants of different social groups. As illustrated before, the identity

term "gay" in the hashtag refers to "homosexual." The main reason why participants used this term was that they wanted to directly respond to Weibo's announcement of censorship in which the exact term was used, but it also worked as including both gay men and lesbians as the initial subject of the protest discourse.

However, the soft leadership seems to concentrate on a few popular participants, such as Zhudingzhen, the gay social media celebrity who initiated the protest in his post: "#IAmGay How about you?" and a following repost: "Let's use this tag and have some fun~" (as cited in Wodepiaquan, 2018).

By asking "How about you?" Zhudingzhen invited not only gay men but also people of all other gender and sexual identities to join the hashtag conversation. By answering this question in their posts starting with "#IAmGay I'm lesbian/bisexual/transgender/heterosexual/etc.," individuals of other gender and sexual identities who supported gay rights could easily join the force. Many other influential participants whose posts were engaged by many also followed Zhudingzhen and adopted similar discursive approaches to encourage diversity in the protest. Thus, the protest was commonly perceived as a diversified assembly led by mainly gay men.

Second, mobilizing participants of different social groups was the most prominent recruiting strategy in the protest. Many posts emphasized the similarities between homosexuals and people of other gender and sexual identities. The articulation of the similarities followed mainly two logics: (1) homosexuals are ordinary human beings, and their love is the same as any other couple's, and (2) in a sense, anyone can be seen as in a minority group. Such strategy, therefore, shows the participants' intention of including not just homosexuals in the protest collective but also people of all gender and sexual identities.

Third, the participants' demographics consisted of people of various gender and sexual identities, proving that the mobilization of different social groups was effective. Participants who were not gay men, such as lesbians, bisexuals, pansexuals, and heterosexuals, are frequently observed. Some interview participants also mentioned receiving direct support from heterosexuals in the #IAmGay protest online and offline. For instance, Interviewee.3 told me that, "I posted some personal things using the hashtag, some about my personal experience. Many [heterosexual] people messaged me and said things to encourage me." Someone else also said:

It influenced my friends and classmates around me. They had no idea about all those things before. But after I came out this time [in the #IAmGay protest], they were influenced, and they helped me to repost things and supported me. (Interviewee.1)

Consequently, the protagonists in the #IAmGay protest were not limited to gay men or homosexuals. Rather, they were highly inclusive and diversified, aiming to mobilize as many participants as possible regardless of their individual identities. The usage of the homosexual identity term in the hashtag became less important as the protest progressed, because the shared definition among the participants, both LGBTQ+ and heterosexual individuals, transformed into a common belief of gender and sexual minorities' equality in China.

The antagonists framed in the #IAmGay protest were multileveled, focusing on heterosexist oppressors: Weibo, the state, and the society. The participants recognized that the oppression from Weibo and the state manifested through censorship and that the heterosexism deeply rooted in the society was the fundamental drive of the oppression.

Specifically, the censorship was implanted directly by Weibo and understood as an order from the government. In the protest, the phrase "Trashy Sina" ("渣男") was used widely to refer to Sina, the operational company of Weibo, and a vast number of posts clearly expressed participants' negative emotions toward Weibo. Those participants believed that Weibo was directly responsible for its discriminative behaviors toward homosexuals. However, most participants considered that Weibo was not bold enough to implement the censorship on its own. Like most media corporations in China, Weibo is still regulated and controlled by the state. Generally, the reason why Weibo implements censorship is known to be compliance with the requirements of the Chinese government (Zhu, Phipps, Pridgen, Crandall, & Wallach, 2013). Hence, the state was perceived to be the more powerful oppressor that ordered Weibo to implement censorship against homosexuals.

All interview participants also criticized the government to various extents for its alleged misconduct. They mentioned government-related aspects that affect gender and sexual minorities in China. Interviewee.7 shared his opinion about censorship, saying that, "from the government perspective, the government really doesn't want us to 'mess around.' They want us to shut up and make no complaint." Interviewee.2 mentioned the ideology and said that, "I hope things will get better, but in fact, I feel that in China, our communist ideology doesn't tolerate homosexuals." Someone else also discussed the law:

I think the government is now under a lot of pressure. Other than same-sex marriage, there is still almost nothing about anti-discrimination, or adoption [by gender and sexual minorities], or anything about transgender surgery in our law. We aren't protected by the law. (Interviewee.5)

Furthermore, beyond Weibo and the state, the participants also realized that the society in China is dominated by the heterosexual culture in which gender and sexual minorities are not accepted. Therefore, they identified the heterosexist society as the ultimate oppressor. Some interview participants thought that the issue was also fundamentally society's prejudice and discrimination. Interviewee.8 said that, "like many condescending replies on Weibo, they say 'I don't support or oppose.' This implies how homosexuals are expected to live in China. You can have your own secret lives, but don't let mainstream heterosexuals see you." Interviewee.9, then, mentioned that, "the entire social environment is heterosexual-dominated. You must form a family between a male and a female and have children. All those factors are really bad for LGBT people."

To sum up, although Weibo, the state, and the society are seemingly different oppressors, they are in fact of three levels of heterosexism framed as the antagonist in the collective identity. It is also worth noting that explicit demands were made only to Weibo by the participants, whereas the state and the society were mostly just condemned. Essentially, the main goal of the protest was to lift the censorship, as it could be achieved more easily than transforming the state and the society.

In the #IAmGay protest, the audience framing was obscure. This seems to be caused by its inclusive framing of the protagonist. As there was no clear personal or social identity boundary between the participants and the audience, anyone who was not framed as a member of the antagonist could easily participate by posting with the hashtag or interacting with existing posts. There is no sign that the participants were collectively speaking to any particular group of people, certainly apart from the antagonist. Therefore, the audience framed in the protest was the general public on Weibo. To frame the audience in such a broad way, the protest was intended to attract as many potential participants as possible so that there would be more pressure on Weibo to react.

#IAmLes

The collective identity framed in the #IAmLes protest was, on the whole, conflictual. On the one hand, it partially inherited the inclusive collective identity framing of the #IAmGay protest. On the other hand, a feminist collective identity framing that emphasized gender boundaries and focused on women's solidarity and liberation was also adopted. The two conflictual processes of framing existed simultaneously in the protest, distinguishing the #IAmLes protest from the #IAmGay protest.

The Inclusive Framing

The rare success of the #IAmGay protest clearly provided valuable experience that could be adopted in subsequent activism against censorship. When Weibo started to censor lesbian content and space in 2019, it was a reasonable move for the participants in the #IAmLes protest to frame a similar collective identity, which was at least partially similar.

Many participants, therefore, collectively adopted the same framing of identity fields. That is, the protagonist was diversified, including participants of all gender and sexual identities; the antagonist centered on heterosexism, identified as Weibo, the state, and the society; and the audience was the broad public on Weibo. The framing effectively gathered a massive crowd that was likely to pressure Weibo.

The Feminist Framing

However, many lesbian participants quickly realized that their unequal status was caused not only by heterosexism but also by the ubiquitous sexism in Chinese society. In their posts, they pinpoint that the reason why lesbian content and space were singled out and targeted by censorship was that, unlike gay men, both their gender and sexuality are oppressed. In other words, they face intersectional oppression as both women and homosexuals. Despite not offering any instruction on action, those posts resonated with many lesbian users as well as heterosexual women allies and were massively engaged, constructing a soft leadership of lesbians that focused on intersectionality.

They adopted a different framing in the protest, which they believed to be more suitable for their needs. The collective identity framing focused on a shared definition of being women in China. As the gender identity was articulated, the boundaries between different social groups were reinforced, and a feminist collective identity was framed. The protagonist was limited to women, including mostly homosexual and

heterosexual women; the antagonist was identified as sexist oppressors; and the audience was narrowed down to women on Weibo.

The protagonist was framed through two approaches. First, rather than directly inheriting the legacy of the #IAmGay protest by continuing using the same hashtag, a few lesbian users on Weibo created a new hashtag, #IAmLes, to launch the protest. By doing this, those lesbian users showed that they refused to be subsumed into a simplified category of homosexuals that includes both lesbians and gay men. Instead, they wanted to recognize the differences between lesbians and gay men, such as different gender identities and political positions. Therefore, when the censorship targeted lesbian content and space, they intended to claim the subjective power and deal with the issue in their own way, even though the previous hashtag #IAmGay was available and could be used to attract previous participants.

Hence, the new hashtag drew a pivotal difference from the old one. The identity term "gay" in #IAmGay was not significant to the participants in the #IAmGay protest to frame their protagonist, whereas "les" as the abbreviation for "lesbian" in #IAmLes was crucial to some lesbian participants in the protest. Those participants aimed to frame the protagonist as mainly lesbians. Meanwhile, as they emphasized their gender identities, they considered lesbians' rights could be more related to women's rights. Hence, they also framed feminists as a part of the protagonist.

Second, this type of protagonist framing was also done through many posts that clearly aimed to mobilize women. In those posts, women, not only lesbians, were referred to as the collective "we," excluding people of other gender and sexual identities. In such circumstances, much space in the protest was created to serve women participants, addressing women's issues exclusively. The demographic of participants in this type of space, therefore, consisted mostly of women, most prominently homosexual and heterosexual women.

Such a way of protagonist framing in the #IAmLes protest coincides with previous observation of lesbian feminism in China. To fight against homonormativity and patriarchy in Chinese queer movement, Chinese lesbian activists are more inclined to address gender issues and form solidarity with women, bisexuals, and transgenders, rather than gay men (Bao, 2018).

The antagonist framing can further reveal why parts of the protest became less inclusive. As mentioned, the antagonist framing focused on identifying sexist oppressors, and specifically, the participants engaged in heated discussions about the control of women's body in relation to reproduction.

Lesbians are perceived to be less likely to have children within a normative heterosexual understanding of reproduction. Therefore, many lesbian participants in the protest expressed in their posts that there was a social oppression concerned with the social norm that women are obligated to marry men and have children. This type of thinking escalated after many lesbian participants found that another hashtag, #Women'sHealthKnowledgeScience (#女性健康知识科普#), was banned at the same time as the ban of the hashtag #Les. Lesbian participants asserted that this proved their assumption that they were socially oppressed not just as homosexuals but also as women.

Some other issues related to women's rights were also occasionally mentioned in the protest, such as women's equality in workplaces, choices of lifestyle and public visibility. However, they did not generate as much discussion as the issue of reproduction, seemingly because they were less related to the censorship.

In terms of explicit framing of the antagonist, different phrases and vocabularies can be found. The most common ones are "the country" ("国家"), "your country" ("你国")³, and "China" ("中国"), which all seem to refer to the state. However, the participants criticized not only the state but also the mutual influence between the state and the society on the issue of sexism in the Chinese context. In this case, the phrase "Trashy Sina" is rarely observed, and Weibo was not a prominent constituent of the framed antagonist.

Notably, gay men also became an antagonist group because of the issue of "homowives" ("同妻"). In many discussions of the objectification of women in reproduction, the participants frequently mentioned that gay men who married heterosexual women are exploiting women's bodies, and therefore, are also sexist oppressors. Interviewee.13 commented on the issue, saying that, "I personally think the harm of 'homowives,' the social influence of it, is way worse. I think you don't have to come out of the closet, but you can't hide it by harming others."

Because of internalized homophobia, closeted gay men may choose to marry heterosexual women (Higgins, 2002). This is relatively common across the world. However, "homowives" alluded to in the protest is a slightly different social phenomenon in China, consisting of an estimated 14 million heterosexual Chinese women married to gay men, who often suffer from mental and physical harm (Wang et al., 2019). The negatively connotated phrase "fraud marriage" ("骗婚"), then, is often used to describe "the phenomenon that gay men fraudulently get married with straight women by not disclosing their same-sex sexuality" (Zhang, Zhang, & Lu, 2022, p. 1333). Chinese homowives have "adopted a collective identity with publicly articulated political aims," and their stories have "provoked considerable public anger" (Zhu, 2017, p. 1076) toward Chinese gay men. Although both gay men and homowives undoubtedly are victims of heteronormativity in the issue, the Chinese gay community is often discriminated and blamed for not improving the situation (Zhang et al., 2022). Such an issue that stemmed from outside of the protest clearly affected how some women participants acted in the protest. Not only did they explicitly reject gay men's support in their posts but also their expression of anger spread widely, framing gay men as their antagonist.

The feminist audience framing is more apparent than the inclusive one. The participants were mostly talking to women on Weibo. To achieve this, they frequently used "sisters" ("姐妹"), a gendered term, to refer to each other and to mobilize potential participants. Such a gendered way of communication excluded most men, both homosexual and heterosexual, from the framed audience, matching the framed protagonist and antagonist.

³ The phrase "your country" is sarcastically used by many politically liberal netizens to express their dissatisfaction with the party state in China (Olesen, 2015).

The Conflictual Collective Identity

The framed collective identity in the #IAmLes protest eventually became conflictual. When the inclusive framing sought to assemble a large crowd against heterosexism, the feminist framing prompted a prominent participant cluster of women against sexism. Gay men were recognized as part of the protagonist and the antagonist in the two processes of framing at the same time. Yet, the two processes were sometimes blended in the protest, as individual participants were free to navigate the digitally networked organization and interact with each other.

Under such circumstances, a perception that there was not enough support from gay men in the protest was commonly expressed during the protest. Interviewee.1, who self-identifies as lesbian, told me that, "I think the protest last year was quite successful, but this year, the lesbian hashtag was banned in April and gay men didn't seem to make a big fuss about it." Some gay men had similar feelings. For instance, Interviewee.7 said that, "many gay men didn't participate, because they thought it was none of their business. The number of gay male participants was so few, so Weibo wasn't intimidated and didn't compromise."

Some gay participants defended themselves by proving that there were a huge number of gay men in the protest, which seems to be the case. However, it is likely that because of the conflictual collective identity framing, gay men were found much less in the space catering to women where they were framed as part of the antagonist role. Debates, then, emerged between participants on topics such as gay men's contributions to the protest, solidarity between gay men and women, and, more broadly, gay men's responsibility for the issue of homowives. Most of those debates did not reach agreement, further shaping the collective identity to be conflictual and fragmented.

Commenting on the wider issue of misogyny, Interviewee.8, who self-identifies as a gay man, said that, "there is indeed misogyny among gay men. We're anxious about our own so-called masculinity, which leads to discrimination and abuse [against effeminate gay men]." Because of some patriarchal and misogynous views in gay identity politics, there had been tension and disagreement between Chinese gay and lesbian groups (Bao, 2018) before the #IAmLes protest. The conflictual collective identity, therefore, encapsulated such tension and disagreement between the two groups.

Conclusion

The different collective identity framings between the #IAmGay and #IAmLes protests can offer several implications. First, identity fields may be indistinctly framed, entangling with each other because of digitally networked SMOs. The inclusive framing in the two protests led to the broadly identified protagonist, antagonist, and audience. In particular, framed as any potential participant, the audience was comparatively indistinct. The feminist framing in the #IAmLes protest, then, increased the complexity of identity fields. Gay men were contradictorily framed as a constituent of both protagonist and antagonist.

Therefore, although some previous studies have already shown collective identities in connective action may entail fragmentation, tension (McClelland-Cohen & Endacott, 2020), and conflicts (Kavada, 2015), my research contributes to the existing literature by urging scholars to revisit the collective identity

framing theory developed by Hunt et al. (1994), in which they importantly stress that identity fields can overlap, expand, and contract. While participation is diversified in connective action and hybrid networked digital activism, by investigating the phenomenon that I call “entanglement of identity fields,” researchers can effectively analyze dynamics—solidarity and conflicts—between participant groups in digitalized SMOs. Notably, more complex dynamics are observed in connective action concerned with intersectionality than in traditional offline social movements. This research suggests that, to understand those complex dynamics, researchers can look at the identity field categories, identify how different groups may frame them in the same or different ways, and find whether there is entanglement. Such dynamics, of course, should be understood in relation to already established group dynamics. For instance, the conflict between Chinese gay men and lesbians in the #IAmLes protest was not a new one. Rather, it had occurred in previous interactions between the two groups.

Second, this research showcases how collective identities are likely to be framed in online movements led by Chinese gay men and lesbians. Since online movements are increasingly decentralized, in the absence of formal SMOs, participant crowd effort becomes vital for movement framing (Bennett, Segerberg, & Walker, 2014). More importantly, soft leadership predominantly affects movement framing (Gerbaudo, 2012). In the Chinese context, when an online movement crowd is led by gay men like in the #IAmGay protest, the framed collective identity tends to be inclusive, aiming to build a mass movement, similar to research findings in the Western context (e.g., Ghaziani, 2011). When it is led by lesbians, the framed collective identity may vary. Inclusive framing can be adopted based on anti-heterosexism. Feminist framing can be also adopted based on anti-sexism, because of lesbians’ intersectional identities as both homosexuals and women. Although Western studies have already shown such a situation of intertwined lesbian activism and feminism (e.g., Taylor & Whittier, 1999), the Chinese case seems likely to induce a conflict between lesbians and gay men, which potentially mirrors their social interactions in everyday lives and how lesbian activism strategizes in China. Contemporary Chinese lesbian activism is often organized beyond lesbian identity politics and form solidarity with people of other marginalized gender and sexual identities, including women, bisexuals, and transgenders, to challenge “the homonormative and patriarchal hegemony of the queer movement” (Bao, 2018, p. 86). As found in the #IAmLes protest, the issue of homowives can be a significant reason why some Chinese lesbians reject gay men in activism to challenge homonormativity and patriarchy.

Third, the concept of collective identity can be used to assess the effectiveness of Chinese LGBTQ+ movements. The distinct outcomes, in terms of whether the censorship was lifted or not, between the #IAmGay and #IAmLes protests may be partially caused by their different collective identities framed. The collective identity in the #IAmGay protest focused on anti-heterosexism and directly addressed the cause of the censorship, whereas the conflictual collective identity of the #IAmLes protest had doubled tasks including women’s equality and liberation in China that were rather complex and difficult to be achieved (see Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017; Huang & Sun, 2021).

However, the conflictual collective identity must not be seen as the sole reason of the failure in not lifting the censorship because although movement framing significantly affects movement outcome attainment (Cress & Snow, 2000), countermovement also plays an important role in hindering movement outcome attainment (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). It seems that Weibo had learned from its experience in

the #IAmGay protest and deployed evolved censorship strategies in the #IAmLes protest, such as not announcing the censorship operation and constantly reducing the visibility of the protest on the platform. The control of digital activism in China is adaptable, involving both harsh and gentle methods (Yang, 2014). This needs to be considered when assessing outcomes.

Nevertheless, this research argues that both protests can be seen as successful because of the collective identities formed, even though forming collective identities was not a stated goal. Both disrupted and reinforced boundaries of identities in movements create opportunities and constraints (Gamson, 1995). The inclusive framing in the #IAmGay and #IAmLes protests, in fact, shows a queer potential in Chinese gay and lesbian activism, because of the significantly lowered importance of participants' gender and sexual identities. This can be greatly meaningful to the formation of a queer collective identity that potentially leads to queer activism against binary heterosexism in China. Meanwhile, in the #IAmLes protest, it was precisely because of the distinctive boundaries between identities that lesbian participants were able to tackle the women's equality issue. Both protests, therefore, successfully framed sustainable collective identities that can be adapted in future activism. The fact that a new campaign called #ChineseLGBTVoiceMonth (#中国LGBT发声月#) was launched on Weibo in April 2020 to coincide with the anniversaries of the #IAmGay and #IAmLes protests proves this.

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